

Talking About Books to Improve Comprehension

Adapted from a lesson by Erika Griffin

Meaningful conversations are a powerful tool to help students understand what they read and make text-to-self connections. This simple lesson, which is designed for repeated use with both fiction and nonfiction, provides students with strategies to support conversations about texts. Students will learn how to determine which ideas work best to inspire a conversation, how to stay focused on a particular idea, and how to talk with other students in a way that leads to deeper thinking. Students conclude the activity by reflecting on how their ideas changed or grew as a result of the discussion.

Objectives

Students will

- Gain knowledge by reading a short text and learning strategies to have a meaningful conversation about that text
- Identify ideas they have about the text and practice identifying which ideas are best suited to a meaningful discussion by selecting a topic for conversation about the text they have read
- Apply the strategies they have learned by having a meaningful conversation that stays on topic
- Practice conversational strategies by agreeing with, building on, or disagreeing with other students in constructive ways
- Analyze how successful their conversation has been and how it has changed their thinking using a postdiscussion reflection activity

Preparation

1. This lesson assumes that students have developed some of the comprehension strategies needed to understand texts they read independently and that they have practiced using these strategies. With this foundation, students will be prepared to share their understanding of the texts they read and will be willing to reflect on their ideas with others.
2. Select a short text (fiction or nonfiction) that will generate ideas for discussion. For purposes of example, *Stephanie's Ponytail* by Robert Munsch has been used in this lesson. The type of text that works best has the following characteristics:
 - It is short (e.g., a picture book, short story, or feature article).

- It includes a meaningful theme or topic that will lead to conversation.
- It deals with a theme or topic that is open to multiple interpretations and of which students have some background understanding.

3. Read aloud the text you have selected so that students are familiar with it and can enjoy the story. After you have read the text to the class, you will want to reread it on your own, marking places in the text where you will stop and think aloud about ideas that might lead to conversations. During the read-aloud, you may have noticed that there were places in the text where students had some interesting responses. These often lead to good conversations.

Step-by-Step

Introduction of Strategy Work

1. Gather students in a circle and explain that they will be learning how to talk about books in a way that enhances their understanding of what they read.
2. Explain that good readers come up with ideas about books while they are reading independently. Ask students if they have any thoughts about what readers do with these ideas. Possible answers include "write them down" or "talk about them."

3. Ask students if they know about specific ways or situations when people talk about things they have read, for example, book clubs. Why do they think readers do this? You want to work toward the idea that discussions after reading help to develop new (and improved) thinking about texts. Explain to students that people have strategies that help them have good conversations. These strategies help them to stay focused on an idea, to share ideas, and to deepen thinking.

Modeling the Strategy

4. Distribute index cards to students and make sure they have writing instruments. Show them *Stephanie's Ponytail* by Robert Munsch. Explain that as you read this book, you are going to stop and think about what you are reading and write down a few ideas you have that you might want to discuss with other readers.

5. Read the first page and stop to share your thinking. Write down your ideas on an index card. For example, you might say something like, "I'm thinking that some children (like Stephanie) seem to have the ability to stand up for what they like regardless of what others think. I wonder why this happens for some children but not for others." Or you might say, "I wonder if all the kids think the ponytail is ugly or if some are just going along with the crowd?" Write down, "I wonder why some children can stand up for their ideas and others cannot."

Another possible place to stop might be the bottom of page 5. You might say something like,

"Stephanie seems determined to have a different hairstyle from the other kids in her class. I wonder why some children, like Stephanie, work so hard to be different." Write down, "I wonder why some children want to be different."

6. While you are modeling, explain that some questions lead to good conversations and others do not. You may even want to model the kind of idea that doesn't lead to a good conversation. For example, you might stop at the bottom of page 7 and think aloud, "I never really liked side ponytails." Then you can ask students if they think this would lead to a good conversation. You can explain that this is not the kind of idea that you would write down on your card.

Guided Practice

7. Read the next section of the text aloud. You will want to stop at some of the places you have planned to and ask students to do some thinking. (Possible places to stop are at the bottom of page 14, page 18, and at the end of the text.) Ask students to write down their ideas and then share them with the class. Look for ideas that will generate conversation and point these out as the type of ideas you are looking for. You will want to steer students away from ideas that will be answered easily and quickly or that only require literal thinking.

8. Read the rest of the text, stopping and asking students to jot down their ideas a few more times. You may want to have students share their ideas with partners to evaluate whether or

not the idea will lead to a good conversation.

9. Once you have finished the text, collect the index cards with students' ideas. The first time you complete this lesson you should go through them quickly and find one that you think will lead to a good conversation. In future lessons, you will want to model for students how you go through a set of ideas and select some to talk about.

10. Read the idea you have selected aloud to the class. Tell students that they are now going to try to talk (as a whole group) about this one idea for an extended amount of time. In order to do that, explain that they should listen carefully before talking, and when they are responding to something one of their peers has said, they should look at the person. On a chart, list a few conversation supports. For example,

- "I agree with that idea, and I'd like to add...."
- "I'd like to build on _____'s thinking."
- "I don't really agree with _____ about that. I'm thinking that...."
- "That makes me think...."

Explain to students that they can use this chart to help them while they are talking.

11. Read the idea and get the conversation started. You might say, "Who would like to start us off by responding to _____'s idea?" or "Who has a response to

_____’s idea?” You will probably need to show students how to maintain eye contact with the person they are responding to (instead of always looking at you).

The first time you use this lesson, you may want to say, “Let’s see if we can talk about this one idea for five minutes!” You want to start with some success and then build your students’ abilities to talk for an extended period of time about an idea. In future lessons, you can see if you can extend the length of time without sacrificing the quality of the conversation.

12. Support students in their ability to keep the conversation going. You may need to redirect the conversation back to the topic, coach students in the use of conversational strategies, and help the conversation to deepen. Possible prompts include

- Are we still talking about our original idea?
- Can you say more about that?
- Can you try that again using one of the conversational prompts?
- Does anyone have another idea about that?
- Does anyone disagree with what _____ said?

Reflection

13. When you decide it is a good time to wrap up the conversation, bring the class back together and spend some time reflecting on the following questions:

- Did you talk about one topic/idea?
- How did you keep the conversation going?

- Did your thinking change? How? Why?

You may want to chart these responses.

Assessment

- Observe students’ use of conversation strategies as they discuss the idea. Look for eye contact, use of conversational supports, focus, and development of the idea.
- Use the Thinking About Thinking worksheet (Reproducible) to extend students’ reflections. You might have students fill out the worksheet in pairs or small groups before the concluding whole-class discussion in Step 13.

For extensions of this lesson and more lessons and resources you can use in your classroom today, visit www.readwritethink.org.

Lesson plans adapted in *The Reading Teacher* are drawn from ReadWriteThink.org, a joint project of IRA and NCTE as part of the Verizon Thinkfinity consortium. Permission is granted to copy these pages for classroom use.

Copyright of Reading Teacher is the property of International Reading Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.