

This document provides a summary of Recommendation 3 from the WWC practice guide *Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade*. Full reference is on the last page.

**CONTENT: Reading**  
**GRADE LEVEL(S): K-3**  
**LEVEL OF EVIDENCE: Moderate**

## Recommendation

# Guide students through focused, high-quality discussion on the meaning of the text.

Lead students through focused, high-quality discussions to help them develop a deeper understanding of what they read. These discussions go beyond simply asking and answering surface-level questions to a more thoughtful exploration of the text, which helps students learn to argue for or against points raised in the discussion, resolve ambiguities in the text, and draw conclusions or inferences about the text.

Students in kindergarten through grade 3 can engage in these discussions if they have appropriate guidance from their teacher. While some of the suggestions for putting this into practice apply to more experienced readers, teachers can make them applicable to very early readers and those reading below grade level. This approach can build students' ability to think more critically and independently about what they read.

## How to carry out the recommendation

1. Develop discussion questions that require students to think deeply about the text.

### Instructional strategies from the examples

- Use higher-order questions to guide students to think deeply about the meaning of the text
- Plan the time, order, and where in the text questions should be asked in advance

### South Carolina standards alignment

**ELA:** K-2.I.1, K-2.I.2, K-2.RL.MC.5, K-2.RL.RC.13, K-2.RI.MC.5, K-2.RI.RCS.12

**TEACHER:** INST.MS.1, INST.MS.2, INST.Q.1, INST.Q.2, INST.Q.3, INST.Q.4, INST.Q.5, INST.Q.6, INST.Q.7, INST.Q.8, INST.TCK.1, INST.TCK.2, INST.TCK.3, NST.TH.1, INST.TH.2

Move beyond having students simply recall details about the text or asking them to provide their opinions by instead developing higher-order questions that guide them to think deeply about the meaning of the text. These questions should reflect what conclusions you want students to draw from the text, including implicit and explicit information. Typical higher-order questions include:

- *Why did \_\_\_\_\_?*
- *What do you think \_\_\_\_\_?*
- *If you were the author \_\_\_\_\_?*
- *What does \_\_\_\_\_ remind you of and why?*

When preparing questions, consider the best time to present each question to students—before, during, or after reading—as well as which questions should be asked when students first read the text and which questions should be asked after a second or subsequent reading. Additionally, determine exactly where in the text a question will be asked (e.g., after a specific page, paragraph, or illustration). For students in kindergarten and grade 1, shared reading time or read-alouds can provide opportunities to introduce higher-order questions.

## 2. Ask follow-up questions to encourage and facilitate discussion.

### Instructional strategies from the examples

- Ask follow-up questions that involve the students applying reading comprehension strategies.
- Ask questions that require students to think about and elaborate on their answers and expound on the meaning of the text.
- Ask students to refer to the text to justify their answers.
- Use follow-up questions to engage in a discussion about the text.

### South Carolina standards alignment

**ELA:** K-2.I.1, K-2.I.2, K-2.RL.MC.5, K-2.RL.RC.13, K-2.RI.MC.5, K-2.RI.RCS.12

**TEACHER:** INST.MS.1, INST.MS.2, INST.MS.3, INST.Q.1, INST.Q.2, INST.Q.3, INST.Q.4, INST.Q.5, INST.Q.6, INST.Q.7, INST.Q.8, INST.AF.3, INST.TH.1, INST.TH.2

Reading comprehension improves when teachers ask follow-up questions that encourage students to apply the reading comprehension strategies they know. In a sustained discussion, respond to the students' answers in ways that lead them to both think about and elaborate on their answers, as well as expound on the meaning of the text. Then ask students to refer to specific portions of the text to justify their responses. Depending on the grade level, this may mean recalling events and passages in the text or pointing to illustrations. Follow-up questions should provide students with a model for thinking about the text and its meaning more actively, as well as help them learn to construct and support opinions with textual evidence.

Recommended follow-up questions include the following:

- What makes you say that?
- What happened in the book that makes you think that?
- Can you explain what you meant when you said \_\_\_\_\_?
- Do you agree with what \_\_\_\_\_ said? Why or why not?
- How does what you said connect with what \_\_\_\_\_ already said?
- Let's see if what we read provides us with any information that can resolve \_\_\_\_\_'s and \_\_\_\_\_'s disagreement.
- What does the author say about that?

Ideally, initial and follow-up questions should resemble a collaborative discussion instead of a typical cycle of teacher initiation (teacher asks a question), student response (one student answers the question), and teacher evaluation (teacher evaluates the student's response), followed by the teacher asking an unrelated question directed at the class or a different student. Although common in classrooms, this kind of discourse does not allow students to build meaning collaboratively from the text.

For younger students, follow-up questions can facilitate discussion, particularly when teachers conduct the discussion in small groups with appropriate support. Students new to this type of discussion may have difficulty, so teachers should model the format and guide them in responding to the text while keeping them focused on both the meaning and the discussion question at hand. Throughout the discussion, teachers should remind students to talk to one another and not just to the teacher.

### 3. Have students lead structured small-group discussions.

#### **Instructional strategies from the examples**

- Provide opportunities for small-group discussion about the text, encouraging students to ask questions of their peers.
- Model structures and procedures to allow for peer-led discussions.

#### **South Carolina standards alignment**

**ELA:** K-2.I.1, K-2.I.2, K-2.RL.MC.5, K-2.RL.RC.13, K-2.RI.MC.5, K-2.RI.RCS.12

**TEACHER:** INST.MS.2, INST.AM.7, INST.Q.8, INST.AF.5, INST.GS.1, INST.GS.2, INST.GS.3, INST.GS.4, INST.TH.2

As students become more proficient in discussions about text, provide opportunities for small-group discussions in which students pose questions to their peers. In creating groups, include students who are relatively good at discussion in each group and allow students to direct the discussion. Teachers may select from many structures and techniques for peer-led discussions, including the following:

- Describe and assign a role to each student to ensure that all students participate in the discussion.
- Have students discuss the predictions or summaries of their peers as they use their reading comprehension strategies. (Note that this approach may be difficult for kindergarteners and grade 1 students.)
- Give students higher-order questions, graphics, or pictures, and ask them to discuss the materials with a partner. This approach is beneficial for students in kindergarten and grade 1 or as a warm-up for a more challenging discussion for students in grades 2 and 3.
- Ask students to make up questions that get them thinking. Rotate the responsibility for coming up with a “thinking question.” For younger students, provide question stems orally or use word banks or picture clues to remind them how to build questions that make them think.
- After students read a text or a section of a text, guide them to reflect on the text by asking them to draw or write in a journal as preparation for a discussion the next day. Explain that entries should be questions or concerns they want to raise with their peers in the discussion. Teachers can support younger students by providing sticky notes with symbols (e.g., question marks, smiley faces, or exclamation points) to mark sections of the text they want to talk about.

## Guide students through focused, high-quality discussion on the meaning of text

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Students in kindergarten through grade 3 will need extensive modeling and practice to be successful in peer-led discussions. The discussions should start out short and become longer as students get older and have more practice. Introducing the entire activity and its rules (e.g., taking turns, not dominating the discussion, and staying on task) before group work begins will prepare students for it. Teachers can then use simple tools such as the ones listed below to encourage students to participate fully and fairly:

- Give students a chart of rules (with picture clues for younger students) to remind them of appropriate behavior in peer-led discussions.
- Consider setting a rule that no one can talk more than three times until everyone has spoken once. To keep track, consider giving students chips before the discussion begins and having them turn one in each time they talk.
- Require students to prepare ahead of time. Ask them to reflect on specific questions about the text by drawing a picture or writing in a “reading log” before the discussion, or have them talk in small groups before the full class discussion.
- Give students time to formulate their thoughts. When moderating the discussion, wait in silence until many students raise their hands, and call on those who have not yet contributed.

## Potential roadblocks and how to address them

Roadblock	Suggested Approach
<i>When students are talking with peers, some teachers believe they do not have control of the classroom discussion.</i>	Though discussion involves giving up some control, teachers can do things to ensure that students stay on task during a discussion. For instance, provide a clear set of guidelines for discussing the text, including the structure of the discussion and the use of discussion guides, and model higher-order questions and responses to help students stay on point. These supports can serve as “training wheels” while students strengthen their ability to take part in this kind of discussion. They allow the teacher to monitor how well students stay on task outside the group and offer assistance as necessary.
<i>Students do not understand how to conduct productive discussions about the text with one another.</i>	Give students opportunities to observe and practice discussion techniques; what is expected of them as discussion leaders should be clearly outlined. Prepare students to lead a discussion by modeling a leader’s behavior and techniques, and then gradually release this responsibility to the students. Consider setting aside time at the beginning of the year to focus on discussion skills. You may also want to keep peer discussions relatively brief at first, giving students enough time to develop the ability to lead longer discussions. For younger students, who may struggle the most with the group nature of discussions, have them turn and talk to their neighbors.
<i>It is difficult to find time to prepare for classroom discussions.</i>	To capitalize on limited time, teachers should collaborate with one another, taking turns preparing discussion questions and guides. Teachers should also establish regular times for discussion early in the school year. In schools where there is only one teacher per grade, teachers can plan collaboratively with teachers at other schools via email or the Internet; cross-age discussions can be valuable as well. The more practice students have with discussion, the less time teachers will need to spend teaching the activity. Finally, fully developed discussion guidelines can be used repeatedly, saving preparation time.

*Reference: Shanahan, T., Callison, K., Carriere, C., Duke, N. K., Pearson, P. D., Schatschneider, C., & Torgesen, J. (2010). Improving reading comprehension in kindergarten through 3rd grade (NCEE 2010-4038). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. Retrieved from <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/14>*