CHAPTER 1

Talking About Texts

Getting Started

When I teach or coach in classrooms in various parts of the United States, I have noticed that talk and collaboration among students has decreased in the last few years, while the use of workbooks and skill-and-drill activities seems on the rise. The pressure schools are under to do well on high-stakes tests may be largely to blame, because the worksheets I see on kids' desks and going home as homework often fall under the umbrella of test prep activities. Alas, we are spinning our wheels and wasting precious time bowing down to the tests, for a recent study of 66 urban schools found no correlation between the time students spend taking tests and improved reading scores (Superville, 2015). In fact, the results of the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the nation's report card, show that scores in reading have dropped in Grades 4 and 8 (Heitin, 2015).

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To me, lower scores in reading are the canary in the coal mine, warning us of a more pervasive issue: More students are disengaged with reading.

So how do we turn things around? Well, there are about hundred answers I could give, but for this book I've chosen one, just one, because right now I think it's the easiest and most powerful platform on which to rebuild our students' relationship with reading.

Talk.

Really? You might be thinking that there can be nothing new to say about instructional conversations. After all, two types of talk, literature circles and book clubs, thankfully have a placehold in many schools (Daniels, 2002)—but not in enough schools, and in this digital age and test prep craze, it's critical that we make sure our students know how to talk to learn, and do so every day. Some research has shown that teachers talk a full 80% of the school day; our goal has to be to reach a 50–50 split and then work to make it so that student talk predominates.

Lessons and Texts to Take Students From Talk to Literary Conversation

I remember the time as a young teacher I told a group of my fifth graders to "talk about Chapter 4" in a novel they were reading and thought that was sufficient direction. I *heard* the folly of my ways within 5 minutes, in the form of animated chatter about sports, lunch, and a favorite new game! Learning-rich conversation about books has to be modeled and practiced—a lot. So in this book, we begin with ready-made lessons

that provide students with models of six different types of literary talk. What they have in common is that they allow you to step out of the conversation so that students can get good at guiding it. Tech-savvy students who "talk" continually on social media want to be in charge of their literary conversations online and at school. And that's just what these lessons help you accomplish.

I've also included original pieces and excerpts by authors whose work students know and admire, including Kathleen Krull, Seymour Simon, and Priscilla Cummings. You can use them repeatedly for your own instructional purposes, beyond this book.

A section called "Reflect and Intervene" equips you with on-the-spot scaffolding tools. And you don't have to design assessments; they're in every lesson and include reproducibles for students and checklists that are reminders of what you heard and observed.

Yes, talk matters, especially when student talk becomes a literary conversation. With time and practice, these conversations develop and improve analytical and critical thinking and ultimately ramp up students' reading comprehension, helping them become the critical readers and thinkers they need to be.

Five Benefits of Student-Centered Talk

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Our students love to talk, and they arrive at school with talking experience and expertise. A powerful form of thinking and communicating, talk also brings social interactions to learning. The kind of talk I'm proposing for students to engage in is literary conversations. Conversations are literary when the talk is about high-quality fiction or nonfiction and powerful movie and video clips. Such texts draw students into familiar and unfamiliar worlds that can spark emotional reactions and prompt them to think about themselves and others. Such texts have multiple interpretations, and the literary and personal experiences a reader brings to a text start an original conversation between the reader and the text. These conversations initiate deep thinking about characters, people, plot, conflicts, and information (Rosenblatt, 1978).

My hope is to build on these literary conversations between readers and texts by inviting students to have similar conversations with a partner, a small group, and the entire class. To illustrate the benefits of bringing literary conversations to your classroom, I have identified five key reasons for integrating this student-centered approach into daily lessons.

Benefit 1: Talk Supports Recall and Comprehension

As a reading or content teacher, you know that students' ability to recall plot and text details is the key to using this information to infer and identify main ideas and themes—in other words, to engage in analytical and critical thinking. If your students are like mine, then you also know that this kind of thinking poses a challenge to many students. The good news is that during literary conversations, students must organize and present their ideas in ways that listeners can understand and follow. You can teach listeners how to ask questions that prompt speakers to clarify and extend ideas and provide evidence from the text. In this way, students support one another as they apply strategies, analyze texts, and think through an idea or position. In addition, talk about text builds vocabulary, enlarges listening capacity, and exposes students to peers' divergent ideas and the stories peers use to think about and discuss texts (Newkirk, 2014)—all skills that facilitate comprehension of complex texts.

Benefit 2: Talk Engages and Motivates

We've all heard our students say things like "Yeah, that's what I was thinking" or "Man, I never thought about that person like you're doing" or "I gotta reread that part—I missed that idea." Such comments are indicators that students are engaged in the literary conversation, listening closely and comparing their ideas with peers' ideas. Participating in whole-class, small-group, and partner discussions gives students opportunities to interpret texts independently and explore questions they're interested in.

When students are in charge of *leading* discussions, when they use questions that *they* composed, and when you encourage them to explore a range of interpretations the text supports, the motivation to engage in these discussions is off the charts. Harvey "Smokey" Daniels (2002), in his book on literature circles, put it this way: "Working with our kids over weeks, and months, and years, I feel grounded in a new way. Now I will never underestimate what kids can do in peer-led groups, because I've seen what our students can accomplish" (p. 15).

Benefit 3: Interactive Talk Becomes a Model for In-the-Head Conversations

What does it mean to engage with a story? What does deep engagement really feel like? It's important to drill down into these often-used terms, because that's how we know exactly the kind of emotional state we want our students to achieve. Yes, emotional state. I want students to feel angry about a character's poor decisions and silently yell at the character. I want students to fall in and out of love, feel grief, frustration, fright, acute loneliness, profound joy—to be so involved with the characters' journey they can't stop reading. This happens when students can step into a character's or person's shoes, experience his or her life, and have conversations with themselves while reading. Robert Coles (1990) calls this being in "cahoots" with a character. The irony of the concept of getting lost in a novel is that the truth is, through narrative, we find ourselves. Someone once said, with informational texts we know how to live, but with fiction we know how to be.

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Such a deep level of involvement can happen with nonfiction texts, too, as long as these texts use stories to present information (Newkirk, 2014). An important and reachable goal of teaching reading is to develop students' ability to have dialogues with themselves about a text they are reading. I call these "in-the-head" conversations.

As students participate in literary conversations in different settings, they cultivate the modes of thinking and the language needed to engage in internal conversations while reading, listening to, and viewing texts. Having conversations with oneself while reading is the heart of metacognition, which can improve visualization, recall, understanding, and critical analysis.

Benefit 4: Talk Activates Ideas for Writing About Reading

Throughout this book you will find guiding questions. These questions are like lighter fluid for student conversations, and the goal is to have them ignite students' *own* questions (see How to Craft Guiding Questions, page 9) and responses that delve into layers of meaning. View these discussions as a rehearsal for deeper independent thinking and writing about texts. We want our students to explore interpretations in a situation where peers support them as they test the validity of their ideas (Rosenblatt, 1978).

This rehearsal is like trying on five pairs of jeans until you find the right pair—no one criticizes the jeans that don't fit. You are in charge of deciding which to purchase. It's like this for students trying to find valid interpretations of texts. It works best in an environment that encourages students to try on interpretations without worrying if they're right or wrong. It encourages divergent thinking about a text and then invites students to further explore ideas that the text can support. Rehearsal—trying on ideas during discussions—can scaffold writing about a text and support students as they develop their ability to move from thinking through talk to thinking on paper.

Benefit 5: Talk Changes How Students Think and Feel About Fiction and Nonfiction

As students become more skilled at conversations, they move beyond recall of plot and information to critical analysis, making inferences, finding themes, and, most important, arriving at an interpretation of a text that "works" for them, and in a sense is tailor-made for them. In a very real sense, four students sitting at a table talking about the same novel will negotiate a shared understanding (almost like lawyers in an amicable negotiation!), but each person will stand up from that table with a take on the novel that is uniquely her or his own—and that's what we want. Writing in the By Heart series in *The Atlantic,* novelist Ethan Canin asserts, "At the end of a story or novel, you do not want the reader thinking. Endings are about emotion, and logic is emotion's enemy" (Fassler, 2016, para. 14).

Having multiple opportunities to develop their ideas helps students independently apply reading and thinking strategies as they work toward using stories to build knowledge that matters to them (Newkirk, 2014). To accomplish this, students can draw on other texts, personal experiences and stories, and their knowledge of genre to construct their understanding of a specific text or an issue raised by a guiding or essential question.

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The Research Support

One of the most important thinkers and researchers on classroom talk is Peter H. Johnston, perhaps best known for his book *Choice Words* (2004). As you start the journey of integrating a range of talk into your classes, it's helpful to become familiar with Johnston's research because he shows how teacher talk affects students' learning. I highly recommend that you discuss Johnston's ideas and suggestions with colleagues so that as you make teaching and learning decisions, you can articulate how they relate to best practices.

By studying the language of accomplished literacy teachers, Johnston demonstrates how the words we speak to our students can affect them in positive and negative ways. Effective oral language can guide students to become strategic, analytical thinkers who use talk to solve problems.

As Johnston notes, the words that teachers speak in the classroom can position their students as competitors or collaborators. If our goal is to build a community of collaborators who can work together, supporting one another as they develop into expert readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers, then we need to pay attention to how our language fosters this type of culture in our classroom. In his book, Johnston provides myriad language prompts that teachers can use in diverse situations to create a healthy, positive environment while promoting rigorous learning. For example, a statement such as *I liked the way you figured that out* lets a student know that she did

the thinking and work. Or pointing out what a child can do and building on it, with a statement such as *I see you know how to spell the beginning of that word,* confirms what the student can do but also sends the message that there's still work to be done. Many of the routines, prompts, and scaffolds in the lessons in this book are designed to encourage a classroom culture that supports risk-taking and collaboration and that puts students in charge of their talk to construct knowledge.

Johnston (2004) devotes a chapter to "Noticing and Naming," pointing out that "pattern recognition is very powerful. Once we start noticing certain things, it is difficult not to notice them again; the knowledge actually influences our perceptual systems (Harre & Gillet, 1994)" (p. 11). For students to become proficient at analyzing literary elements, they must first learn to recognize them. The lessons in Chapter 5 include prompts that guide students to notice and name various literary elements in the texts they read and discuss. With practice, identifying literary elements becomes second nature, which deepens readers' comprehension of narrative. Similarly, as students identify various text features and structures, they become more adept at analyzing informational texts.

The lessons, student pages, and intervention strategies in this book embed language that encourages students to notice and name what they see as they read.

Johnston also discusses the idea of agency, the belief that what we do affects our environment. For students to become independent readers, they must believe that they are capable of making meaning from text. Student talk, and especially literary conversations, can help foster this sense of agency by inviting students to work together to uncover an author's meaning.

As a means of encouraging students to dig into text, prompts in the lessons and student pages ask students to choose questions to explore, to apply reading strategies, to provide evidence for their thinking, to ask questions, and to consider the author's purpose.

Finally, Johnston highlights the importance of using language to facilitate transfer, the ability to generalize learning from one specific situation to a new one. To foster transfer, Johnston offers teachers phrases that encourage students to consider different contexts. Ask *How else . . .* to nudge students to think of diverse ways to solve a problem, or say *That's like . . .* to observe similarities in texts, words, or figurative language. Teaching for transfer means that students view learning as more than the set of information that makes up a specific lesson. Instead, they're keenly aware of the benefits of transferring strategies and processes practiced and learned in one context to different contexts. See http://resources.corwin.com/readtalkwrite for specific ideas on how to teach students to transfer their learning.

Coming Full Circle With Literature Circles

In 1994, with the first edition of his book *Literature Circles*, Harvey "Smokey" Daniels transformed the nature of student talk in the classroom by moving it from teacher-directed and teacher-controlled to peer-directed and peer-controlled. According to Daniels (2006), it all started in the 1980s, when "a number of teachers and students around the country simultaneously and independently invented the idea of literature circles. Pioneers like Becky Abraham Searle in Chicago and Karen Smith in Arizona began organizing their students into small, peer-led book discussion groups" (p. 10). Almost 20 years later, Daniels wrote a second edition of *Literature Circles,* and book clubs and literature circles have become a positive classroom experience for students in the United States as well as in Finland, Australia, and Canada.

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Teaching Tip: Transfer

To foster students' growth into independent learners, teach them specifically about the idea of transfer.

- Introduce the idea of transfer in a mini-lesson, explaining why it's important to students' progress. To illustrate the concept, first review what students have practiced that you want them to transfer. Then demonstrate how the skill or knowledge works in different situations and subjects. Here's what I say to help students transfer the skill of comparing and contrasting, which they've practiced with literature, to other contexts.

  You've been comparing and contrasting settings, characters, and conflicts using my read-aloud text, Through My Eyes *by Ruby Bridges, and your instructional reading materials. The skill you've developed—finding how specific literary elements are alike and how they differ in a text—can be used in other situations. You can use compare and contrast to show how two different informational texts treat the same topic. You can also use it to evaluate two or more websites or two ways to solve the same math problem. Comparing and contrasting can also help you with life decisions that you make. For example, you can evaluate two summer camps this way to decide which one you'd rather attend. You can also use it when buying clothes to compare brands and/or styles before choosing one. It's a useful and practical strategy because it's helpful beyond school tasks.*

- Be explicit when showing students how they can transfer a skill discussed from your read-aloud text to a new situation. For example, if you point out and explain flashback in reading, show students how they could use that technique when writing a memoir or story. Help them see more generally that what they notice while reading can be used in their own writing.
- Have students share or debrief, and ask them to link what they are presently doing to a skill or strategy they previously learned. For example, one group of sixth-grade students pointed out that learning to evaluate websites in English class enabled them to choose websites that their teacher found acceptable for a research project in history.
- Provide time during guided practice with instructional materials and independent reading using self-selected books for students to practice a new skill so they have a depth of understanding that can result in transfer.
- Have conversations with students where they can showcase and explain transfers they've made first to you and then to classmates.

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In today's data-driven climate, it's important to have research that proves the efficacy of peer-led literature circles. According to Daniels (2006), we can assess students' discussion skills through "teacher observations; forms that record kids' preparation, participation, specific comments, and levels of thinking" (p. 14). A study in 2001 by Davis, Resta, Davis, and Camacho, concluded that literature circles increased students' motivation to read, improved their performance on tests, and raised their reading levels.

In 2003, Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran published a study conducted in 64 middle and high school English classrooms. The results suggest that when students engaged in discussion-based approaches with high academic demands, students developed the skills to participate in and complete challenging literacy tasks independently.

Sixth grader Rick summed up some of the benefits perfectly: "If my group and I decide the guiding question, and use a book we chose and loved, then I can't wait to talk about it and see what friends think."

Types of Talk and How They Fit Into the Lessons

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As you incorporate more purposeful talk into your classroom, think about the varying contexts in which it can occur:

- Turn-and-talk
- Whole-class discussions
- Partner talk
- Small-group discussions
- In-the-head discussions
- Teacher–student discussions

In the next chapter, I include detailed lessons for these six kinds of talk. They are in the order I recommend you try them, and they follow a framework that can deepen your knowledge of a specific kind of talk. I also offer guidelines for integrating student talk during the following:

- **Interactive mini-lessons:** Pause during your mini-lesson and ask students to turn-and-talk to discuss part of the lesson or respond to a question you pose.
- **Daily read-alouds:** As you read, pause once or twice and have students turn-and-talk to respond to a focused prompt.
- **Guided practice:** Students can use partner talk and turn-and-talk as they practice applying the lesson you've modeled using a focused prompt, a literary element, text features, or a comprehension strategy. Including talk during guided practice helps students clarify their thinking and analyze texts. You can wrap up guided practice with a short whole-class discussion and spark the conversations with a prompt or guiding question.
- **Independent practice:** Reserve time for students to partner talk or participate in a small-group discussion after independently completing books in the same genre. Students can use their books to discuss a guiding question the teacher

provides (see How to Craft Guiding Questions below) or questions students have composed. These discussions provide opportunities for students to share and support interpretations as well as discuss how they transferred a skill they internalized during guided practice.

- **Teacher–student discussions:** As you meet with students in conferences, encourage them to discuss parts of a text that confuse and challenge them. By working with their teacher, students can move from dependence to independence with a task.

Initiating Talk With Questions and Prompts

Asking questions is a key part of any literary conversation and often serves to launch such a discussion. Teachers can pose a guiding question to focus inquiry for a unit of study. But students should also be taught how to ask thoughtful, open-ended questions to extend thinking about an idea, issue, or text as well as to clarify or respectfully challenge a classmate's thinking.

How to Craft Guiding Questions

A guiding question goes beyond text-specific questions and leads students into a discussion by inviting them to consider an issue that is enticing and complex enough to explore. Guiding questions go beyond one specific book and help students explore diverse materials to learn about a topic such as *What is survival?* (McTighe & Wiggins, 2013; Wilhelm, 2012). Here are tips for developing and determining the effectiveness of guiding questions:

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- **Develop questions before a unit of study starts**, as the guiding question drives the thinking and talk during the unit and can be used as a springboard for inquiry, where students develop a series of questions related to the guiding question. For students to develop a guiding question for a unit, they'll need background knowledge of the topic. Whether the teacher or students develop the guiding question, it's helpful to ask students to use inquiry to generate additional queries. Students can start inquiring before the unit starts, and then throughout the unit questions will arise as students read and talk. For example, the theme of a unit of study for a sixth-grade class I worked with was *trust*. Students agreed on this guiding question: *What is trust?* Then inquiry enabled them to develop additional questions to investigate before and during reading, such as these: *Why is trust important to friendship? How does trust affect confidence? Explain why trust creates feelings of safety.*

- **Decide on the theme or concept you want students to explore**, such as survival, obstacles, or stereotyping. Use your theme to compose a question that can't be answered in a sentence or two. Instead, a guiding question has a variety of interpretations and can be supported by several different texts. For example, one class I worked with was reading different biographies, and the teacher chose the theme of obstacles. Her guiding question was *How do obstacles affect the course of a person's life?*

- **Avoid editorializing in your questions**. For example, *Why is it stupid to stereotype groups?* limits student thinking about the topic. Instead, make questions short, clear, and open-ended. For example, *Why is stereotyping unjust?*

Lessons at a Glance

TALK STRUCTURE	GROUP FORMAT	TIME	GREAT FOR	CHECK OUT THESE LESSONS
Turn-and-Talk	Partners	2–4 minutes	• Building background knowledge • Applying a strategy during read-alouds • Thinking about a literary element or technique during read-alouds • Processing mini-lesson topics • Analyzing a text feature or structure	• Chapter 2, Lesson 2.1: Turn-and-Talk, page 27 • Chapter 2, Lesson in Action: Turn-and-Talk, page 29 • Chapter 3, Lesson 3.1: Inferring With Informational Text, page 72 • Chapter 4, Model Lesson: The Importance of Inferring: “Snow Day” by Priscilla Cummings, page 133 • Chapter 5, Lesson 5.5: Compare and Contrast Notes, page 174 • Chapter 5, Model Lesson 5.5: Teaching Compare and Contrast Notes: “How Athens Got Its Name” Retelling by Joanna Davis-Swing, page 176
Whole-Class Discussions	Whole class	5–30 minutes	• Exploring guiding or interpretive questions • Analyzing text(s) • Comparing and contrasting multiple texts • Sharing ideas after partner talk	• Chapter 2, Lesson 2.2: Whole-Class Discussions, page 32 • Chapter 2, Lesson in Action: Whole-Class Discussions, page 34 • Chapter 3, Lesson 3.2: Exploring Interpretative Questions: Biography, page 74 • Chapter 5, Lesson 5.2: Conflict, Plot, and Setting, page 154 • Chapter 5, Model Lesson 5.2: Teaching Conflict, Plot, and Setting: “Coming Clean” by Anina Robb, page 156 • Chapter 7, Lesson 7.2: Thinking About Issues: Obstacles, page 205 • Chapter 7, Model Lesson 7.2: Teaching About Obstacles: “How Ada Lovelace Leaped Into History” by Kathleen Krull, page 210 • Chapter 7, Lesson 7.3: Teaching the Problem-Solution Text Structure, page 212 • Chapter 7, Model Lesson 7.3: Teaching Problem-Solution: “New Horizons in Space” by Seymour Simon, page 216 • Chapter 7, Lesson 7.5: Identifying Main Ideas, page 224 • Chapter 7, Model Lesson 7.5a: Teaching Explicitly Stated Main Ideas: “Who Climbs Everest?” (Excerpt From *Tales From the Top of the World*) by Sandra Athans, page 229 • Chapter 7, Model Lesson 7.5b: Teaching How to Infer Main Ideas: “Defying Gravity: Mae Jemison” by Anina Robb, page 231
Partner Talk	Partners	5–20 minutes	• Applying mini-lesson topics • Developing guiding questions • Developing interpretive questions • Exploring guided or interpretive questions • Applying reading strategies • Analyzing literary elements and techniques • Analyzing text features and structures • Discussing the gist • Summarizing texts	• Chapter 1, How to Teach Students to Compose Interpretive Questions, page 12 • Chapter 2, Lesson 2.3: Partner Talk, page 38 • Chapter 2, Lesson in Action: Partner Talk, page 40 • Chapter 3, Lesson 3.1: Inferring With Informational Text, page 72 • Chapter 3, Lesson 3.2: Exploring Interpretative Questions: Biography, page 74 • Chapter 3, Lesson 3.3: Determining the Author’s Purpose: Informational Text, page 76 • Chapter 4, Model Lesson: The Importance of Inferring: “Snow Day” by Priscilla Cummings, page 133 • Chapter 5, Lesson 5.2: Conflict, Plot, and Setting, page 154 • Chapter 5, Model Lesson 5.2: Teaching Conflict, Plot, and Setting: “Coming Clean” by Anina Robb, page 156 • Chapter 5, Lesson 5.3: Identifying Themes, page 161 • Chapter 5, Model Lesson 5.3: Teaching Theme: “Snow Day” by Priscilla Cummings, page 163 • Chapter 5, Lesson 5.4: Planning and Writing a Summary: Fiction, page 166 • Chapter 5, Model Lesson 5.4: Teaching Summary: Fiction: “Hoops Tryouts” by Anina Robb, page 168 • Chapter 5, Lesson 5.5: Compare and Contrast Notes, page 174

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TALK STRUCTURE	GROUP FORMAT	TIME	GREAT FOR	CHECK OUT THESE LESSONS
Partner Talk (cont.)	Partners	5–20 minutes	• Applying mini-lesson topics • Developing guiding questions • Developing interpretive questions • Exploring guided or interpretive questions • Applying reading strategies • Analyzing literary elements and techniques • Analyzing text features and structures • Discussing the gist • Summarizing texts	• Chapter 5, Model Lesson 5.5: Teaching Compare and Contrast Notes: “How Athens Got Its Name” Retelling by Joanna Davis-Swing, page 176 • Chapter 6, Lesson 6.1: Mining Text Features for Information, page 186 • Chapter 6, Lesson 6.2: Teaching Text Structures, page 189 • Chapter 7, Lesson 7.1: Taking Heading Notes and Finding a Main Idea, page 198 • Chapter 7, Model Lesson 7.1: Taking Heading Notes and Finding a Main Idea: “Who Climbs Everest?” (Excerpt From *Tales From the Top of the World*) by Sandra Athans, page 203 • Chapter 7, Lesson 7.3: Teaching the Problem-Solution Text Structure, page 212 • Chapter 7, Model Lesson 7.3: Teaching Problem-Solution: “New Horizons in Space” by Seymour Simon, page 216 • Chapter 7, Lesson 7.4: Personality Traits and a Person’s Achievements: Biography, page 218 • Chapter 7, Model Lesson 7.4: Teaching Personality Traits: “Defying Gravity: Mae Jemison” by Anina Robb and “Isaac Newton and the Day He Discovered the Rainbow” by Kathleen Krull, page 222 • Chapter 7, Lesson 7.5: Identifying Main Ideas, page 224 • Chapter 7, Model Lesson 7.5a: Teaching Explicitly Stated Main Ideas: “Who Climbs Everest?” (Excerpt From *Tales From the Top of the World*) by Sandra Athans, page 229 • Chapter 7, Model Lesson 7.5b: Teaching How to Infer Main Ideas: “Defying Gravity: Mae Jemison” by Anina Robb, page 231
Small-Group Discussions	3–8 students	10–30 minutes	• Exploring guiding or interpretive questions • Writing interpretive questions • Applying reading strategies • Analyzing literary elements and techniques • Analyzing text features and structures	• Chapter 1, How to Use the Fishbowl Technique, page 18 • Chapter 2, Lesson 2.4: Small-Group Discussions, page 45 • Chapter 2, Lesson in Action: Small-Group Discussions, page 47 • Chapter 3, Lesson 3.4: Why Characters Change: Small-Group Discussion Using a Short Story, page 78 • Chapter 5, Lesson 5.1: Protagonist and Antagonists, page 142 • Chapter 5, Model Lesson 5.1: Teaching Protagonist and Antagonists: “Hoops Tryouts” by Anina Robb, page 144 • Chapter 5, Lesson 5.3: Identifying Themes, page 161 • Chapter 5, Model Lesson 5.3: Teaching Theme: “Snow Day” by Priscilla Cummings, page 163
In-the-Head Conversations	Individual	5–15 minutes	• Monitoring comprehension • Applying reading strategies • Analyzing literary elements and techniques • Analyzing text structure and text features • Thinking about the gist	• Chapter 2, Lesson 2.5: In-the-Head Conversations, page 51 • Chapter 2, Lesson in Action: In-the-Head Conversations, page 53 • Chapter 3, Lesson 3.5: Prompting In-the-Head Conversations: Biography, page 80
Teacher–Student Discussions	Teacher and student	2–3 minutes for desk side conversations 5 minutes for a conference	• Scaffolding reading strategies, summarizing skills, literary elements and techniques, text structures and features • Modeling strategies and skills • Setting goals • Discussing assessments	• Chapter 2, Lesson 2.6: Teacher–Student Discussions, page 58 • Chapter 2, Lesson in Action: Teacher–Student Discussions, page 60 • Chapter 3, Lesson 3.6: Teacher–Student Talk: Conferring, page 82

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- **Test your questions to make sure that each one has more than one valid answer** to ensure that it requires students to do high-level analytical thinking. Once you develop a knack for composing guiding questions, teach students the process so groups can devise and investigate their own. Here are research-based criteria to share with your students (Wilhelm, 2012). The question should
  - Compel students to think and talk right now
  - Cause students to talk, debate, agree, and disagree as they use the guiding questions to build understanding and a knowledge base
  - Ask students to study, learn, research, and talk about print and e-books, as well as the Internet, and conduct interviews that enable them to engage in a rich exploration of the guiding question

How to Teach Students to Compose Interpretive Questions

In addition to guided questions, students should raise and explore interpretive questions of their own during literary conversations. Research shows that students who are taught to generate their own questions after reading can develop a deeper understanding of the text than students who receive no training and practice (Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992; Robb, 2010; Rothstein & Santana, 2011; Zimmerman & Keene, 2007). The reason for enhanced comprehension is that to write text-specific interpretive questions, students must have a thorough knowledge of the reading material. Moreover, when students compose their questions, they are motivated to talk about them, leading to greater independence with reading and discussion.

Explain that there are two kinds of questions: open-ended, interpretative questions that have more than one answer and closed questions that have one correct answer. For example, an interpretative question for *The Giver* by Lois Lowry is *Why does the Giver encourage and help Jonas to escape the community?* A closed question is *Who does Jonas take with him when he leaves the community?*

Encourage students to write open-ended, high-level, interpretive questions after they've read a chunk of a novel or informational text or a complete short text. An interpretive question has more than one valid answer that can be supported with text evidence. I tell students that as soon as they can find two valid answers, they can think about composing another question.

Questions can be about literary elements, text features, themes, important information, and the author's point of view. Here are some verbs that usually signal open-ended questions: *analyze, examine, compare and contrast, evaluate, show, classify*. Once students can write open-ended questions with these verbs, have them read and discuss the verbs on the revised Bloom's taxonomy. You can use a search engine to access the taxonomy.

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Making Student Talk Productive

In the coming chapters, you will notice that the teacher's role in student discussions is flexible, and while the teacher always is there to ensure that talk deepens comprehension, the goal is for students to be independent. For example, at first the teacher supports and respects students' thinking by jump-starting a discussion and then steps aside

to observe and listen. While the teacher can become a co-participant in discussions, the students should take the lead (Adler & Rougle, 2005; Johnston, 2004; Wilhelm, 2007). When teachers embrace students leading discussions and see it as transformative for their student readers, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as students are transformed by what they read as they understand it on a deep level (Coles, 1990; Paterson, 1989; Tyler, 2013; Wiggins, 2012).

Students will feel comfortable using questioning techniques before, during, and after reading if you have created a positive learning community where students trust you and their peers (Baca & Lent, 2010; Lent, 2007; Robb, 2010). Trust permits students to risk talking to a partner, a small group, or the entire class about ideas they've just begun to probe.

How to Build Trust

Building a community of learners starts the first day of school and continues throughout the year. Listening to and interacting with students sends the message that you're interested in what they like and dislike.

- Get to know each one of your students while they read or write independently by asking them to complete an interest inventory (see pages 14–15).
- Hold short, 4- to 5-minute conferences with students and use the survey as a conversation starter. Offer positive feedback and avoid being judgmental in order to let students know you value what they wrote.
- Provide opportunities for groups of 4 to talk about their interests, what they love to do during their spare time, and what they like and dislike.
- Recognize and celebrate cultural diversity and diverse learning styles. To create a safe community, adapt your lessons and curriculum to the wide range of needs in your class. Honor and respect the cultures in your class, and use this diversity as an opportunity to share ideas and life experiences. Often, engaging in literary discussions enables students to share family stories and life experiences. You can invite students to bring in a photograph that reveals something about their culture and discuss it with a partner or small group. You can also include in your units books and stories about diverse cultures.
- Abandon a one-size-fits-all curriculum and find materials for students reading below grade level that they can learn from and enjoy.
- Organize desks into groups of 4 to 6, and as units change, change where students sit so they can learn from and with different students.
- Encourage students to take risks with developing interpretations of texts. However, doing this will definitely raise the need for adjusting and refining ideas, and that's okay, because this is part of the analytical thinking process.
- Support the developing literacy skills of English language learners (see suggestions in each lesson).

For an in-depth look at creating a community of motivated learners, read *Building a Community of Self-Motivated Learners: Strategies to Help Students Thrive in Schools and Beyond*, by Larry Ferlazzo, Routledge, 2015.

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Interest Inventory

Name ______________________ **Date** ______________________

Directions: Respond to the prompts on this handout.

What are your favorite . . . ?

Books

____

____

Comics

____

____

Magazines

____

____

Authors

____

____

School Subjects

____

____

Movies

____

____

Television Programs

____

____

Music

____

____

(Continued)

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Sports

____

____

Hobbies

____

____

Afterschool Activities

____

____

Weekend Activities

____

____

Social Media

____

____

Foods

____

____

Electronic Games

____

____

If you could travel anywhere, where would you go? Explain why.

____

____

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How to Help Students Initiate Discussion

If students have little to no past experiences with leading and sustaining a literary conversation, you'll have to scaffold the process so they can talk independent of your orchestrating the discussion. I've provided a handout you can use as a starting point for preparing students for literary conversations: Guidelines for Discussion (see page 17). Before your first discussion, give each student a copy and walk through it, highlighting what students should do:

- Come to the discussion prepared. Complete the reading assignment, and bring the text, reader's notebook, and a pencil.
- Collaborate with peers to compose open-ended questions about the text (if not using a teacher-assigned guiding question).
- Choose a moderator, whose job is to keep the discussion moving forward. (There is a list of prompts the moderator can use on Prompts That Keep a Discussion Moving Forward, page 25.)
- Participate in the discussion, being respectful of others, listening carefully, asking questions to help a speaker clarify an idea, and citing text evidence to support points.

Here are some suggestions for gradually moving students to independent literary conversations:

- Start with the turn-and-talk strategy (see Lesson 2.1 in Chapter 2 on pages 27–28) so students have brief talking encounters and can experience sharing, questioning, and listening. Use the prompts in the lessons or your own.
- Move to a whole-class discussion and motivate talk with a guiding question or an open-ended question; encourage a student to volunteer to start the discussion. Tell students that they don't have to raise their hands, but they can participate by adding thoughts or asking questions once the student speaking has finished.
- Debrief after the first whole-class discussion and ask students to reflect on what worked and what could be improved.
- Invite students to design guidelines for productive discussions. Revisit the guidelines after 2 to 3 months so students can make adjustments based on experience. Here are the guidelines fifth-grade students developed early in the school year:

  Come prepared; do the reading; bring your notebook.

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Continue using turn-and-talk to give students the experience of sharing ideas with and listening carefully to a partner. If students have difficulty maintaining a conversation, you can provide the Ways to Contribute to a Discussion section of the Guidelines for Discussion handout (also available at http://resources.corwin.com/readtalkwrite).

How to Teach Students to Listen Actively

In order to become active listeners during discussions, students benefit from having multiple opportunities each week to talk with a partner, a small group, and the whole class. All participants should listen actively during discussions, but this doesn't come

Guidelines for Discussion

Name ______________________________ Date ______________________

- Come to the discussion prepared. Complete the reading assignment, and bring the text, your smart notebook, and a pencil.

- Collaborate with peers to compose open-ended questions about the text (if not using a teacher-assigned guiding question).

- Choose a moderator, whose job is to keep the discussion moving forward.

- Participate in the discussion, being respectful of others, listening carefully, asking questions to help a speaker clarify an idea, and citing text evidence to support your points and inferences.

Ways to Contribute to a Discussion

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- **Restate the speaker's idea.** If you would like to clarify an idea a classmate suggested, restate it in your own words and ask if that was the intended meaning. You can use phrases such as I heard you say < >. Does that sound about right?

- **Ask a question.** If you would like the speaker to elaborate on or clarify his or her thinking, or if you're curious about a speaker's take on a related issue, ask a question. Can you say more about < >? / I'm not sure what you meant when you said < >. Can you help me understand? / What do you think about < >?

- **Connect to the speaker's idea.** You can build on a speaker's idea by first connecting to it. I like the point you made about < >, and I have this to add. / I had a similar idea.

- **Offer a different view.** You can honor a speaker's contribution and then share your own perspective in a respectful way. I hear what you're saying about < >. I had a different thought when I read that part. / I have a different perspective on that scene.

- **Disagree respectfully.** Sometimes you will disagree with classmates, and that's fine as long as you can state your disagreement respectfully. Here are some prompts that can help you respectfully disagree: I didn't see it that way. Instead, I think < >. / I don't agree; I think it means < > because < >.

- **Refer to the text.** Always refer to the text to support your ideas and thinking during discussions. You can use these prompts to show you will be providing text evidence: When it says < >, I infer < > because < >. / Let's take a look at this description; it says a lot about the protagonist.

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naturally to most students. Take some time to define active listening, discuss why it's important, and model it for students. Tell them that when someone else is talking, listeners should

- Keep focused on what the speaker is saying
- Set aside any distracting thoughts that arise
- Not think about what to say in response

Listeners may jot notes to help them remember what the speaker said, but the focus should be on understanding the ideas the speaker is conveying first, rather than formulating their own ideas.

How to Use the Fishbowl Technique

The fishbowl permits students to observe a partner or small-group literary conversation (Fisher, Brozo, Frey, & Ivey, 2007). The students who will discuss sit in a circle while the rest of the class forms a circle of observers and listeners around them. Set aside about 15 minutes for the discussion and about 10 minutes for debriefing.

Guidelines for Implementing the Fishbowl Technique

- Use a prompt or guiding question that has more than one possible answer and relates to a text all students have heard or read. I suggest using a read-aloud that you completed.
- Set up the room with an inner circle of four to six chairs, or two chairs if it's a discussion between partners. Chairs are for the students who will discuss the text.
- Establish a purpose or goal for students in the outer circle to observe. Choose from these options: considering the role of moderator, asking high-level questions, listening carefully, or responding positively to the remarks of others.
- Review discussion guidelines. Remind students that one person talks while others listen and that all participants should respond respectfully and use text evidence to support a point.
- Hold the discussion.
- Debrief the fishbowl discussion by asking students what they learned about the purpose or goal of the literary conversation. Require that students not refer to peers by name, but focus on the discussion. These reflections can support students' progress with meaningful discussions and provide you with topics for whole-class mini-lessons.
- Have students write their goals for the next small-group or whole-group discussion in their readers' notebooks. A reader's notebook is also an excellent place for students to document what they discussed and/or learned from a discussion.

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How to Use Smart Notebooks

Smart notebooks are a spin-off of readers' notebooks and are indispensable for literary conversations. Students can use partner talk to generate ideas for small-group and whole-class discussions and then jot notes about the text to prepare for the discussion. Such preparation makes for "smarter" discussions as students clarify their thinking and pose questions they want the group to address. Smokey Daniels (2002) aptly

explains: "This kind of writing is open-ended and personal; it invites kids to generate extended, original language, not to jot 'correct' phrases in response to workbook blanks" (p. 22).

After discussions, students can write a summary, a list of key points discussed, or a reflection of the discussion when it's finished. In this way, the smart notebook becomes a record of students' responses and reactions to their reading throughout the school year and can illustrate progress in thinking and writing fluency.

Of course, smart notebooks can be used for many other purposes as well. Writing in them regularly encourages students to construct their reading identities by recording hunches, theories, interpretations, and questions about texts they listen to and read as well as model lessons that you present. Smart notebooks can also include lists of books students have read and loved along with books they want to read.

Smart notebooks are safe places for readers to try out ideas, adjust or change the course of their thinking, or express anger toward a character or event. Fourth grader Jamal wrote this about Judd (a character in *Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor): "I hate you Judd. You're mean to Marty. You beat and kick and starve your dogs. Your heart is steel." At the end of the book, Jamal had an epiphany about Judd and his notebook entry reflected it: "I see why Judd was mean. He was treated mean and beaten and punished by his dad." Try to view notebook writing as an opportunity for students to discover what they think and know about a text. It's a place to try on and try out ideas that can and often do change as the story unfolds. It's not a place to look for correct responses or responses the teacher expects.

Use a marble-covered composition book as a notebook because the pages are sewn. If students tear out pages, the notebook falls apart, and I want students to keep every entry. Saving all notebook writing permits students to review entries and reflect on their progress. You can also make notebooks by stapling composition paper between two colored pieces of construction paper.

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Additional Prompts for Documenting Discussions

Students can document their discussions in notebooks after groups experience a few practice discussions. This is especially helpful as during a class you can listen to one, at the most two, group discussions. If students have difficulty writing about their discussions, ask them to choose an open-ended query from this list:

- How did the discussion change your thinking?
- What new ideas did you learn from the discussion?
- Did you disagree with an interpretation? Explain.
- How did the discussion change or reinforce your feelings about a character, person, event, or information?
- Did students offer enough text evidence to convince you of an interpretation? Explain.
- Did the discussion raise questions? If so, what are they? Why are the questions important to deeper comprehension?

What's Ahead

In the next chapter, we turn to lessons for teaching six types of talk: turn-and-talk, whole-class discussions, partner talk, small-group discussions, in-the-head conversations, and teacher–student discussions.

Reflect on Your Teaching

- How much student talk are you including in your lessons?
- What kinds of talk will you integrate first? I suggest that you start with turn-and-talk and whole-class discussions as these prepare students for partner and small-group discussions. Once you're comfortable with these, you can introduce small-group discussions and partner talk.
- Why is it important to help students see the benefits of in-the-head conversations and have conversations with themselves when they read, watch videos and movies, and listen to texts?

Don't Miss Reading and Learning From: *Choice Words* by Peter Johnston, Stenhouse, 2004.

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