

Recommendation 3



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

The panel recommends that teachers lead their students through focused, high-quality discussions in order to help them develop a deeper understanding of what they read. Such discussions among students or between the students and the teacher go beyond simply asking and answering surface-level questions to a more thoughtful exploration of the text. Through this type of exploration, students learn how to argue for or against points raised in the discussion, resolve ambiguities in the text, and draw conclusions or inferences about the text.

The panel believes that students in kindergarten through 3rd grade are capable of having this kind of a discussion if they have appropriate guidance from their teacher. That said, some of the suggestions for putting this recommendation into practice apply to more experienced readers, but the panel believes that teachers can make the suggestions applicable to very early readers and those reading below grade level. For example, teachers can use read-alouds, shared reading, or pictures paired with text for less developed readers. Teachers can also choose texts (see Recommendation 4) and discussion questions that vary in complexity.

Four factors contribute to the success of a discussion. The first two are related to

planning. Teachers should select texts that are compelling enough to spark a discussion. Teachers should also create a discussion guide consisting of “higher-order” questions that prompt students to think more deeply about the text and articulate key aspects of the story. The second two are related to sustaining and expanding the discussion. If higher-order questions are challenging for students, teachers can use follow-up questions to point them in the right direction. Teachers can also split the class into smaller groups and ask students to discuss the text among themselves, checking in on them periodically to ensure that they are on the right track. This approach can build students’ ability to think more critically and independently about what they read.

Summary of evidence: Minimal Evidence

There is minimal evidence that participating in high-quality discussion improves reading comprehension for the target population; most studies on using discussions either observed older students or were not designed to conclusively prove the effectiveness of such discussions. Despite this, the panel believes these types of discussions are critical tools for helping students understand what they read. The use of discussion in teaching has a long history, and the panel is aware of extensive evidence of its effectiveness with older learners. Thus, the lack of evidence supporting this practice with younger students is because the claim has rarely been tested empirically and not because studies have failed to find discussion to be effective. For these reasons, and drawing on the panelists' own experiences in working with and observing the learning of young children, the panel believes this to be an important recommendation.

Three studies examined instructional programs that emphasized discussion in kindergarten through 3rd grade; however, they could not show that discussions led to better reading comprehension.⁶⁴ One, a study of

Transactional Strategies Instruction in which peer-led discussions were used in teaching comprehension strategies, showed that 2nd graders exposed to this technique had better comprehension outcomes than did those who were not.⁶⁵ However, it was impossible to separate the effects of discussion on reading comprehension from the effects of the other strategies that were “bundled” with discussion in the intervention. The two other studies that tested the effectiveness of discussions in this age range were missing information needed to demonstrate that discussion leads to improved comprehension.

Four additional studies used correlational designs that suggest a positive association between higher-order questions and reading comprehension.⁶⁶ Two of these four studies focused exclusively on students in 3rd grade and higher.⁶⁷ These studies provided some insight into relevant instructional practices and how using higher-order questions during reading instruction may be related to improvements in reading comprehension, but they could not show that asking students higher-order questions about text results in better reading comprehension.

How to carry out the recommendation

1. Structure the discussion to complement the text, the instructional purpose, and the readers' ability and grade level.

Teachers should consider how the type and content of the text will affect the discussion they plan to hold. The text used will affect the goals of a discussion, the extent to which students are interested in the discussion, and the questions teachers use to stimulate discussion. A text is more likely to prompt a rich discussion if it features either a character who faces a conflict or a real-world problem that presents a dilemma, because both give students an opportunity to support one side of an issue or the other (see Recommendation 4 for more details on selecting text for instruction).⁶⁸

Discussions and questions should be grounded in state and national comprehension standards. Many state standards for younger students incorporate versions of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) standards, which include three categories of comprehension: locate and recall, integrate and interpret, and critique and evaluate (Table 7).⁶⁹

Teachers can use these categories to frame discussion about text. Believing that high-quality discussions should address all three categories, the panel provides guidance below on how each category can be approached.

Table 7. Description of NAEP categories of comprehension

Category of Comprehension	Description
Locate and Recall	Identify the main ideas and supporting details; find elements of a story; focus on small amounts of text
Integrate and Interpret	Compare and contrast information or actions by characters; examine connections across parts of text; consider alternatives to what is presented in the text; use mental images
Critique and Evaluate	Assess text from numerous perspectives, synthesizing what is read with other texts and other experiences; determine what is most significant in a passage; judge whether and the extent to which certain features in the text accomplish the purpose of the text; judge either the likelihood that an event could actually occur or the adequacy of an explanation in the text

Source: Categories of comprehension and their descriptions are drawn from the *Reading Framework for the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress*, National Assessment Governing Board (2008), where they are referred to as “cognitive targets.”

- **Locate and Recall.** In discussion, the teacher and students should ask questions about what the text means, what the main idea is, and which details support that idea. Before the discussion, the teacher might prepare a guide for the class that highlights which questions students should ask and which the teacher should ask.⁷⁰ Teachers should ask some questions and moderate the discussion, but students should do most of the talking.
- **Integrate and Interpret.** In discussion, the teacher begins by reminding students of the comprehension strategies they already know (see Recommendation 1). The teacher then asks the students to read a small portion of the text themselves.

Adapting for younger students

- Take a greater role by asking more questions when working with younger students.
- Explicitly model how to think about the question. For example, the teacher could say: “The question asks about what koalas eat. I am going to look for a heading that talks about food or eating. Headings are these larger, bold-face words that tell us what a part of the text is about. Here’s a heading that says ‘Food for Koalas.’ I am going to read that section. I think it will tell me what koalas eat.”

Adapting for younger students

- Read aloud and ask students periodically about what’s happening, what the story is about, or what they think is going to happen.
- Facilitate a discussion by using a variety of higher-level questions that prompt the students to interpret the text.

When they are finished, the teacher leads a discussion about what they just read, and so on throughout the entire text. The questions asked by the teacher should lead the students to summarize what happens in the text and to interpret these events in light of their own experience, knowledge, or other parts of the text.⁷¹

- **Critique and Evaluate.** For discussion, the teacher assigns a text that poses a dilemma about which students might disagree, such as the appropriateness of a particular character’s actions or whether the outcome of a story seems realistic. The teacher then divides students into teams according to the opinions they express after they read the text. Each team is asked to pick out parts of the text that support its opinion (e.g., events that make the outcome seem realistic or unrealistic). To facilitate this process, the teacher could

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distribute sticky notes to students and ask them to mark these points in the text. Students could also mark text that they think is confusing, and teachers could use this material as the basis of a class discussion about what information is needed to make the text easier to understand.

Adapting for younger students

Read a selection aloud, and have students discuss it with a partner and then report back to the class. To start a discussion at that point, the teacher can ask students whether they think the character did the right thing.

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

Teachers should develop higher-order questions that encourage students to think deeply about what the text means rather than simply recalling details.⁷² Questions should reflect what teachers want students to draw from the text, including implicit as well as explicit information. They generally should not be simplistic (“What is the boy’s name?”) or ask just for an opinion (“Did you like the story?”). Typical higher-order questions include

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

Table 8 shows sample higher-order questions linked to the NAEP’s three categories of comprehension.

When preparing questions, teachers should think about the following: the best time to present each question to students—before,

during, or after reading;⁷³ which questions should be asked when students first read the text;⁷⁴ and which questions should be asked after a second or subsequent reading. In a similar vein, teachers should 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 1st grade, shared reading time or read-alouds provide an opportunity to introduce higher-order questions that invite discussion.

Adapting for younger students

These types of questions can be adapted to students in kindergarten through 3rd grade, but teachers of students in kindergarten or 1st grade who are just becoming familiar with these types of questions may have to ask more follow-up questions (see step 3, below) to clarify what in the text led the students to respond as they did.

Specifically, younger students may find it difficult to take on the viewpoint of the author or a specific character. Teacher guidance can help them recognize and appreciate those viewpoints, drawing on the empathy that children have at this age.

3. Ask follow-up questions to encourage and facilitate discussion.

Reading comprehension improves when teachers ask follow-up questions that encourage students to apply the reading comprehension strategies they know. The questions should be asked in the context of a curriculum in which students are taught comprehension strategies as described in Recommendation 1.⁷⁵ In a sustained discussion, teachers should respond to the students’ answers in a way that leads them to think about and elaborate on their answers and the meaning of the text.

Teachers should ask students to refer to the text to justify their answers. Depending on the grade level, this may mean recalling events and passages in the text or pointing to illustrations to justify their answers. Follow-up questions should both provide students with a model for thinking about the text and its meaning more actively, and help them learn to construct and support opinions with textual evidence. Examples of recommended follow-up questions include the following:⁷⁶

Table 8. Sample discussion questions related to NAEP categories of comprehension

Locate and Recall	<p>What is the main idea of this section?</p> <p>Who were the main characters in <i>Goldilocks and the Three Bears</i>?</p>
Integrate and Interpret	<p>How did the bears feel when they found Goldilocks? Why did they feel that way?</p> <p>How did Goldilocks feel? Why did she feel that way?</p> <p>What are the differences between how Goldilocks and the bears felt?</p>
Critique and Evaluate	<p>What do you think is the most important message in this story?</p> <p>How well did the author describe the new ideas in what you just read? If the author asked you what she could have done differently or better to help other students understand, what would you tell her?</p> <p>How might Goldilocks behave in the future based on her experience in this story?</p>

Source: Categories of comprehension are drawn from the *Reading Framework for the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress*, National Assessment Governing Board (2008), where they are referred to as "cognitive targets." The panel created sample questions for illustrative purposes.

- 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 questions 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), 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 from the text in a collaborative way.⁷⁷ For younger students, the panel believes that follow-up questions can facilitate discussion, particularly when teachers conduct the discussion in small groups with appropriate supports such as clarifying student answers and guiding students to respond to one another's answers positively.

Students new to in-depth discussion may struggle with this format. Therefore, teachers should model the format and guide them in responding to the text while keeping them focused on both meaning and the discussion question at hand. Younger students may require additional assistance in answering some of these kinds of questions. Throughout the discussion, teachers should remind students to talk to one another and not just to the teacher.

4. Have students lead structured small-group discussions.

As students become more proficient in discussion, the panel suggests providing opportunities for peer-led discussions about text in which students pose questions to their peers.

The key to forming groups is to include students who are relatively good at discussion in each group and to allow students to direct the discussion.

Adapting for younger students

Small-group discussions for younger students will be shorter and more structured than discussions for older students; the questions will also require more follow-up questions.

Teachers may select from many structures and techniques for peer-led discussions, including the following:

- Describe and assign a role to each student (e.g., posing questions or keeping the group on task) 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 (see Recommendation 1). The panel cautions that this approach may be difficult for kindergarteners and 1st graders.
- Give students higher-order questions, graphics, or pictures, and ask them to discuss the materials with a partner. The panel recommends this approach for students in kindergarten and 1st grade or as a warm-up for a more challenging discussion for students in 2nd and 3rd grades.
- Ask students to make up questions that get them thinking. For example, give students question stems (see step 2), and have them fill in the blanks and ask the questions of one another.⁷⁸ 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 to them that the entries should be questions or concerns they want to raise with their peers in discussion.⁷⁹ Teachers can support younger students by giving them sticky notes with symbols (e.g., question marks, smiley faces, or exclamation points) to mark sections of the text they want to talk about.

Kindergarten through 3rd-grade students 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.⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹
- Consider setting a rule that no one can talk more than three times until everyone has spoken once.⁸² 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.⁸³
- 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.⁸⁴

Key reminders

Because it will take time for students to understand how to moderate their own discussions, it is imperative that teachers provide scaffolding and practice to support the students' growth in this area (e.g., asking them to clarify what they mean, whether they agree with a prior statement, or whether there is more to add before moving on to the next topic⁸⁵). For additional support, students in the upper elementary grades may help model peer-led discussion for younger students.⁸⁶

Potential roadblocks and solutions

Roadblock 3.1. *When students are talking with peers, some teachers believe they do not have control of the classroom discussion.*

Suggested Approach. Though discussion involves teachers giving up some control, there are things that can be done to ensure that students stay on task during a discussion. For instance, teachers should 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.⁸⁷ These supports can serve as “training wheels” while the students strengthen their ability to take part in this kind of a discussion. Teachers can monitor how well students are staying on task from outside the group and can offer assistance as necessary.

Roadblock 3.2. *Students do not understand how to conduct productive discussions about the text with one another.*

Suggested Approach. Teachers should give students opportunities to observe and practice discussion techniques; what is expected of them as discussion leaders should be clearly outlined. Teachers can prepare students to lead a discussion by modeling a leader’s behavior and techniques, and then gradually releasing this responsibility to the students. Teachers may consider setting aside a time at the beginning of the year to focus on discussion skills. They 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, the panel suggests having them turn and talk to their neighbors.

Roadblock 3.3. *It is difficult to find time to prepare for classroom discussions.*

Suggested Approach. To capitalize on limited time, the panel recommends that teachers 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 using email or online, and 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.

Roadblock 3.4. *It is difficult to find time to devote to discussion when also teaching decoding skills, comprehension strategies, and vocabulary.*

Suggested Approach. Finding enough time to teach everything there is to teach is a challenge, especially in schools that serve a diverse student population. That said, high-quality discussions should be part of the school day because they have a great deal to do with improving reading comprehension. Devoting time only to word-level skills will not be sufficient to help primary grade students become effective readers. Students developing decoding skills and fluency also need to develop their knowledge of the world and their ability to think about what they read. This can be accomplished in time-efficient ways. For instance, instead of handling discussion as a stand-alone task, teachers can make it part of the process of teaching other comprehension strategies. In addition, teachers can make the most of the time devoted to guiding students through a high-quality discussion by thoroughly preparing for the discussion.