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*Sincerely,  
Karen Haag*

*Discussion of what is read is a sharing of ideas and opinions. Discussion is what we engage in with a friend or airplane seatmate when we notice they are reading a book we have just read. Teachers lead discussion, helping the children take turns and adding their ideas when appropriate. Discussion is not questioning. Questioning is an activity teachers do to “make sure children read it and got it right.*

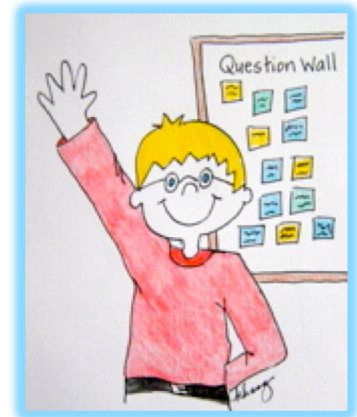
*If after children read, teachers usually ask a lot of questions, children focus their attention on remembering. If after children read, teachers usually engage them in discussion, children focus their attention on understanding and deciding what they think. Questioning fosters remembering. Discussion fosters comprehension.*

---“A Tour Through the School: What to Look For”

## Checklist for Teaching Students to Discuss Books

If you had a chance to read my timeline, you know that it takes me the year to build a book-reading community. I put each step in place intentionally. Each lesson is featured in detail in a specific month on my timeline and you can find more details for each of these strategies on those pages.

*This handout compiles all my tips into one page since you may work through them faster or slower than I do.*



I learned from experience that I have to teach students how to talk to one another when working in academic groups. Talking about books - or any content - requires a new language and a new way of thinking learners might not understand. I model in the groups for a while until they are ready to work on their own. I spent many years struggling with how to make conversations go more smoothly. To save you time, I share my STEPS with you.

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### (1) Benefits

First, I explain my hopes for how discussion will work and what I hope they will gain. I set 3 guidelines that pretty much sum up all potential pitfalls:

1. Allow everyone to teach.
2. Do everything in your power to learn.
3. Create an environment that empowers others to learn.

### (2) Listening Minilesson

Select one student to tell you a story while you model "non-listening" strategies. (Let your volunteer know ahead of time what is going to happen.) The first time, interrupt the student while he is telling the story. Stop in the middle. Turn to the students and ask them whether you were listening well. Make a list on the board of behaviors that show that you aren't listening. Have them help you start a list of listening behaviors to follow. Start again: your volunteer tries to tell you the story a second time. This time, follow the suggestions your class made, but use your body language to show you are not listening. Add recommendations to the chart. The third time, model how to listen well. Ask the storyteller if they felt like you listened this time. Make the point:

listening is not about the listener. *It is about whether the speaker feels listened to.* We can all listen and do something else at the same time. However, does the person who is speaking feel that her ideas are heard? Add your good behaviors to the chart. Keep the chart in a visible spot all year. *For more detailed directions for the listening minilesson, download “How to Show You’re Listening” on the Structured Talk page.*

### (3) Argue Safely

Next, I introduce students to phrases I call “argue-safely phrases.” If they use this kind of language, they are less likely to offend one another. The language also helps to keep the discussion moving at a brisk pace. *For a more detailed explanation, download Argue Safely Tips on my Structured Talk page.*

#### Tips for discussing with your group:

- Be aware of people’s feelings
- Look at people when they’re speaking
- Act interested.
- Compliment people on their comments.
- Take time to acknowledge comments before you go on to your own.
- Ask follow up questions to help people clarify their thoughts and share their evidence.

#### Phrases That Help

- I agree and . . .
- Good point! I also learned . . .
- That’s interesting. Did you also think about . . .
- I’m curious what you thought about . . .
- I was wondering . . .
- What did you think when . . .
- What about . . .
- Tell me more about . . .
- I never thought about that idea before.

### (4) Commitment Contracts

There are classes or groups of students who need to make contracts with one another. In that case, I ask the students, “What do we need to do to make this discussion groups work?” Together we brainstorm a list of guidelines. We narrow the list down to 4 or 5. Once we master those, we will add more. So, for right now, the group and I need to narrow our focus to the most important guidelines depending on what’s causing the struggle. I photocopy the guidelines so that students can fill out a contract every day. If I write small I can fit 6-8 on a page. Teachers can cut these up and ask students to fill out a contract daily. If a student is breaking a covenant, then I will politely remind the student. In my presence the student writes “NO” on the contract in that one area. We talk about what to do to improve. If the behavior becomes chronic - broken more than 3 times - the contract is not working and something else needs to be done. *Read more about Commitment Contracts on the Formative Assessment page.*

#### Commitment Contract for in Reading Workshop

Date Monday, April 2, 2012	Yes or No		Date Tuesday, April 3, 2012	Yes or No
Have notebook and reading ready.	X		Have notebook and reading ready.	X
Listen with my whole body.	X		Listen with my whole body.	X
Encourage others to talk.	NO		Encourage others to talk.	X
Talk so everyone can hear.	X		Talk so everyone can hear.	X
Talk one at a time.	X		Talk one at a time.	X
Marked what I want to talk about.	X		Marked what I want to talk about.	X
In reading time, I learned . . . <i>inferring means to predict</i>			In reading time, I learned . . . <i>the author gives the reader clues throughout the book.</i>	

### (5) Steps for First-Time Discussion

In the beginning stages, I give students a structure to follow. These simple steps are designed to make everyone feel welcome and equal. Each person practices leading the circles. Quickly, students deviate from these steps and move into a format that meets their differentiated needs. *Download a poster of the Discussion Steps on the First Discussion Groups page.*

1. Elect a leader. (Rotate leadership each time.)
2. Leader welcomes everybody by name.
3. Leader states the purpose for getting together.  
For example, today's purpose: Students will practice asking questions that deepen understanding of the reading.
4. Discuss questions you bring. (Leader decides whether he/she will call on participants or ask for volunteers.)
5. After discussion or when time is called, summarize the main ideas discussed. Leader records the ideas to report back to the class.
6. Leader compliments each participant and allows group members to share compliments as well.
7. Write in your reader's notebook. Evaluate your participation in your group. Set a new goal.
8. Members say good-bye to one another, push their chairs back, and begin reading next chapters as a signal that their group is finished discussing.
9. Leaders report summaries to the whole class.
10. Class critiques summaries and discuss the ideas.



### (6) Fishbowl Student Group

The Fishbowl is a demonstration method that works when modeling discussion groups. It means that I bring a small group of students into a circle in the middle of the room to discuss a book or article they read in common. (These students are in the fishbowl.) The rest of the class sits in a bigger circle around them with notepads. (The other students are outside the fishbowl looking in.)

The larger group's purpose is to observe the small group discussion and take notes on how people talk with one another. Specifically, I ask them to notice what makes group conversation work. When discussion goes well, we name what's making it work: offering to let another person speak first, nodding in agreement, adding onto another person's ideas, etc.

When the participants struggle, we stop. We try to name the problem as it happens. With a teacher's guidance, students chart the problems – the difficulties in making conversation. Together, the class brainstorms possible solutions. The solutions vary from class to class and year to year. If the students determine the solutions, they are more likely to live with the consequences.

For example...

Potential Problems	Possible Solutions
Students don't talk loud enough.	Raise our hands when student is too soft. Tell student you can't hear him/her.
Some students don't come prepared to group.	Unprepared students cannot participate in circles. They use time to read and prepare.
Some people don't talk.	Ask, "What do you think?" Say, "I really want to hear what ___ has to say about this question."
Some people sound angry.	Refer them back to the argue-safely rules. Ask the complainer to come with the "complaine" to the teacher. Come TOGETHER to discuss a possible solution.

### (7) Observe Adult Groups

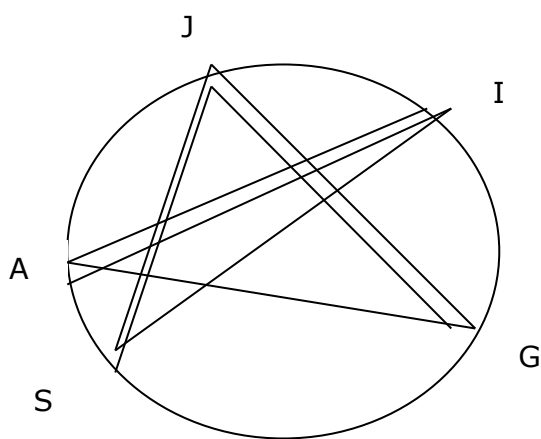
Some years, I am fortunate to find a group of adults who are willing to model (i.e.; principal, AP, literacy coach, guidance counselor). They read the same article as my students. They also sit in the middle of the class (fishbowl) and we sit in a circle around them. Again, we observe to see how veterans make conversation. We name what they do. We watch how they solve problems.

### (8) Videotape Groups

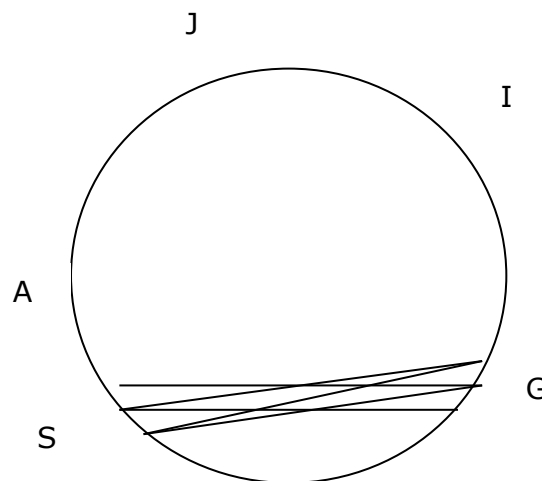
We watch videotapes of past book clubs. Or, we watch videos that I have purchased or that are available online. Students watch to see how groups handle potential problems that surface. By now, we have quite a long list of what works. We have also talked through solutions to potential problems. For suggestion of videos, visit the **LikeToRead** Bibliography page.

### (9) Star Charts

Once the groups work on their own, I sit in and make a Star Chart map of their conversation. Basically, I draw a circle and write each student's name on my paper like a seating chart. I draw a line from one person to the other to reflect who talked to whom. If 5 students are in a circle and they all talk to one another, the map will look like *Star Chart 1* below. If not, students identify who is not talking and who is dominating. We ask participants either why they haven't participated or why they're talking so much. (See Star Chart 2.) The students set goals for the next question to see if they can improve participation. I find that once we do Star Charts 2 or 3 times, I never have to do them again. My students get the point. All I have to say is, "Remember the Star Chart!" and the students know what I mean - pay attention to be sure your conversations are balanced. *For more detailed explanation of Star Charts, go to the **LikeToRead** Website page, "Star Charts".*



Star Chart 1



Star Chart 2

### (10) Reader Response Checklists

Once groups tackle and master participation, it's time to require more. I ask students to focus on improving 4 goals of group dynamics: (1) ask lead questions; (2) build on other's ideas to sustain conversation; (3) support opinions with evidence from the text or other sources; and (4) encourage one another. (These goals are in addition to skills and strategies like determine author's purpose and theme.)

To help students assess these goals, I created another mapping sheet of sorts. Basically, the teacher makes a table of names and 4 goals. She tallies the number of times each participant demonstrates a goal. The following table represents a group discussing one question brought to the group by Jerome. The data shows that all participants discussed fairly equally. In the course of the discussion, students talked about evidence brought to the group's attention by Jerome and Jazmin. Jerome encouraged his peers by either

thanking them, asking someone what they thought, complimented a peer on finding evidence or providing a satisfactory answer. This response log serves as evidence that this group sustained discussion on one question, sought evidence to support their opinions and worked together well.

Names	Asks Lead Question	Follows Up	Reference Text	Encourages Others
Jerome	√		√	√
Joshua		√√√		
Jazmin		√√√√√	√	
Jazz		√√		

This response log shows that the members of the group threw questions out to one another but did not discuss the questions in depth. *For a more detailed explanation of Reader Response Logs, go to the **LikeToRead** website page, “Reader Response Checklist”.*

Names	Asks Lead Question	Follows Up	Reference Text	Encourages Others
Jerome	√√√			√
Joshua	√√√√			
Jazmin	√√			
Jazz	√	√√		

### (11) Reflection

To improve individual’s participation in discussion groups, show them how to make, assess, and reset personal goals. This process can be used for any area of growth. I found the process to be particularly helpful in improving discussion skills.

Before students go into discussion groups, they write about their individual strengths and areas for growth. They choose a goal to work on during discussion time and write it as I Can... or I Will... statement. At first, share examples of goals so that students have some models. Then, when the students finish discussion, they return to their reader’s notebooks and write about whether they met the goal or not. They either reset the same goal for next time or choose a new goal. If teachers confer with the students about the reflections, conversation will improve. *Read more about Goal Setting and Conferencing on my Formative Assessment page. Check [www.liketowrite.com](http://www.liketowrite.com) for specifics on teaching students to be reflective.*

### Sample Personal Goals

- Since I am a shy person, I will try to talk 3 times.
- Since I talk a lot, I will listen to one person before I add to the conversation.
- I will invite someone to participate.
- I will find references in the text to support my opinions.
- I will ask a question.
- I will try to answer my classmate’s question until he feels satisfied.
- I will discuss equally and not try to win the conversation.
- I will thank people when they help me.
- I will compliment the thinking of my group mates.
- After we get plot questions answered, I will push my group to think about main ideas, themes, author’s purpose, and the personal meaning of what we read.



**(12) Daybook Reflections (Or, Reader's Notebook Reflections)**

Once all these steps are in place, your students are ready to review a body of work housed in their daybooks or portfolios. The students spend a good deal of time analyzing all the work they've saved. They choose their best work to show you. They explain in writing why their work is their best. They sticky note pages for you to examine. In this way, the teacher only looks at the students' best work and reads their explanation as to why it is their best. In other words, the students prove - with evidence - that they have made progress in your class. *For detailed explanations of daybook reflections, go to my Formative Assessment page on [www.LikeToRead.com](http://www.LikeToRead.com) or my Assessment page on [www.LikeToWrite.com](http://www.LikeToWrite.com)*

