

Asking Questions about the Text

Engaging students in a dialogue about something they are about to read can clarify their thinking and help you find out what they already know or expect from the material. Questions and discussion also clarify understanding during and after reading. One way to begin this dialogue is through asking questions that elicit responses reflecting the student's thoughts and understandings about the reading.



Too often questions are used only at the end of reading, to check comprehension. In fact, successful readers ask themselves questions throughout the reading process.

Effective questions encourage real thinking, not just yes or no answers.

Beginning readers need modeling

and

practicing to learn how to do this.

The following types of questions require different ways of finding the answer:

Factual or "right there" questions can be answered with a single word or phrase found right in the story: "When did the story take place?" "It was midnight, the 25th of October..."

Inference or "think and search" questions require finding and integrating information from several places in the story and relating one's own knowledge as well. "When did the story take place?" "The harvest moon hung high in the sky, shining on the field of ripe orange pumpkins waiting to be picked for Halloween..." Using our background knowledge of concepts like "harvest" and "Halloween" as well as the words "ripe pumpkins" we figure out that this story takes place one night in late October, even though those words aren't used in the text.

"In the head" or "On my own" questions require bringing in one's own information, (background knowledge). These can be answered without reading from the book. "We have read a lot of fairy tales, what kinds of things usually happen in fairy tales?" Or, "You told me you have a cat. What might happen in a story called Puss in Boots? Do you think it could be true?"

Remember to focus on the positive aspects of the child's responses to encourage future attempts.



Questions before reading should help the reader:

1. Make connections between background knowledge and the topic of the book: "This book is about Anansi the Spider: do you remember the other Anansi book we read? What kind of character is Anansi? What kinds of things did he do in that story? How do you suppose he will behave in this book?"

2. Set a purpose for reading: "Here is a new book about sea turtles. What are some things that you would like to learn about these creatures?"

3. Make predictions: "The title of this book is *The Missing Tooth*, (Cole, 1988). Who do you suppose the two boys on the cover are, and what do you think this book might be about? What happens to you when you lose a tooth?"



Questions during reading should help the reader:

1. Clarify and review what has happened so far: "What are some of the things that made Arlo and Robby such good friends?"

2. Confirm or create new predictions: "Now that one boy has lost a tooth, so they aren't both the same, what's going to happen? I wonder if they will stay friends:"

3. Critically evaluate the story and make personal connections: "Could this really happen--that two good friends could have a fight because one of them had something the other wanted? How would you feel if you were Robby? What would you do?"

4. Make connections with other experiences or books: "Does this remind you of another story / character, what happened in that story? Could that happen here?"

5. Monitor the child's reading for meaning and accuracy: "Did that word 'horned' make sense? What is a 'horned toad'?"



Questions after reading will help:

- 1. Reinforce the concept that reading is for understanding the meaning of the text, and making connections:** "In this story about Amy's first day in school how did she feel before going into her classroom? How did you feel on your first day?"
- 2. Model ways of thinking through and organizing the information they have taken in from reading a text:** "What did Amy's teacher do when she walked into the classroom? How does Amy feel now? How do you know that?"
- 3. Encourage critical thinking and personal response:** "What do you think might have happened if the teacher had not done that? Why do you think the author decided to write this story? Would you have done what Amy did?"
- 4. Build awareness of common themes and structures in literature:** "What other story or character does this sound like? What parts are the same? What parts are different?"



When children respond to your questions it is important to listen carefully to what they say, and to respond to any questions they may have. Also, if children have misunderstood a section of a story you may want to go back to that part of the book and reread it, clarifying any difficult vocabulary if necessary, to help children understand what is happening.

You might say:

"You said that the rabbit was laughing at the pig at the end, but you know, I remember something different. Let's look at that part of the book again and see what it says." (Then reread the appropriate segment of the book.)

"Here it says: 'The rabbit ran through the door and slipped past the man who was laughing at the pig.' Do you know what it means when someone "slips past" something?..."



The most important thing, however, when talking about a story with children is to let them know that their ideas about what they have read are important and that you value what they have to say.