



# Open-Ended Questions: Conducting Productive Classroom Discussion

## Overview

**Rationale for Change Idea:** More effective classroom discussions use **open-ended questions** to elicit students' thinking about a topic, idea, or reading they have done and allow that thinking to extend and evolve through dialogue—even if students' thinking is still tentative. Questions may ask students to search across multiple pieces of text to develop an answer; they may ask readers to form a hypothesis or make a prediction, as in “What if Paul Revere had misinterpreted the lantern in Old North Church?” or “If the main character had made a different decision about her life...?” Still other questions may ask students to evaluate or critique what they have read. Such questions encourage student discussion.

Most classroom discussions start with teacher comments or questions that are supposed to be followed by student responses, which teachers can then evaluate as right or wrong. The answers to many of these questions are explicitly stated in the text, that is, they require readers to search for specific information or to read primarily at the literal level. When supported, even students whose reading skills are not strong should be able to participate in—and learn from—such classroom discussions.

The “open-ended questions” change idea provides teachers with a protocol to ensure productive classroom discussions. Students should come to recognize that initial confusion and ideas that are not fully formed are part of the learning process and that deep discussions build their understanding.

**Who Benefits:** All students, especially those who read primarily at the literal level and students who have not been taught content area skills for their grade level

### When Used and Why?

- Any time teachers interact with students—introducing ideas, reviewing what has been read, etc.
- Students' responses to open-ended questions provide insight into their comprehension and have the potential to scaffold deeper comprehension.

### Time Required:

Use of open-ended questions should not add any time to teachers' interactions with students, although students' responses to questions may be more extensive than to more traditional questioning. This change idea does require more time of the teacher in preparing for their lesson and active engagement in supporting discussion.

## Connection to Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) Goals and Priorities

Understandings and Expectations			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>1: Planning standards-aligned content</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>4: Evidence of student learning</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>2: Equitable instruction</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>5: Collective efficacy</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>3: Student engagement</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>6: Equitable and inclusive learning environment</b>

English Language Arts Instructional Practices			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Understanding the text</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Critiquing the text</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>Responding to the text</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>Producing text</b>

*Note.* There are multiple ways to implement the change idea on open-ended questions. The ideas below for teacher preparation and implementation are just one way of thinking about this work.

Attention to Equity			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Reflect on one’s own biases to mitigate negative impact on curriculum selection, instruction, and relationships with students, families, and colleagues. (U6)*	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Emphasize assets, resilience, joy, and resistance of historically marginalized groups to provide a more comprehensive representation of their lived experiences. (U6)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Use culturally relevant and sustaining approaches across grade levels and content areas for all students, with a critical eye toward serving those from historically marginalized groups. (U1, U2)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Sustain students’ cultural, linguistic, and literate practices while providing instruction that promotes flexibility in their ability to navigate different cultures and contexts. (U1, U2, U3, U6)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Position students for success as knowledge producers rather than consumers. (U1, U2)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Use perspective-taking to develop an understanding of the factors that influence varied points of view. (U2, U3)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Draw on students’ interests and culture to shape curriculum, instruction, and assessment. (U1, U6)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Question the single story/status quo that sustains societal inequities. (U2)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Use language to discuss asset-based approaches to teaching and learning. (U6)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Center the experiences, voices, histories, perspectives, and dignity of Native People and People of Color. (U6)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Foster a nurturing and collaborative learning community where students seek feedback from teachers and peers, assess their own learning, and set goals. (U3, U4)		

\*LBUSD Understandings Continuum

## Checking Comprehension in Social Studies and Language Arts

- Content area reading courses for middle school students often require deeper levels of comprehension than students have had to use in earlier grades, and teachers' questioning begins to accustom students to this kind of thinking.
- Social studies and language arts teachers can scaffold students' thinking by asking questions that students answer orally and discuss with others.
- Being aware of one's comprehension processes is the foundation of these necessary skills.

## Guidelines for Coaches: Introducing the “Open-Ended Questions” Change Idea

### Why the Change Idea Is Important: Change Idea Details

The “open-ended questions” change idea is one of the ways for teachers to help their students become more expert at the **content area reading skills that most likely were not taught in earlier grades**.

- This change idea is not the same as teaching students to read to answer factual questions or questions that have only one right answer (although of course these are important, too).
- One of the goals for teaching should be to help students become better critical readers in each content area.<sup>1</sup>
  - **Reading instruction** in elementary school may not have attended to the critical reading skills that students need in the content areas, and the reading material they have previously experienced may not have invited this kind of thinking previously.
- Following are considerations to discuss with teacher teams:
  - Many middle school students may not question the extent to which they are understanding what they read and assume that their lack of comprehension is because the reading material is too hard. This change ideas helps to engage students and elicit a deeper understanding of how they are engaging with the text.
  - Some students may read so quickly that they do not check their comprehension and complete assignments without fully understanding what they have read.

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<sup>1</sup> The “question the author” approach to questioning was developed by Isabel Beck as a way for students to master the skills needed to read critically. Students are encouraged to develop questions they would ask of the author as a way to solidify their own comprehension. For an overview of and worksheet for a “question the author” activity, see [https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/ela/bank/RL\\_CS\\_QtA.pdf](https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/ela/bank/RL_CS_QtA.pdf).

- Other students read very slowly and miss the thread of what they are trying to read.
- Still other students have convinced themselves that they are bad readers and that reading is not for them.

Engaging in discussion about the text can help students explore the text in more depth, give them confidence about their abilities, and demonstrate to them that comprehending is a cumulative process in that it does not happen automatically after one reading of a given text.

- Remind teachers that part of their responsibility as content area teachers is to help students master the specific cognitive tools and processes to make sense in their content area; these tools include critical reading and writing.
- Teachers themselves need to follow certain guidelines:
  - Encourage all students to speak but do not force anyone to offer opinions until they are ready.
  - Acknowledge the contributions of all students, regardless of gender, ethnicity, background, etc.
  - Recognize that some students may try to dominate the discussion without really answering questions or reflecting on what they read.
    - Keep such speakers under control.
  - If students' answers are off base, try to redirect their thinking in ways that are constructive and respectful.

## Implementing the Change Idea With Students

### Teacher Preparation

1. Find appropriate selections of relevant informational or narrative texts that are complex enough to require a close reading. State a purpose for reading and anything specific readers need to think about as they read.
2. Briefly remind students about the different purposes that questions can serve as you ask them to think deeply and to do one or more of the following:
  - a. Search for answers across several sections of text.
  - b. Make inferences about what has been written, including developing questions readers would like to ask authors.
  - c. Evaluate the text, including agreeing or disagreeing with it.

- d. Think beyond the text, often in ways that allow students to bring in their own background experiences and values.
3. On the basis of the selection students will read, determine how to introduce the reading assignment by considering what you want readers to think about, learn from, or take away from their reading:
  - a. Be prepared that some students may hesitate at first to answer open-ended questions while also preparing to reassure students that you value their thinking.
    - i. Even students who usually can answer factual questions quickly and accurately may be more hesitant answering questions that ask them to think beyond what is directly stated in text.
4. Plan follow-up open-ended questions for each stop to encourage students' deeper thinking about what they read; the questions should require readers to look back at the text to support their answers.
  - a. Support readers if they were not able to answer or respond to the original question.
  - b. Help readers make connections between sections of text or across texts.
  - c. Encourage readers to think more deeply about something within, about, or beyond the text, for example, to think about how the text does or does not reflect experiences they have had or their own cultural framework.
  - d. Scaffold understanding of the text if students are not able to respond to the first question.
  - e. Remind students that sometimes they read texts too quickly and it is important to slow down if they want to comprehend fully.
    - i. Optional: Plan opportunities for students to talk to a partner or jot notes about the text.
5. Decide how you will introduce the text and task along with the purpose of reading this particular section. To ensure that all students feel comfortable in this format, teachers need to explain, remind students about, and reinforce norms of civil discourse, including
  - a. listening respectfully and without interrupting each other;
  - b. listening actively, that is, with an open mind and the intent to understand each other's views;
  - c. criticizing fellow students' **ideas** but not each other;
  - d. accepting criticism but being willing to ask what leads fellow students to their criticisms; and
  - e. allowing each other the chance to speak, that is, not trying to dominate the discussion.

## Sample Teacher Implementation Routine

1. **Introduce the change idea to students** as a way to encourage them to think more deeply about what they read and to give teachers a better idea of how well they are understanding the content they are learning.
  - a. Explain that **strong readers comprehend beyond the surface—literal—level of what they read** and are able to **answer questions that may have multiple answers** or even **no right answer**.
2. Tell students that such questions may be asking them to engage with their reading in new ways, that is, they do the following:
  - a. **Invite thinking:** So what did you think? What was especially interesting for you?
  - b. **What do you think** would have happened if...?
  - c. **Why do you think [the main character or significant figure]** acted in a certain way?
    - i. **What other choices** might she or he have made?
  - d. **In what ways could those choices** have changed history or changed the outcome of the story?
  - e. **Why do you think the author made specific choices**, such as deciding to use some rhetorical device or structure, such as telling the story in a certain way or presenting information in graphic form?
  - f. **Probe their thinking:** Help us understand your thinking about this. What in the text made you say that?
  - g. **Link what they read to other ideas:** How do these ideas relate to each other? What connections do you see? Are there parts of the text that seem to disagree with the main ideas?
  - h. **Make connections:** In what ways has this reminded you of other things you have read? In what ways does the text remind you of something you have experienced?
  - i. **Cite evidence:** Where in this text did you see that? What else have you read that had the same ideas? Where have you read (or seen or heard) different ideas?
  - j. **Reflect on one's reading:**
    - i. What did this reading remind you of in other readings you've done?
    - ii. Questioning themselves ("does this make sense?") or the author ("why does she write this?")
    - iii. Identifying specific parts of text that cause problems

- k. **Agree/Disagree:** Given what you have read or experienced, does something in the text NOT make sense to you? If you were able, what questions would you ask the author?
  - l. **Extend:** Does everyone agree? What might be a different way to look at that?
  - m. Summarize and check for understanding
    - i. Keep track of what you do and how having reading challenges makes you feel.
3. Tell students that answers to such questions may vary from reader to reader, depending on their depth of comprehension and on the background experiences they bring to the comprehension process.
- a. Encourage students to think deeply about what they read can stimulate valuable discussions that enhance learning and help students link their thinking and their reading skills.
  - b. Assign students a relatively easy piece of content area text that is assessable conceptually but perhaps a bit challenging for some students.
    - i. Introduce the passage with some background information and preview vocabulary and concepts as appropriate.
  - c. Have students read silently, making annotations if they want.
4. After students have read the passage, ask them a series of questions that target both literal comprehension (yes/no, “find in the text where it says”) and higher-level questions; students will answer the questions orally.
- a. The goal of the questions is for students to think and then to express what they are thinking, even if their ideas are tentative and they think they have not fully comprehended.
    - i. Teachers need to reassure students that some questions may not have one right answer.
  - b. Teachers reassure students that their opinions and references to their own experiences and cultural identities are welcome because they are valuable contributors to their comprehension.
5. Some students may be reluctant to participate, at least at first; but teacher encouragement and reassurances that “there are no right or wrong answers” should build confidence.
- a. Students should begin to see that comprehension can vary from person to person, especially when texts themselves offer different ideas.

6. Begin to include more open-ended questions in all discussions and make open-ended writing assignments.
  - a. Encourage students to express and justify their thinking in a nonjudgmental way.
  - b. Try to include all students in discussions by creating acceptance for diversity of opinions and reinforcing the “there’s no one right answer” concept that encourages deeper thinking and questioning about comprehension.

### **Possible Implementation Routine**

7. Introduce the text, task, and purpose for the reading and remind students of any processes and expectations you have introduced for close reading of texts.
8. Read the first section of text. Stop and pose the question and have students respond as planned, either orally to the whole class or in small groups (e.g., “turn and talk”).
9. Options for student engagement include the following:
10. Once you have completed the reading, ask students to respond to a deeper level question that requires them to make meaning across the text. Have students talk or write their response depending on how you configured the initial discussion (partner or small group discussion).
11. Repeat this process as appropriate to scaffold comprehension of the text/content.

## **Assessing the Change Idea**

**Students’ comprehension should improve** because they are thinking more deeply and applying different strategies to make sense of what they are reading.

Ideally, students will begin to think about reading as an active process, one that does not have to lead to one exact interpretation of a text but rather that stimulates their thinking and learning. They may still not say they like to read, but they should express an improved confidence in their abilities in all content areas.

- **Teacher self-assessment/discussion questions:** Reflect on how well you introduced the concept of open-ended questions and the quality of the examples you used. Think also about whether the students understood that some questions may have more than one right answer.



- Does the idea that some questions are open-ended make some students uncomfortable?
  - Why do you think this is true?
  - How do you address this?
- How willingly do students hazard a guess at answering open-ended questions?
- Do students build off each other's responses to open-ended questions?
- Do students draw on their background knowledge and experience in answering these questions?
  - How can you encourage them to do that?
- Do students bring up questions they would like to ask the authors of what they read?
- Do students say that they apply different strategies as they read, especially when trying to answer open-ended questions?
- After introducing and discussing the change idea, how many students overall seem to be more confident reading difficult texts because they realize that there may be more than one way to respond to the text?
  - Do students realize that they can disagree with an author or question what is presented as fact in something they read?
- What objections, if any, did students seem to have about being asked more open-ended questions?
  - How might you address these objections?
- What seemed to work well to encourage students to answer open-ended questions and what might you need to change in your approach to using this change idea?

It would be helpful to log some responses to these reflection questions in your implementation tracker. (These questions can be discussion points during coaching in addition to the general implementation questions in the coaches handbook.)

Rubric for Teacher Evaluation of Student Work			
4 – Excellent	3 – Proficient	2 – Adequate	1 – Not satisfactory
Student is always able to respond to open-ended questions and can use the questions and dialogue to get to a deeper understanding of the text.	Student is usually able to respond to open-ended questions and can often use the questions and dialogue to get to a deeper understanding of the text.	Student is sometimes able to respond to open-ended questions and can sometimes use the questions and dialogue to get to a deeper understanding of the text.	Student is rarely able to respond to open-ended questions and rarely can use the questions and dialogue to get to a deeper understanding of the text.
Student consistently refers to both the text and to responses to their own and other students' responses to open-ended questions when talking and writing about the text.	Student often refers to both the text and to responses to open-ended questions when talking and writing about what they have read.	Student sometimes refers to both the text and responses to open-ended questions when talking and writing about what they have read.	Student rarely refers to either the text or responses to open-ended questions in talking and writing about what they have read.

### Optional Discussion Rubric for Teacher Evaluation

Possible Rubric for Coaches to Use With Teachers in Discussion (Not a Measurement Item)			
Teacher assessment	Possible student responses <sup>a</sup>		
Students who can answer open-ended questions seem to have stronger overall comprehension than their fellow students and seem better able to understand <b>what the class was learning about</b> today.	≥ 75%	50%–75%	< 50%
Students who are able to answer open-ended questions can talk accurately and write about what they read.	≥ 75%	50%–75%	< 50%
Students seem willing to answer open-ended questions and, if prompted, add comments to each others' answers.	≥ 75%	50%–75%	< 50%
Students' answers to open-ended questions seem to help all students better understand what they have read.	≥ 75%	50%–75%	< 50%
If students had not fully comprehended the text they read today, fellow students' answers to open-ended questions seem to increase their understanding.	≥ 75%	50%–75%	< 50%

Possible Rubric for Coaches to Use With Teachers in Discussion (Not a Measurement Item)			
Teacher assessment	Possible student responses <sup>a</sup>		
Students who understand the different reading strategies took part in <b>classroom discussion</b> .	≥ 75%	50%–75%	< 50%
Students who could answer open-ended questions had little difficulty completing <b>today’s writing assignment</b> , especially if the prompt was itself open ended.	≥ 75%	50%–75%	< 50%

<sup>a</sup> To the extent possible, estimate the percentage of students who fall into the “< 50%” category and note those who may need extra help or reteaching.

Optional Rubric for Student Self-Evaluation in Social Studies and Language Arts: Open-Ended Questions			
Student statement	Possible student responses <sup>a</sup>		
I understood what we were learning about today.	Yes	No	Sort of
I was comfortable trying to answer open-ended questions about what I read for today.	Yes	No	Sort of
I am willing to answer open-ended questions even if I’m not sure what answer is expected.	Yes	No	Sort of
Listening to others’ answers to open-ended questions helps me better understand what I have read.	Yes	No	Sort of
When I didn’t understand the text we read today, I knew what I could do to figure it out (either on my own or with help).	Yes	No	Sort of.
In general, when I don’t understand a text, I know what I can do to figure it out (either on my own or with help),	Yes	No	Sort of

<sup>a</sup> Select “sort of” to indicate “to some extent” or “somewhat but not as much as I’d like or need to.”

