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Teaching Students How to Discuss

Adapted from Chapter 5 [Getting Started with Literature Circles](#)

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Learning to participate as an effective listener and contributor during discussions isn't easy. At times, we all may have difficulty listening well to others and contributing our own ideas. Finding meaningful things to say about what they've read, as well as participating as an active member of the discussion, requires skills that many students have not yet developed. Therefore, the time and effort you invest in teaching and practicing, the process of discussion will pay crucial dividends.

Learning discussion skills can be broken down into three components: Knowing what you're aiming for (what makes a good discussion), experiencing it either directly or vicariously, and developing some guidelines.

[Identify the elements of a good discussion](#)

[Experience discussion](#)

[Develop guidelines](#)

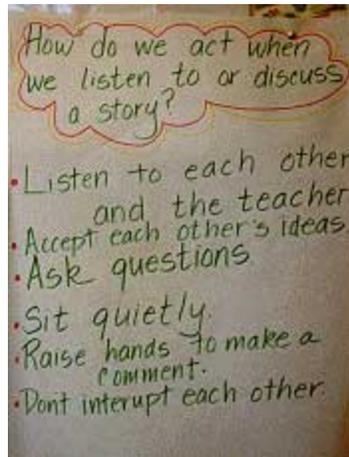
Above all -- students need to practice, practice, practice. Students will grow in their ability to discuss gradually -- it *will* take time. Be patient with them and with yourself. One of the fastest ways for students to improve in the quality of their discussions is to build in regular [debriefing](#) sessions.

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Identify the Elements of a Good Discussion

This is a great place to begin for the simple reason that students -- at all levels -- *know* what goes into an effective conversation (even if they can't yet *do* it). Here are several ways to find out what your students know about good discussion:

- **Brainstorm** Your best bet is to ask your students -- and then make a chart of what they say. This can be the beginning of your [guidelines](#) for discussion. For example, [Vicki Yousoofian](#)'s first graders gave her all of the information she needed for the chart below when she asked them, "How do we act when we listen to or discuss a story?"



- **Discussion Etiquette** This is a focused form of brainstorming. Fifth grade teacher, [Kirstin Gerhold](#) wanted her students to understand the elements of good discussion. For example, she wasn't sure they really knew what being an "active listener" meant. Kirstin discussed with her students what each element of discussion "looks like" and "sounds like" using the chart below. She identified the elements of discussion etiquette along the left-hand side, then asked her students to tell her, "What would it look like and what would you hear if someone were truly an active listener?"

Kirstin listed the **Discussion Elements** -- her students came up with the **descriptors** under "**Looks like**" and "**Sounds like**".

Discussion Elements	Looks Like	Sounds Like
Active Listening	Eyes on speaker Hands empty Sit up Mind is focused Face speaker	Speaker's voice only Paying attention Appropriate responses Voices low One voice at a time
Active Participation (respond to ideas and share feelings)	Eyes on speaker Hands to yourself Hands empty Talking one at a time Head nodding	Appropriate responses Follow off others' ideas Nice comments Positive attitudes
Asking Questions for Clarification	Listening Hands empty	Positive, nice questions Polite answers
Piggybacking Off Others' Ideas	Listening Paying attention	Positive, nice talking Wait for people to finish
Disagreeing Constructively	Nice face Nice looks	Polite responses Quiet voices No put downs
Focused on Discussion (body posture and eye contact)	Eyes on speaker Hands empty Sit up Face speaker Mind is focused	Speaker's voice only Appropriate responses Voices low

Supporting Opinions with Evidence	One person talking Attention on the speaker	One voice
Encouraging Others	Prompt people to share Ask probing questions	Positive responses

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Experience Discussion

There is no better teacher than actual experience with discussion to help students internalize what works -- and what doesn't. This is how students move from knowing what goes into discussion to being able to participate effectively as a group member. We suggest two ways to begin: Direct experience (immersion) and vicarious experience ("fish bowl").

- **Immersion (or how to learn by jumping in)** This strategy operates on the principle that before students can generate effective guidelines for discussion, they need to experience it first-hand. The immersion strategy does just that: Students carry on a brief discussion even before you've talked about what makes a good discussion -- and *afterward* they have a true "need to know."

For example, [Lori Scobie](#) knew that her fourth graders would have far greater buy-in for discussion guidelines if they could see a real need for them. She believed that immersing her students in a discussion was the fastest way for them to learn what guidelines they needed. What happened? Well, the inevitable: Someone had trouble moving his chair to his group without stepping on toes; a student gave away the "good part" of the book that others hadn't yet read; someone else wouldn't say a work -- or talked all the time. After students had met in their groups for about ten minutes, Lori gathered everyone in the front of the room. Writing their responses on a large piece of chart paper, Lori asked them what they liked about meeting in groups for literature circles. Here's what they said:

- Sharing feelings about the book.
- We shared if we liked the book or not.
- We got to talk about different parts of the book.

Then she made another column on the chart, "How can we improve?" Here's what went on that list:

- Some people can't read as fast as others
- Not interrupting
- Trying not to goof around
- Working together
- Getting started right away
- Talking more; some talked a lot and some didn't talk very much

Next, she explained that it was time for them to [develop guidelines](#).

- **Fish Bowl** Perhaps the most powerful way for students to understand what goes into a good discussion is to observe one in action. If you have students in your classroom -- or even students in other classrooms -- who are discussion veterans, perhaps they can be models. Several of [Janine King's](#) sixth graders had participated in literature circles the year before. She used a common cooperative learning technique -- a "fishbowl" -- to model good discussion

strategies for the rest of her class.

Just as Lori Scobie did with the immersion session session described above, Janine presented a discussion model after students had experienced one literature circle cycle with *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976). That way, she knew her students had a frame of reference to understand what they would see -- and they had a clear need to know. Janine invited five students with strong discussion skills to participate in the demonstration. She asked each to re-read the last chapter and gave them the [prompt](#), "Look for something to talk about that stood out for you". For the demonstration, the group gathered chairs in a circle at the front of the room and began to talk. Although understandably self-conscious at first, the students quickly forgot the audience and engaged in an interesting discussion of the book's ending.

From this experience, Janine and her students developed their [guidelines](#).

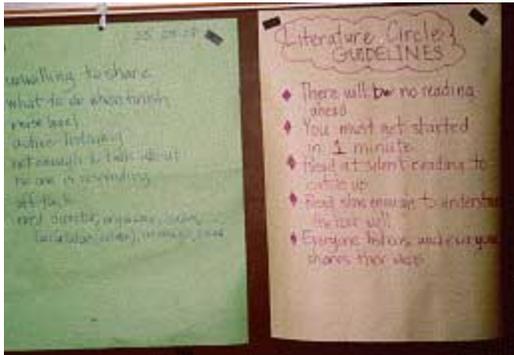
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Develop Guidelines

Guidelines for discussion work best when they're developed jointly with your students. You can do this after either an ["immersion"](#) or a ["fish bowl"](#) experience as described above.

- **After an "immersion" experience:** Pointing to each comment on the chart (see green chart below), Lori asked for a positive way to phrase it. For example, she began with the statement, "Some people can't read as fast as others." Carolyn suggested that they needed a guideline about not reading ahead, since those who knew what had happened sometimes told -- spoiling it for those who hadn't read as far. Several students agreed that this was a big problem. Lori asked, "Since this seems to be a real concern, is there a positive statement we can make for this guideline?" Mobi offered, "There will be no reading ahead." Ashley then pointed out that some students have a hard time reading as fast as others. The class shaped another guideline: "Read during silent reading to catch up." After about 20 minutes of negotiation, the guidelines list was finished.

The chart below shows two lists : The first: "What went well and what do we need to work on?" The second: The final set of guidelines. As you can see, the list is short. Lori kept the number of items limited to those she felt were most important. Although she may have had additional guidelines in mind, she was willing to begin with these -- they covered everything that was crucial.



Step 1 (green chart)

What went well; What do we need to work on?

- people were unwilling to share
- we didn't know what to do when finished
- noise level
- active listening
- not enough to talk about
- no one is responding
- off task
- need director, organizer or facilitator

Step 2 "Literature Circle Guidelines"

- There will **be** no reading ahead
- You must get started in 1 minute

Step 1 (green chart)
What went well; What do we
need to work on?

Step 2 "Literature Circle
Guidelines"

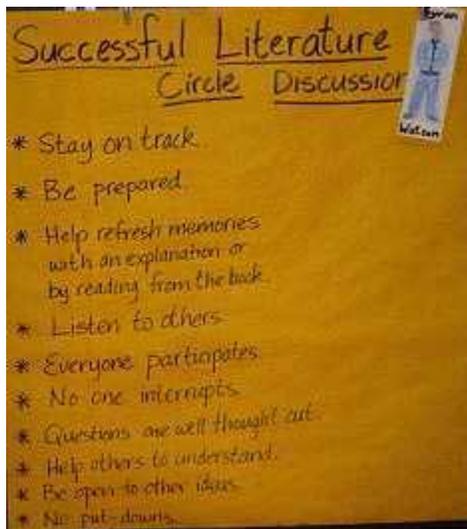
- Read at silent reading to catch up
- Read slow enough to understand the book well
- Everyone listens and everyone shares their ideas

Process of developing discussion guidelines:

Step 1: Brainstorm from experience: "What went well and what do we need to work on?"

Step 2: Word guidelines as positive statements

- **After a "fish bowl" experience:** When the fish bowl demonstration was over, Janine asked, "What did you notice as you watched this discussion?" This generated a flood of responses. Because the discussion had taken place right in front of them, the students had no trouble picking out what worked. Janine's class generated the same kind of list as Lori's fourth graders did -- and from their list grew the guidelines (see below) that they used for the rest of the year. Janine says the fishbowl technique made a big difference in her students' understanding of how to discuss: "That was the big toe in the water for us before we put the whole foot in."



Discussion guidelines after a fishbowl experience

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