

Academic Discussion Strategies

Discuss Guiding Questions

Units are built around **Guiding Questions**, content-rich questions that do not have a single definitive answer. Analyzing these questions is like conducting a scientific inquiry. Not only do these questions provide an organizing principle for the units, they also provide the occasion for the substantive and interactive classroom conversations that both motivate students to read and increase their comprehension. To take full advantage of the **Guiding Questions**, keep the following principles in mind:

- 1. Highlight the question's authenticity.** The essential characteristic of **Guiding Questions** is that they are debatable. When introducing a question, note that people have taken different positions on them over the years. Most school discussions revolve around things that are already known and figured out, so it's important to make it clear to students that they will have to formulate their own hypotheses and then take and defend a position.
- 2. Let student responses dictate the direction of the discussion.** Sometimes teachers preempt student thinking by asking yes/no or fill-in-the blank questions. This slots students' responses in the teacher's interpretation. Promote creativity and originality. Do your best to make sure that students are the ones who are doing the higher-order thinking.

Discussions can be unpredictable. If a student's response takes the discussion in a new direction, go with it. Recognizing student-generated ideas propels discussion. Identify and credit the idea by writing responses on a board or display device. Follow up with the student to invest them with authorship and reinforce authenticity. For example, say: *Does what I wrote down reflect what you were saying?*

- 3. Establish routines for argumentation.** Build habits in active argumentation using consistent series of questions that prompt argumentation. Model and provide practice in turning a question upside down or inside out.
 - After students make a claim, ask: *What makes you say so?* This cues them to produce evidence. Remind students to mine the text for evidence.
 - After they cite evidence, ask: *So what?* This cues students to connect the evidence and the claim and help students discriminate between relevant and irrelevant evidence.
 - Ask: *What would someone who disagrees say?* and *How would you respond?* This cues students to anticipate and respond to counter-arguments.

Extend discussion with follow-up prompts. In addition to the phrases supporting the argumentation routine, encourage elaboration in more general ways.

- To help students complete ideas or provide additional detail, say: *That's very interesting. Can you tell me more about that?*
 - To help students connect to ideas expressed by others, ask: *How does what you just said connect to what _____ said?*
- 4. Create Student-to-Student Interactions.** In addition to the **Cooperative Learning Structures** (PD58-PD59), make frequent use of small-group and partner discussions to engage more individuals in active participation and support the development of multiple perspectives. Small group discussion also gives students a deeper understanding of their peers' perspectives because there can be more frequent exchange of ideas and opportunities for clarification and elaboration. In whole-class discussions encourage students to summarize the previous speaker's points before making their own.
 - 5. Provide Time to think.** Silence can be daunting but it is important to create an environment where time for reviewing the text and silent thinking time is allowed and supported in whole-class and small group discussions. Use the following strategies to support the class in gaining comfort with wait time.
 - For whole class discussions, choose a series of respondents (*you, then you, then you*) including both volunteers and more reluctant students to allow students time to frame responses before speaking.
 - Acknowledge silence as a part of the thinking and learning process. Say, for example: *I'm glad you're taking time to think that through, let's come back to that topic in a minute or two.* Or stop the discussion and say: *Let's take a minute to collect our thoughts. Everyone take a minute to review the text. Then write what you're thinking about.*