

Developing Meaning-Making through Explanation, Questioning and Discussion

HOW DO CHILDREN GET BETTER AT MAKING MEANING FROM TEXT?

In order for children to become more proficient at making sense of texts they need:

- To be exposed to a **wide, rich and varied canon** of literature so they explore texts beyond that which they would explore themselves
- To have **meaning explained** to them through **succinct teacher-led explanations** in order to build knowledge of literature and knowledge of the world
- To have meaning-making modelled to them by teachers so the **implicit inner cognitive processes** of the proficient reader are **made explicit**
- To have opportunity to engage in **rich discussion** with their teachers and peers about literature and explore key ideas so they begin to understand the **subjective nature of literature** and to **respect and value** the views of others
- To have all the above **guided by an expert who** purposefully focusses on the most **fundamental aspects** of any given text

WHAT DOES EFFECTIVE EXPLANATION LOOK LIKE?

When we come across an interesting or tricky point in a text, we can choose to either **explain** the content or pose a **question** to encourage children to explore the content themselves. We would **choose to explain** when:

- We are keen to maintain the **pace of reading** and suspect a pause for a question would break the flow
- We assess that children lack the **knowledge to understand** the word, phrase, sentence or aspect without support from an adult

When this is the case, a **succinct, teacher-led explanation** moves children on in their meaning-making as we teach them the **new knowledge** required to understand the text: it becomes one more pointillist dot on their canvas. These explanations need to be as **succinct** as possible, be **prepared** in advance and supported **by images or additional resources** where appropriate.

Teachers can also model strategic reading by **'thinking out-loud'** in order to develop meaning-making. This includes:

- Re-reading ("I'm not sure I've understood that. Let's re-read...")
- Summarising ("There's a lot going on there – I think it basically means...")
- Self-Questioning ("Hold on, why has that character just done that? It could be because...")

Modelling this by thinking out-loud helps embed these as habits for our children which will improve their independent meaning-making.

WHAT DOES EFFECTIVE QUESTIONING LOOK LIKE?

The **aim of questioning** in reading lessons is **to provoke pupils to build meaning from texts themselves**, habituating them to the cognitive effort this can demand and demonstrating the value of their individual interpretations of texts. Teachers should use a **range of questioning techniques** to ensure **all children engage** with the question(s). These techniques include 'Think-Pair-Share', 'Pose-Pause-Pounce-Bounce', 'Mini-White Boards', 'Choral Responses', 'Cold-Calling' and 'Talk Gestures'.

Written responses can also be used such as structured response tasks. These can be useful for teachers to gather assessment information but **should not be over-used**. Questions teachers pose should **toggle** between **establishing meaning** (establishing a basic sense of a text) and **analysing meaning** (exploring language choices, character development etc.). Questions should also **zoom** from word level, to sentence, to paragraph, to chapter and to whole text. Teachers should be conscious of the questions they ask with regards to toggling and zooming but there is no prescribed ideal.

Questions should also vary from **closed to open**. Closed should be used when **pace** is a concern and open questions should be used to **stimulate discussion** and debate. E.g.

- What phrase suggests Jub was frightened in the woods? (closed)
- How was Jub feeling? How do you know? Why might she be feeling this way? (open)

Teachers can adapt their questions in response to class's needs to ensure all can engage. E.g.

- Why do you think the dragon was ecstatic? (teacher notes lack of understanding/engagement)
- Ecstatic means 'happy' Why might have the dragon felt that way?

Often including the word 'might' in a question encourages more engagement as it makes clear all sensible suggestions are valid.

WHAT AREAS SHOULD WE FOCUS QUESTIONING ON?

The temptation is to use the domains from the statutory assessments to structure our questions. This is likely to lead to lifeless reading lessons that undermine reading for pleasure initiatives. Though some exam preparation is needed, especially in preparation for statutory assessments, these domains should not be considered the main drivers. Teachers should instead focus on the areas below. These areas provoke children to think deeply about literature and inspire classroom discussion.

AREA	EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS (TO BE TAILORED FOR DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS)
Connection to the Reader	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does the story relate to your own experiences or knowledge of the world?• Do you find any of the characters' actions or decisions relatable or surprising? Why?• What emotions did the story evoke in you, and how does the author accomplish this?
Narrative and Plot	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the main events of the story?• Can you summarise the plot in a few sentences?• How does the conflict in the story develop, and what is the climax?• What are the turning points in the narrative, and how do they affect the characters?
Character Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does the protagonist change over the course of the story?• What causes these changes?• What are the motivations behind the actions of the main characters? Are they always clear?• How do secondary characters contribute to the development of the protagonist or central conflict?
Language and Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does the author's language (word choice, sentence structure) affect the tone of the story?• Are there any notable literary devices (e.g., metaphors, irony, allusion)? How do they add depth to the text?• How does the author's writing style influence your engagement with the story?
Setting and Atmosphere	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does the setting influence the story?• Could the events take place in a different time or place? Why or why not?• What role does the atmosphere or mood play in the narrative?• How do the author's descriptions help create this mood?
Interpretation and Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What might the author be trying to convey through the ending of the story? Is it open to interpretation?• Do you agree with the choices the characters make? Why or why not?• How might different readers interpret the story differently based on their own perspectives?
Themes and Symbols	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the central themes of the story?• How are these explored through the plot and characters?• Are there recurring symbols or motifs in the text? What do they represent?• How does the author use the story to comment on social, political, or moral issues?
Point of View and Narrative Technique	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does the point of view (first person, third person, etc.) shape our understanding of the story?• How reliable is the narrator? Are there any moments where we question their perspective?• What narrative techniques (such as flashbacks, unreliable narration, or foreshadowing) are used, and how do they enhance the story?

WHAT MIGHT EFFECTIVE DISCUSSIONS LOOK LIKE?

There is much overlap between questioning and discussion but some key points to consider with regards to discussions specifically are:

- Effective discussion involves a **shared construction of meaning**, therefore, teachers should recognise what might be **valuable in pupils' responses** so they can purposefully guide discussions to build on responses.
- The **classroom culture needs to be established** so **that all feel comfortable** with sharing their ideas in an environment of mutual respect. This requires modelling and scaffolding from the class teacher.
- Teachers can **also depressurise class discussions** by using '**might**' in their questioning and by being careful **not to over-praise responses**.

The **discussions** children can have **following a piece of reading**, can and should be the **most enjoyable part of the school day**. At times, when preparing for assessments, for example, they may feel more formal, but generally they should be opportunities to **enjoy exploring literature together**. If this is happening every day in our classrooms then this will have a significant impact in ensuring our children become **proficient readers** who enjoy **making-meaning** from text.