

Inviting Students Into Literature

“Literature is unique as a discipline...a literary work is inevitably dormant until it is read. True, the text is there, but the ink on the paper amounts to little until a reader picks up the page, reads, and responds to it and thereby transforms it into an event. It is the experience that the text invites and enables the reader to have that makes it literature.”

Robert E. Probst (2004)

The following are strategies that support students in accepting the “invitation” to delve into a text.

Tapping into Students’ Background Knowledge

Using Picture Books & Short Texts to Build BK

Ellin Keene reminds us that we need to support students’ understanding throughout their reading experience, which includes “the use of “way-in” texts—picture books and short pieces of texts students can use to build background knowledge (schema) and provide a way in to understanding more abstract, concept-and-vocabulary-laden texts” (2007, 29).

Quick Write Prompts

Encourage students to explore topics related to the literature we are going to read. “What do you remember about your first day of high school?” or “How would you describe your high school to a new student?”

Anticipation Guides

Encourage students to begin thinking about issues or themes that will be raised in the text.

First Impressions

It’s tempting to jump into an explanation of why the text students are going to read is important. But this doesn’t allow students to discover the text on their own. And it doesn’t allow for the development of habits that will support and sustain students in making choices as readers throughout their lifetime.

Exploring the Title

Have students do a quick write based on their response to the title, using these prompts: (or discuss with a partner)

- Have you heard of the title? If so, what do you know about it?
- What does the title suggest the book might be about?
- Can you think of books with similar titles?
- What connections do you see between the title of the text and our essential questions?

Judging a Book by its Cover

Ask students to list, discuss, share, etc. what they learn about the book by previewing the front and back of the book. Have students write a few statements about the book based on what they have learned from their preview.

After reading the introduction or first part, have students go back and add what they know now, etc.

Read Aloud

“There is no better way to hook kids than to read to them the first chapter of a book” (Appleman 2007, 146). We use reading aloud to model the close reading of leads or the entire opening chapter, and we support reading aloud beyond the first chapter.

Janet Allen provides her own insights regarding the impact of shared reading in noting how this technique:

Allowed me to model reading strategies I employed when I came to unknown words, concepts, or inconsiderate sentences; show excitement as well as sadness in my appreciation of the characters’ lives and problems; encourage discussions in which everyone could participate; extend the story to our lives and build community background knowledge; and demonstrate ways in which readers question themselves, the text, and the author in order to make the experience personally meaningful. (1995, 63)

What I know So Far/ What I Want to Know

We relish the opportunity to use literature as a model for good leads. We want students to read and reread the opening of a book or short text and really focus on what they notice.

1. Handout a copy of the lead or ask students to follow along as you read the lead aloud.
2. Pose the following question: What do we know so far? Students should jot down their response in a quick write.
3. Ask students to reread the lead with the following questions in mind:
 - Who is telling the story?
 - What do we know about the setting?
 - What do we know regarding what is happening?
 - What do you predict will happen next? What did you hear that suggests this?
4. Ask students to add to their quick write by responding to the following: What do I want to know?