

READING & WRITING

# TOGETHER



COLLABORATIVE  
LITERACY  
IN ACTION

NANCY STEINEKE

Foreword by Smokey Daniels

# *Reading and Writing Together*

Collaborative Literacy in Action

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# *Literature Circles*

## *Getting Them Started and Keeping Them Going*

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### **Training Students for Literature Circles**

Thanks to the regular use of SSR and Book Talks, students do gradually become much more skillful at reading and small group discussion. In addition, they'll be fairly competent at most of the skills that members of a Literature Circle need for success: support and friendliness, good listening, and asking Lead and Follow-up Questions. Finally, students will be in a better position to use and analyze reading strategies such as finding passages, making connections, and drawing inferences. That's why I like to save Literature Circles for later in the semester.

When training students for effective functioning in genuine Literature Circles where each group is reading a different book, I use a specific progression. Before committing groups to any novels, I've found it best to first work students through two or three short stories in order to get them focused on asking good questions. I define a good question as one that creates interesting discussion and new insight, but also gets members to look back in the text. The stories I like to use for this kind of introductory training are those that are only a few pages long. Students can read them in ten minutes or less, which gives more time for skill practice and question discussion. Also, doing the individual work in class eliminates the preparedness issues that may arise when the class moves to a novel. Some stories that lend themselves to this activity are "The Jacket" by Gary Soto, "Eleven" by Sandra Cisneros, and "The Bridge" by Todd Strasser.

Students start by reading the story and jotting down two or three questions that would be interesting to discuss with their partners. I have the students write each question on a separate sticky note and paste each question on the page of text right where they thought of it. Next, before the discussion, students get out a sheet of loose leaf, put their names on, and create the usual Lead and Follow-up Questions columns. Then they trade papers with their partners; this is a new twist. Partner A reads his question aloud and jots down the page number on the note before removing it from the text. Then he hands it to Partner B who pastes it in the Lead question column of Partner A's sheet. Before Partner B answers the question, both students make sure their stories are open to the same page. Only then can Partner B answer; afterwards, Partner A asks a Follow-up Question. However, before Partner B can answer this next question, he has to write it down next to the sticky note in the Follow-up Question column. What's interesting about this reversal, compared to the way questioning is done on the Partner Grid, is that it builds in some wait time. Students seldom give pause to think of what they will say; they hear a question and blurt out whatever enters their heads first, probably because this is the kind of rapid-fire responses that

large group discussions often generate. Once three or four Follow-up Questions have been pursued, the roles are reversed. It's never a good idea to let one person ask all of his Lead Questions because it might leave the other student with nothing new to discuss. After the process, papers are traded back so that each person has a record of his questioning. The next step is for each student to mark the lead question that produced the most extended and interesting discussion. In large group, these questions are shared on the board or a transparency.

Once everyone's best question is out for examination, the class can draw some general conclusions on what kinds of questions work the best. Usually they'll come up with observations such as these:

1. They make you think.
2. There's more than one possible answer.
3. It makes you fill in details from your imagination.
4. It brings up a controversial idea.
5. It makes you notice something you didn't before.
6. It makes you see something in a different way.

I like to practice this partner strategy and question analysis a few times. Once the kids know the drill, I increase the group size to four and move on to the next phase, reading a whole class novel Literature Circle style. Though I am the first one to support choice, I also know that almost every English curriculum in the United States contains at least one or two required texts. In my own department, ALL freshmen are expected to read *Of Mice and Men* and ALL sophomores read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. So, why not "kill two birds with one stone"? Get that "must read" book out of the way and teach the kids how to work in small groups at the same time. Really, having everyone read the same book has some advantages.

First, students become aware of the careful reading needed for a Literature Circle discussion. I find that students who are used to large class discussion formats often need to rethink how they approach their homework reading. In the past, skimming, watching the movie, reading the *Cliff's Notes*, or just careful listening and notetaking during the teacher led discussion was enough for them to finish with a C or B on the unit test. However, while talented bluffing might be a useful skill to save face when singled out in a large group discussion, that sort of behavior in a small group just frustrates members and wastes everyone's time. A whole class book is a good opportunity for kids to learn the following concept: a successful small group discussion requires that everyone has read carefully and knows what he's talking about.

Second, a whole class novel is a good trial run for assessing individual accountability. *To Kill a Mockingbird* offers me excellent insight into who is consistently ready for discussion, who is inconsistent in preparation, and who is highly undependable. Once in awhile, I run across a group with only one or two members who are really ready for discussion. A whole class novel lets me easily shift these kids to other groups for that meeting while their unprepared members are *strongly* encouraged to use the class period to get ready for the next discussion. Also, those groups with temporary members get to learn how to greet and include guests in their discussion. I find that this individual accountability track record is highly useful later when putting together true Literature Circles where every group is reading a different book. If I know up front that a student is inconsistent in her preparation, I'll try to make sure that kid gets her first book choice since I want her motivated to read. Also, I'll make sure the group is a bit larger since that member might not be ready to participate in all the discussions.

1. Why do you think Kenny went into the water at Collier's Landing after he knew people had died there? Ch. 13
2. If you were in Kenny's place, would you go to Collier's Landing? Ch. 13
3. What do you think was going through Kenny's mind when he heard the bomb go off? Ch. 14
4. "A guy just came by and said somebody dropped a bomb on Joey's church." How would you react if that sentence had your loved one's name in it? Ch. 14
5. Why was Kenny the only one who went into the church after the bombing? Ch. 14
6. Why do you think someone would put a bomb in a church with little kids in it? Ch. 14
7. Why does Kenny become so traumatized (after the church bombing)? Ch. 15
8. Why do you think Kenny imagined the magic behind the couch? Ch. 15
9. Why weren't the parents helping Kenny get over his trauma? Ch. 15
10. How has Byron changed from before he left for Birmingham? Ch. 15

**Figure 8.1** *Class examples of questions that created good discussion*

Third, on the days between small group discussions, the class can come together to compare and discuss how to improve their Literature Circle notes and their discussion skills. Because everyone is reading the same text, comparing the usefulness of specific questions or passages is easy. Here are some questions we gathered from the last three chapters of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* by Christopher Curtis.

When I notice that students still aren't pursuing Follow-up Questions enough in their "same book" Literature Circles, I use a skill drill similar to one the students have used earlier in a social rather than academic context. As students read the novel chapters assigned, each member has to come up with two or three Lead Questions. This time, the questions and the corresponding page numbers are written on note cards rather than sticky notes. In their groups of four, all of the questions are shuffled and placed in a deck.

1. #1 picks a card from the deck and reads it to #2.
2. #2 counts to five silently (building in wait time) and answers.
3. #3 asks a follow-up question.
4. #4 asks a follow-up question.
5. #1 gives #2 a specific compliment based on that member's answers.
6. #2 picks up the deck and a new round begins.

After this activity, once again gather the two most interesting questions from each group and display them on the board or overhead. Now it is time to analyze the questions in a bit more depth. You can use the different levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. Here's an example that uses questions based on the fairy tale "Cinderella."

*Knowledge* (fact recall): What were the mice turned into?

*Comprehension* (summarize/explain): Recap the main plot points in “Cinderella.”

*Application* (relate to real life): When was a time you wanted to do something that your parents forbid you to do?

*Analysis* (compare/contrast): What kind of person is Cinderella? What does she have in common with Snow White?

*Synthesis* (create something new): How would Cinderella have gotten to the ball if her fairy godmother had never appeared?

*Evaluation* (give an opinion): What do you think about Cinderella’s generous decision to allow her stepsisters to live in the castle with her?

A somewhat simpler way to examine questions is a framework used by Project CRISS called QARs: Question Answer Relationships (Santa 1996). Questions are first divided into two main categories: “In the Book QARs” and “In My Head QARs.” “In the Book” questions are further categorized into “Right There” questions whose answers are short and can be found directly in the book, and “Think and Search” questions whose answers are still text dependent but require the reader to look up information in different parts of the text. “In My Head” questions are subdivided into “Author and You” questions that require the reader to make inferences, while “On My Own” questions focus on the reader’s prior knowledge and experiences; these questions encourage discussion of personal connections. Here is a Cinderella question that fits into each category.

*Right There*: What material were Cinderella’s slippers made out of?

*Think and Search*: What happened during each of the three evenings Cinderella attended the prince’s ball?

*Author and You*: What do you think made Cinderella’s stepsisters so mean and selfish?

*On My Own*: If you had to live in a family like Cinderella’s, what would you do to survive it?

The nice thing about the QARs is that with only four, it’s easy to code them. After a couple of Literature Circles, students can go back over their notes and highlight their questions with crayons or markers, using a different color to represent each type of question. This is a very visual way of getting kids to recognize whether or not they are in a question rut. Once question after question highlighted in the same color glares back from a page, students quickly start writing questions that reflect greater diversity.

If I’m feeling too lazy to drag the crayons out of the cabinet, I have each student write her best question on a slip of paper. After getting them typed up and run off, I hand a copy out to each student and make an overhead as well. Instead of colors, we code the questions with numbers: 1 = Right There, 2 = Think and Search, 3 = Author and You, 4 = On Your Own. First, I have the students do the labeling on their own. Then, using the overhead, I record the class’ judgments. If there is disagreement, we go back to the question type definition and example and discuss it. Lots of times we conclude that a question could fall into a couple of categories depending upon how it is pursued by the group. This presents an excellent opportunity to re-emphasize the importance of Follow-up Questions since they can have such an effect on the depth of a question’s answer. I like to examine questions early on and then again later in the Literature Circle cycle. Comparing the early and later transparencies shows the class how far they have come in their development of sophisticated discussion questions.

---

## Getting Literature Circles Up and Running

While SSR offers students a wide range of choice and challenge depending on the students' individual inclinations, Literature Circles are definitely more teacher driven in the sense that the choice is finite. When creating a book list, you've first got to think about the goal. Is it to learn more about a certain period in history? Is it to provide the support needed to read some of the classics that your curriculum requires? Is it to show kids the fun of sharing ideas together as one reads a book? At one time or another, I have used Literature Circles for each of these purposes. Currently, my favorite Literature Circle books are text sets, groups of novels that focus on a specific theme. After we watch the film *Schindler's List*, students form Literature Circles around novels which all connect in some way to the film. However, all of the books are not directly about the Holocaust. Choices include *Hate Crime*, a novel about contemporary anti-Semitism; *The Giver*, a futuristic story about a "too perfect" society; and *After the War*, a novel about the challenges death camp survivors faced once released. After reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the subsequent Literature Circles revolve around books that hopefully will broaden my students' understanding of the ongoing discrimination African Americans face in the United States. While many of the books have southern settings, this text set also includes *There Are No Children Here* by Alex Kotlowitz, a nonfiction narrative that depicts in stark detail the difficulty any urban child faces growing up in the public housing projects of Chicago. My most recent text set was developed in response to the events of September 11, 2001. The turn of world events made me realize that we all needed to learn more about the Middle East and Arabian culture.

When choosing your books for a Literature Circle unit, the trick is to find books that need a discussion, ones that challenge yet are not so difficult that they will frustrate the reader. At the same time, I look for books of varying levels of difficulty so that the various reading levels present in a heterogeneous class can be addressed. Also, I try to look for books that students wouldn't necessarily pick up on their own.

### **Picking Books and Forming Groups**

On the day scheduled for students to make their selections, I have a ballot already prepared that lists the books, asks for ranking (#1 is first choice, #2 is second choice, etc.), and provides designated blanks for the ever-necessary name, date, and hour. After passing out the ballots, I tell the students that I want them to make informed choices so they need to go through two steps before they rank their selections.

First, I do a quick Book Talk on each book so that students have some idea of the plot, its connection to the Holocaust (or whatever theme is being studied), and also any caveats or previous readers' opinions (i.e., "starts slow, but then it really moves").

Next, I group the kids in rows or circles so that the number in the row or circle matches the number of choices: eight books equals a circle with eight kids. Then we do a quick book pass; each student gets to look at each book for one minute and then the book gets passed. Before we do the pass, we have a quick discussion listing what one might look for in a book during a minute's worth of examination. Students conclude that one minute is enough time to look at the cover, skim the summary on the back, check how long it is, and maybe read a bit of the first page. During the book pass, I emphasize that this activity is solo; that means no talking! Once the book pass is completed, everyone ranks the selections. I always tell them to rank their top four choices out of the eight or nine titles available.

After collecting the ballots, I warn everyone that there are limited numbers of copies, so everyone will not automatically get his first choice; usually a student gets one of his top three choices.

Name _____
Date _____ Hour _____
Rank your choices in numerical order. Make your first choice #1, second choice #2, etc.
_____ <i>Briar Rose</i>
_____ <i>Gentlehands</i>
_____ <i>The Giver</i>
_____ <i>Hate Crime</i>
_____ <i>If I Should Die Before I Wake</i>
_____ <i>Summer of My German Soldier</i>
_____ <i>The Wave</i>
_____ <i>The Cage</i>

**Figure 8.2** Literature Circle ballot

I always try to give myself a cushion of at least two days between the voting and actually passing out of the books. That gives me a chance to catch anyone who was absent on voting day. It also gives me a little time to form the groups and organize the books. Once I've got the ballots, I sort them out by first choices. Any book that doesn't have at least three people choosing it gets dropped, and those students are reclassified by their second or third selection.

Next, I look at numbers. The best Literature Circle is a group of four. If one member is absent, a fine discussion can still be had with three. On the other hand, when someone is absent from a group of three, having a full-blown Literature Circle discussion with only two is difficult for most students. I'll never forget the senior Novel class I had several years ago. I was just beginning to experiment with Literature Circles and had no financial backing, which meant my offerings were limited to what I could scrounge from the English department book closet. Being inexperienced, I assigned a group of three seniors to *Around the World in Eighty Days*. All of them had good attendance records, so I assumed a group of three would not be a problem. Unfortunately, I never anticipated the week-long disappearance of the student council member when he was called upon to oversee the high school's spring festival activities, nor did I predict the absences generated from "college visits." For seniors, these days are akin to personal leave days: use 'em or lose 'em. This combination of factors resulted in that group of three having only one meeting out of a potential five where everyone was present. After that experience, I now try my best to avoid groups of three whenever possible. On the other hand, five is the ideal number when you have a student with a high absence rate or one who seldom comes to class prepared. Since these students will probably not be participating in every discussion, it's still mainly a group of

four. However, a group of five is not ideal when everyone is present and prepared. Try as I might with reinforcing the discussion skills and processing after each discussion, a group of five always has one member who is a shadow, letting the other four do most of the talking.

Finally, I look at the faces in the current groupings and try to tweak the groups for optimal success based on personality, discussion skill level, and homework habits. If the high achiever's first choice puts him with the kids who seldom do their homework, I'll move him to his second choice. It would be nice to fantasize about him being just the role model these less-motivated kids need, but, being a pragmatist, my gut tells me that he'll probably be the only one prepared, quickly get frustrated, and then have his angry parents call me about the punishment these Literature Circles are inflicting upon their child. On the other hand, if I can put a less-motivated student with several stronger ones, that often can push that student in a positive way if the book was this kid's first choice.

Gender and personality balance are also considerations. If a group consists of one girl and three guys, I think about whether the guys will be skilled enough to include her, and I'll also think about whether the girl is going to be comfortable in that situation. I also always try to make sure the kids are working with some new people, since one of my goals is for all of the students to meet and work with everyone else before the end of the year. All of these are individual judgment calls, but if you've been working with a class for a while you can usually make them pretty quickly.

By now you're probably wondering if anyone ever gets the book she really wants to read. The answer is yes. I'd say that ninety percent end up getting their first choice and close to one hundred percent have gotten their first or second choice. With all my meddling, how can that be? Thanks to SSR, the kids have already read at least a half dozen novels on their own; they've become book connoisseurs, so to speak. They know what they like and don't like. Choosing books based on who else wants to read a particular title or which one has the fewest pages takes a back seat to choosing a book based on potential reading enjoyment. This fact hit home just recently. One of the choices from the Holocaust text set is *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. Since I put this list together several years ago, the middle schools that feed into the high school have also put this book on their reading lists; therefore, many of the ninth graders have already read it. If students were looking for the easiest way out, they'd opt for a book they'd already read, right? When I looked at the most recent ballots, hardly any students listed *The Giver* as a top choice, instead opting for books they hadn't read before. *I repeat: readers know what they want.*

The other reason why the groups seem to fall into place is that the selection is an absolutely silent, individual process. It is completely solo. I purposely do not give them the opportunity to negotiate with their friends because I want them to choose the book that interests them versus the book that "Susie" wants them to read. I know this makes me sound like a control freak, but groups of friends do not necessarily create the best Literature Circles. They have too many other agendas and common experiences to share, discuss, plan, or review. If these kids really want to read a book together, they can start a junior chapter of Oprah's book club! What's stopping them? Also, there are always one or two kids in class who don't have a lot of friends, whatever the reason. Still suffering the pain of being chosen next to last for high school P.E. teams, I never want to put my students in that position. In the end, I'm always aiming for heterogeneous groups made up of people with diverse experiences and opinions since these are the ingredients necessary for lively discussion.

### **Meeting the Group**

After I have my groups nailed down, I type up a list for each class naming the members and book title for each group and print up a couple of copies. One copy goes in my grade book and the other copy goes to my student aide, who counts out the books and puts a rubber band around

them. I always find that the better organized you are on the day you pass out the books, the happier you'll be. Also, do not pass the ballots back to the kids unless you want to hear a lot of whining about why they didn't get their first choice, why they don't want their first choice, or why they want to change their first choice. If you wait a few days between voting and passing out the books, most of the kids will not remember their exact rankings. This will make your life easier; go with it!

The day the books get passed out, I like to immediately follow with about 15 or 20 minutes of SSR time so that students can get a bit of a feel for how their books read before they meet with their group. There are certain tasks that need to be completed during the first meeting.

**Membership Grid:** Often, we teachers want students to move directly into the task when what the group really needs at first is some "get to know you" time. The Membership Grid works very much like the Partner Grid from Chapter 2 except that there is room for details on more members and students don't need to write anything about themselves. That way, the sheet still works for a group of five. The grid is an activity that should be the first item on the agenda of each Literature Circle meeting because it loosens everyone up and lubricates the wheels of discussion.

**Ground Rules:** By the time students begin working in Literature Circles, they've already worked with groups in several other capacities, definitely enough to have a pretty good idea on what behaviors create success versus failure. Therefore, at the first meeting I have each group develop a list of three to five ground rules that everyone agrees to follow. You might have students think about how they'll deal with a member who hasn't done the reading/notes, how to share equally in discussion, or how not to get on each other's nerves. Students often bring some pent-up frustration with them from their previous experiences in dysfunctional groups, so this is a way to clear the air and lay the cards on the table so that all members are clear on each other's expectations. Here's an example of the ground rules one group negotiated.

1. Take TURNS talking and doing discussion things.
2. Come prepared.
3. Be NICE to each other no matter how much pain you're in.

I like that third rule. I'm glad students also recognize that personal baggage needs to be put aside in order for academic activity to take place. Along with the first and last names of their members, I have each student list their group's rules on a sheet of loose leaf labeled Literature Circle Processing. This sheet comes out at each meeting for review, reflection, and goal setting.

**Reading Calendar:** One of the things I like best about Literature Circles is that it promotes student responsibility and decision making. At this first meeting, I give each group some calendars with the Literature Circle meeting dates circled and any other important dates (holidays, prom, etc.) marked. I tell students that the book needs to be finished by the last meeting date, but they need to decide what reading is due for the other dates. It's interesting to listen in on the conversations and the strategies. Often, inexperienced groups will start by figuring out how many pages are in the book and then dividing by the number of meetings. Sooner or later, though, someone else will suggest that finishing a certain number of chapters for each meeting might be a more logical approach, while someone else recognizes that it makes sense to assign more pages to the meetings that have more reading time between them. Each member of the group keeps a copy of the calendar but also turns in a copy to me. Double check to make sure the groups have recorded the actual page assignments rather than listed the chapters. Knowing the pages each group should

## MEMBERSHIP GRID 12<sup>th</sup>

TOPICS	GROUP MEMBERS			
	Amy Ricciardi	Matt Withrow	Christine Rome	Rich Hansen
5-4 Best Places to see a movie	- friend's house - comfy - rent movies - watch a lot of them	- Sony Home Theater @ Best buy - monster surround sound	- friend's house w/ DVD + BG screen - cheaper - eat what you want	- Marcus - big screen - food = good - popcorn
5-7 Andrew fest Day 1	- no \$ - don't know what's going on - 2 <sup>nd</sup> hr. + still - walk around	not here	- wants to go to pic <del>to</del> throw - no \$ - walk around	- buy food - going 3 <sup>rd</sup> hr. - wants to eat - obstacle course
5-8 Andrew fest Day 2	Absent	- was working - snow cones - lots of snow cones - raining	- walked around - thought it was boring - circus boy	- was fun - Elephant ears - pizza - obstacle course = fun
5-14 3 day weekend	- went to Aunt's - Spirit night w/ Cousin - saw Charles - Angels	- Lincoln way - track meet - weather = bad - got canceled - didn't have equipment	- got sick - Friday went to friend's house - Sun = Grandparents over	- saw <del>the</del> drum - Marcus - German guy - talked family - Good movie

Figure 8.3 Megan's Membership Grid

be discussing on a given date makes accountability monitoring much easier for you. Of course, some groups completely mismanage the reading schedule at first and then need to change it. That's okay; it's part of the learning process.

**Large Group:** While the students are still in their groups, I have one member from each group share their ground rules and also the strategy for how they decided on their reading schedule. Then I give the groups a few minutes to review their own rules and schedule since the sharing might have jogged some refinement of their own.

**Processing:** Before the group disbands, I want them to immediately begin to recognize and reinforce their positive accomplishments. So on the same sheet that has their ground rules listed, I have them discuss and list three specific things that helped the group get along, get the jobs done, and enjoy each other's company. If time permits, it's nice to quickly share these in large group as well because it publicly affirms behaviors that contribute to group success. Also, when the kids aren't specific in their observations (i.e., "We cooperated"), this gives me the chance to

# MEMBERSHIP GRID

TOPICS	GROUP MEMBERS			

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Figure 8.4 Blank Membership Grid

prod them for an example that illustrates the skill. Last but not least, I tell the members to turn to their group and say, “Thanks for your help; I’m glad you were here today.” Yeah, it sounds phony, but when I don’t remind the kids to frequently thank each other, I notice a drop in positive interaction. Hmmm, imagine how differently we might feel at school if we were frequently and genuinely thanked for our hard work.

### ***Getting Ready for the First Discussion***

You’ll notice that the Literature Circle instructions that I use are very similar to the preparation of the Book Talk Discussion Sheet. This was not due to laziness but design. I purposely wanted the preparation to be similar in order for the students to keep refining certain reading skills. Also, it is quicker and easier to explain new tasks that are already familiar in some ways. The one big difference in preparing for a Literature Circle discussion versus a Book Talk is that the kids have to come up with good discussion items that will get others involved and thinking. Though role sheets are often suggested for Literature Circles, by the time the kids are in high school, I want them to be focusing on all of the typical elements one would bring to a group discussion: questions, passages, connections, illustrations. When each student is preparing in this manner, there is usually plenty to discuss. Ideally, there is too much to discuss, which forces students to choose their most promising items when it is their turn to contribute. Depending on the class, I might or might not offer class time for preparation. When I taught senior Novel, I often gave them class time for reading and notetaking since most of the students held what amounted to full-time jobs. As much as I wished I could use the class time for something else, I knew that this group made no time for homework. On the other hand, my ninth graders are too young for jobs, so they are expected to prepare outside of class.

Along with the rubric, I always find it helpful to show students what high-quality notes look like by showing them work from previous students. Of course, the samples are from novels other than the ones they’re reading. I also emphasize that high-quality notes cover ALL the pages, not just the first ten! When preparing the notes, I give students the choice of using sticky notes or writing directly on a sheet of paper. Besides the usual name, date, and hour, the paper must be headed with the title of the book and the page range due for that discussion. The paper is folded in half lengthwise to create two columns. The left-hand column is for questions, the right-hand column is for passages, and the reverse side is for connections. A separate blank sheet of paper is used for the illustration.

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## **The First Discussion**

Before the time for the first discussion arrives, you need to decide how you’ll handle those who come unprepared. If you let the groups handle that issue in their ground rules, it’s important for them to have a short meeting a day or two before that first discussion so that they can motivate each other to complete the reading and notes and also to review the consequences of being unprepared.

On discussion days I recommend planning some sort of ten-minute individual activity so that you have some time to take a quick look at the notes. You could always give them the time to read, but I’ve found a good ongoing assignment is writing a Character Journal based on what the students have read in their Literature Circle book so far.

A Character Journal encourages students to explore inferences related to character and examine multiple perspectives. They must write as that character would think. Though students can be assigned characters, they’ll probably be more invested in the writing if they can choose the character. However, since this activity is designed to stretch the reader, you might add one

requirement such as making the student choose a character of the opposite gender or choose a character that is most unlike the student's personality. Even with these guidelines, students sometimes turn their journals into summaries rather than ongoing explorations into character. If that happens, ask students to brainstorm what real people or fictional characters might put in a diary. You'll notice in the list below that "moment by moment account of what happened that day" is not included. While the students write their journal entries in their composition books, I take a walk around the room and briefly examine the notes.

After the notes are checked, it's time for the groups to move together. Between the Membership Grid, journal, and notes there should be enough there for at least a twenty-minute discussion. Keep in mind that English teachers can gab for hours about what they've read, but high school students aren't English teachers; it's always better to have them begging for more time rather than finishing early and then have extra time to start throwing wadded up candy wrappers at another group. For the first meeting, I use an agenda similar to this. My times are based on a 50–55-minute class period.

1. **Membership Grid** (5 minutes)
2. **Read Character Journals aloud and discuss** (5–10 minutes)
3. **Take turns guessing at, explaining, and asking questions about each other's illustrations** (5 minutes)
4. **Discuss questions, passages, connections** (10–20 minutes)
5. **Group Processing** (5 minutes). What were three things we did well today? What is one thing we can do differently so that our next discussion improves? Remind group members to thank each other before disbanding.
6. **Large Group Processing** (5 minutes)

1. Emotions/feelings
2. Memorable events
3. Fights
4. Gossip
5. Confessions
6. Personal problems and possible solutions
7. Depressing stuff
8. Death/loss
9. Friends, family
10. Secrets
11. Ideas/beliefs
12. Goals/future plans
13. Favorite things
14. Hopes and dreams
15. Missing scenes from the book
16. Relationships—what people did, what you wish they did

**Figure 8.5** *Character Journal ideas*

## Literature Circle Discussion Notes

### Questions (spread out through assigned reading)

What would be interesting to discuss with others? Your questions need to reflect your thoughtfulness after reading and have the potential for extended discussion and follow-ups. Note the *page number* for each question. Below the original question *write three potential follow-ups* you might use.

### Passages (spread out through assigned reading)

Pick passages that seem especially important, interesting, or puzzling. Record the *page numbers, passage locations, and three potential follow-up questions* that could direct thought and conversation about your passage. Be ready to read the passages aloud and explain why you chose them.

### Connections

What does this story remind you of? Does it make you think of another story or novel you've read? An incident from your own life? Something in the news? A television program, movie, play? Jot down a *specific connection* and *notes that explain them*. Be ready to talk about them and tell your group the whole story.

### Illustration

On a plain sheet of paper, sketch a picture related to your reading. This can be a drawing, cartoon, diagram—whatever. You can draw something that's specifically talked about in the reading, or something from your own experience or feelings, something the reading made you think about. Be ready to show your picture to your group and talk about it. On the back side, jot down the pages you were thinking about and some notes about the novel. **Make the drawings detailed and full page.**

Figure 8.6 *Literature Circle notes instructions*

Amy  
9/21/00  
1

5/5      Book Co      5/5

Questions

What possessed Helenus to say that Diomedes was the best of the Greeks & they didn't even fear Achilles as much?  
p. 238 C1B

How come, in those times, two rivals were so formal and polite to their enemies, even before dueling?  
p. 238 C2B + p. 239

In the Trojan War, Andromache greatly supports Hector & keeps him fighting. But in this version, she's more selfish & tells him not to leave her familyless. Why is this?  
p. 242 C1

Passages

p. 242 C2 paragraph 4:  
The similes in this passage are awesome. The author really reaches deep into this scene & just spits it back out at you in very loose, proud vocab.

p. 240 C1 paragraph 3:  
I liked this passage because the author expresses in depth how Hecuba was willing to offer her dresses to Athena if she'd help the Trojans. And I think it's cool how it's summed up by simply saying, "But Athene would not."

p. 238 C2 paragraph 3:  
I liked this passage because it's really exaggerated. Instead of just saying Hector walked away, the author really leaves a more developed image in your mind.

Figure 8.7 Student Literature Circle notes

## Literature Circle Notes Rubric

### Questions

1

2

- Neat
  - Original
  - Page number indicated
  - Meets quota
  - Open-ended
  - Spread out
  - Follow-ups if required
- Questions consistently reflect potential for prolonged, interesting, thoughtful discussion

### Passages

1

2

- Neat
- Original
- Page and location (T, M, B) indicated
- Meets quota
- Spread out/do not overlap questions
- Notes on reason for choice
- Follow-ups if required

- Notes explain choice and discussion potential in detail

### Connections

1

2

- Neat
- Original
- Meets quota
- Connection to specific part of book
- Notes

- Lots of specific details
- Connection explained thoroughly

Figure 8.8 Literature Circle rubric

<b>Vocabulary</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neat</li> <li>• Original</li> <li>• Meets quota</li> <li>• Page number and location indicated</li> <li>• Correct definition for context</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Notes related to author's craft and context</li> </ul>
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Illustration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neat</li> <li>• Original</li> <li>• Fills the page</li> <li>• Some detail</li> <li>• Text location and caption on back</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foreground and background details</li> <li>• Very detailed</li> <li>• Thought and effort apparent</li> <li>• Original—did not pick the most obvious image</li> </ul>

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**Figure 8.8** (Continued)

## Literature Circle Skill Accountability Rating

Assignment: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Hour \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

- Support & Liking
- Focused on group members . . . On task
- Actively using book and notes

- 12" voices
- Follow-up Questions
- Encourages equal participation and idea sharing

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

- Support & Liking
- Focused on group members . . . On task
- Actively using book and notes

- 12" voices
- Follow-up Questions
- Encourages equal participation and idea sharing

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

- Support & Liking
- Focused on group members . . . On task
- Actively using book and notes

- 12" voices
- Follow-up Questions
- Encourages equal participation and idea sharing

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

- Support & Liking
- Focused on group members . . . On task
- Actively using book and notes

- 12" voices
- Follow-up Questions
- Encourages equal participation and idea sharing

Figure 8.9 Literature Circle accountability ratings

### Literature Circle Skill Accountability Rating—*Advanced*

Chapters: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Hour \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

- Support & Liking
- On task . . . 12" voices . . . using books/notes
- Getting everyone's opinions
- Extending/Disagreeing

- Lead Questions/Passages/  
Vocabulary/Illustration/  
Connections
- Follow-up Questions

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

- Support & Liking
- On task . . . 12" voices . . . using books/notes
- Getting everyone's opinions
- Extending/Disagreeing

- Lead Questions/Passages/  
Vocabulary/Illustration/  
Connections
- Follow-up Questions

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

- Support & Liking
- On task . . . 12" voices . . . using books/notes
- Getting everyone's opinions
- Extending/Disagreeing

- Lead Questions/Passages/  
Vocabulary/Illustration/  
Connections
- Follow-up Questions

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

- Support & Liking
- On task . . . 12" voices . . . using books/notes
- Getting everyone's opinions
- Extending/Disagreeing

- Lead Questions/Passages/  
Vocabulary/Illustration/  
Connections
- Follow-up Questions

Figure 8.9 (Continued)

Before the groups meet, I make it very clear to them the kind of behaviors I expect to see as I observe the groups. First, on a poster, overhead, or on the chalkboard, I make an “I’m Looking For . . .” list.

1. Desks touching.
2. Plenty of space between groups so that I can walk around and observe. Put the bags under the chairs.
3. Members focused only on each other.
4. Equal participation, taking turns.
5. Support and friendliness.
6. Books open, everyone on the same page.

Besides the general requirements of the list, I also give each group an Accountability Rating sheet. Each member signs his name in a blank. As I monitor the groups, I also try to do some specific observation, checking off skills being used, and jotting down exactly what students say or do that are specific examples of those skills. Though the number rating (1 is low and 5 is high) is always present on this form, I don’t necessarily assign the number myself. Usually, I let each student rate himself along with a note explaining why. Direct observation for skill usage is an important guide for deciding on the following day’s lesson. Also, your observations can be useful to the group during that end-of-discussion processing. Always leave some time for skill discussion, refinement, and review for the day following a Literature Circle.

### ***The Day After that First Meeting***

I usually schedule Literature Circle meetings for Tuesdays and Fridays and use some time during the in-between days to refine the discussion process so that, hopefully, each meeting will be better than the last one. I always make a point to set some time aside for large group processing, because usually time runs short at the end of Literature Circle meetings. After that first discussion, it’s very helpful for the groups to share their processing in order to see what strengths and frustrations they have in common. Here are the lists one of my classes developed after their first discussion.

#### **Things Done Well**

1. Stayed on-task.
2. Used 12-inch voices.
3. Asked a lot of questions.
4. Encouraged each other.
5. Listened to each other’s ideas.
6. Compromised on different answers.
7. Asked for sections to be reread.
8. Made good eye contact.
9. Didn’t interrupt the speaker.
10. All our desks touched.

#### **Things to Improve**

1. Work faster.
2. Pay better attention to the speaker.

3. Ignore other groups.
4. Ask more questions.
5. Sit closer together.
6. Use 12-inch voices.
7. Have more fun.
8. Take turns reading aloud.
9. Share work evenly.
10. Include others.

These lists offer an interesting comparison: the same skill can be strong in one group yet weak in another.

After the whole class processing lists are compiled, groups need to gather for a quick meeting so that they can review their original improvement goal, possibly changing or modifying it so that they are working on the element most critical to improving their next discussion. Once the group goal is set, then they need to figure out three specific actions that all members can take to achieve the goal. Here are a few examples:

**Goal: Include everyone equally**

1. Let the person who talks the least go first.
2. Address each other by name.
3. Take turns in the discussion rather than letting one person ask everything from his notes.

**Goal: Have more fun**

1. Address each other by name.
2. Work on bringing more interesting passages and questions to discussion.
3. Give members compliments whenever they contribute positively.

**Goal: Share work evenly (i.e., everyone comes prepared)**

1. Call each other up and remind each other of what's due.
2. Tell the group exactly when you are going to do the assignment.
3. Celebrate with a treat if everyone is prepared.

Groups are more likely to own a problem and work together towards a solution if they are the ones who set the goal. Therefore, it is best that teacher intervention occur subtly. If a group asks for answers on how to solve a problem, turn it back to them first. If you return later and they are still stumped, ask them this question, "Would you like to hear how other groups have solved this problem?" Then give them some examples and leave so that the troubled group can develop its own plan. From this point on, goal review now becomes a regular part of each meeting agenda.

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## Literature Circle Meeting #2

For all meetings there are some constants, namely the "I'm Looking For . . ." list, the Literature Circle Accountability Rating form, the Membership Grid, and the Literature Circle notes. As groups progress, though, the meeting agenda begins to evolve.

1. **Membership Grid** (5 minutes). Don't be tempted to discard this activity once it seems that groups have bonded. This is a warm-up for the discussion to come. Talking about a silly, nonthreatening topic like what toppings you like on your pizza creates a friendly atmosphere that is much more conducive to the risk-taking necessary for sharing ideas in depth. During portfolio interviews, I am always surprised by the number of students that use an old Membership Grid as one of their artifacts. For them, the grid symbolizes the birth of some new friendships or at least the creation of some good working relationships. The grid gives students the excuse to talk to new people and get to know one another. I often notice that the grid notes get more detailed the longer students use the Membership Grid. I think this happens because as students get to know each other better, they become more interested in each other. Therefore, it's natural to ask more questions and get more details. This interest in the ideas of other members is what makes a Literature Circle discussion engaging.
2. **Read Character Journals aloud and discuss** (5–10 minutes). A variation of this might be for members to trade journals and respond in writing as if they were another character or possibly even the same character rereading the entry at a later date. Or, have the kids read the entry aloud without first disclosing the perspective and make the listeners guess which character it is by pointing out relevant clues.
3. **Review the goal and action plan from the last meeting** (5 minutes). Discuss how each person is going to meet that goal in today's discussion.
4. **Share Illustrations** (5–10 minutes). Take turns guessing at, explaining, and asking questions about each other's illustrations.
5. **Discuss questions, passages, connections** (10–20 minutes).
6. **Group Processing** (5 minutes). What were three specific things we did today that helped us meet our goal? What is one thing we can do differently so that our next discussion improves? What was an interesting idea that came up in our discussion that we could tell the rest of the class about? Remind group members to thank each other before disbanding.
7. **Large Group Processing** (5 minutes). If you have an extra five minutes, use it for a quick round-up of one positive accomplishment and one goal from each group.

### *The Following Day*

Now students need to get back into their Literature Circles to discuss a couple of items. First, what solution worked best in helping the group meet its last goal? Everyone should put a star on his Processing Sheet by that item. Next, under the new improvement goal, which was agreed upon the day before during group processing, each person needs to come up with three specific things he can say or do to meet that goal. Last time the group came up with a group plan; this time each person comes up with his own plan. In the example below, one group decided they needed to ask more follow-up questions, so each person came up with three all-purpose follow-up questions she could use in the next discussion.

#### **Goal: Ask more Follow-up Questions**

1. Where did you find that?
2. How does that make you feel?
3. What did that make you think about?

This was one person's action plan. Ideally, each member would have different questions to truly extend the discussion.

Next, each group reviews how they will explain their interesting idea, also from yesterday's group processing, to the rest of the class so that everyone will understand their summary even though each group is reading a different book. I tell the students that this time there will be no volunteers; individuals will be chosen at random. A really good way to make the randomness fun is to get a transparency spinner. Have the kids number off, pick a group to start, and then spin; the number the pointer lands on is the one who stands up and addresses the audience. This is a great way to increase individual accountability. Aim for no more than a ten-minute large group discussion unless students seem really interested and involved. It's important to remember that all groups don't have to share in regards to each of the processing questions. Also, since this discussion is taking place while the kids are still in their groups, it's important that whoever "wins the spin" stands so that it's easier for the rest of the class to focus on the speaker. Equally important is for the audience to swivel around in their chairs or desks so that they are always trying to give the speaker eye contact. Do not let half the class sit with their backs to whoever is speaking; that is a recipe for nonlistening. Furthermore, as a teacher, if you let this behavior occur, the message being sent is that this large group discussion isn't very important anyway.

The rest of the time spent on those off-days depends on how the groups are doing. If some of the skills are sagging, I'll take some time to review a skill by looking back at an old T-Chart and getting the class to add more "Looks Like" details and "Sounds Like" phrases to the lists. Once in a great while those Membership Grids just don't do the job of creating blissful group harmony. I remember one class where half of the groups spent most of their meeting time angrily arguing over who was right. Those kids wanted to tear each other's throats out by the end of almost every Literature Circle meeting. Group processing time was spent finger pointing and blaming each other for the lousy discussion that just transpired. At first I thought those initial bad discussions were just isolated phenomena, but after a few more fiascos that approached fisticuffs, I woke up and realized a completely new skill needed to be discussed.

For some reason, this group of students all believed that there was only one correct interpretation of a text. To top it off, each student believed that his interpretation was the only correct one! First, I clued the kids in on the fact that different readers can have different responses, and in many instances, divergent views can both be valid. They needed to view conflicting perspectives as something that makes discussion interesting rather than something frustrating and negative. Plus, they needed to agree to disagree. Then I told them that rather than immediately falling into an argument mode, they needed to figure out how Follow-up Questions could help them investigate these differences of opinion productively. The groups put their heads together and brainstormed questions to ask when conflicting ideas arose. Once we had the master list, the class then divided them up into two categories: questions to ask when members disagree and questions to ask in order to better understand a member's idea. Though the students in that class never became buddies, their discussions began to progress beyond arguments and bad feelings. In the end, they were able create positive working relationships with each other.

### **Sophisticated Follow-up Questions: Disagreeing with an Idea**

1. What makes you feel that you are right?
2. Why do you think that?
3. What parts of the text lead you to believe this?
4. What else could that passage/word mean that is different from what you said?

5. Where did you find this in the text? Give us some support for this idea.
6. I disagree. What about the instance in which . . . ?
7. What examples are there that might also support this other viewpoint?

### Understanding Another Person's Idea

1. What other parts of the story does this remind you of?
2. Where did you find that?
3. What information do you have to back this up?
4. What examples of this can you think of?
5. I don't understand; explain your idea in more detail.
6. How do you feel about this?
7. What did that part make you think about?

Sometimes groups reflect a higher level of skillfulness, which in turn requires less time for tune-ups. In that case, those off days can provide some time for whatever curricular agenda you wish to cover. I like to spend those days experimenting with the performance options I offer to students for planning their group Literature Circle projects. I'll cover those assessment options later in the chapter.

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## The Remaining Literature Circle Meetings

By the third meeting, the groups should have developed a certain rhythm and familiarity that often allows them to facilitate more in-depth discussion. Also, Literature Circle experience gives students direction in refining their notes so that better discussion is created. Starting with the third discussion, I encourage each group to develop its own discussion agenda. I've noticed that groups quickly fall into ruts, trudging through their questions on a death march towards their connections. Groups need to experiment with different ways to start. They might save the journals for last and start with each person's favorite passage, or each person might prioritize his discussion notes, picking only the best two items to bring up with the goal of using the text and follow-up questions to extend the discussion. At this point, after the day's agenda is set, I also encourage members to put their notes face down because what they bring up from memory will probably be more spontaneous. Of course they can return to their notes for a page reference. Here's a sample agenda for a later meeting:

1. **Membership Grid** (5 minutes). I keep on using the Grid because the routine is familiar and needs no explanation. However, if you have some other favorite icebreaking activities, use them. After all, variety is the spice of life!
2. **Negotiate the discussion agenda** (5 minutes). Now the group decides how they want to use their discussion materials. I encourage them to try a different agenda for each meeting. After an agenda is determined, all members write it down on their individual Processing Sheets.
3. **Review the goal and action plan from the last meeting** (5 minutes). Discuss how each person is going to meet that goal in today's discussion.
4. **Discussion** (15–25 minutes).
5. **Group Processing—Compliment Pass** (10 minutes). This activity works exactly like the Compliment Card processing described in Chapter 4. The only difference is that the

students pass their Processing Sheets around rather than an index card. Each member passes his Processing Sheet to the person to his right. That person compliments the owner of the paper on something specific that she said or did that helped the group that day. The writer signs his compliment. When everyone is finished writing, the papers are passed again. By the time the owner gets his paper back, he has a signed compliment from each member of the group. *Warning:* the compliment pass is a more advanced processing strategy, and the groups must really value each other in order to make it work. If you're worried that someone might break the trust with a nasty anti-compliment, continue with the simpler consensus style processing discussed here and in Chapter 4.

When a Literature Circle group concludes its cycle, each student's Processing Sheet records the group's progression in regards to successful functioning and skills refinement. Figure 8.10 shows Dana's record of her meetings.

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## Literature Circles and Group Design

When troubleshooting Literature Circle dysfunction or, in “Emeril speak,” just trying to “kick it up a notch,” the place to start is with those five elements of group design. Groups that aren't working or are working at a minimal level, probably have weak or missing ingredients. If you were to look back at the Literature Circle agendas, you would find that they all had the following elements in common:

**Positive Interdependence:** The group needs each other to create a discussion. The better the discussion, the more students will have to write about in their journals or discussion reports, and the more knowledgeable they will be about the text when it comes to writing an essay or taking a test. Contributing to a good discussion is in everyone's best interest. Groups also have specific social skill goals. They must practice taking turns, reading from the text, and asking questions that require group members to elaborate and explain their ideas in greater depth.

**Individual Accountability:** Students need to complete the reading and have their notes ready on time for each meeting. While notes are checked, all students complete individual Character Journals. Each student keeps a Processing Sheet. Though groups set goals together, individuals also set skill goals and then work to achieve them. After a discussion, students write summaries or journals that highlight how well they listened to the ideas of others. When a Literature Circle concludes, students might complete a project together but each individual is also responsible for completing his own essay or test.

**Social Skills:** Students use checklists and processing to monitor and practice important skills such as asking Lead and Follow-up Questions, getting everyone's ideas, offering support and friendliness.

**Group Processing:** After each meeting, students reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the group. If time allows, large group processing takes place so the class can compare problems and generate solutions. At the conclusion of a Literature Circle, each student writes an individual Processing Letter that focuses on accurately assessing that member's contributions to the group and setting new goals for improvement as a member of future groups.

**Face-to-Face Interaction:** Students focus on each other, sit far enough away from other groups so as not to be distracted, and engage each other in continual conversation via the Membership Grid, Illustration, Character Journal, and notes.

**3/19/01 Members of Group #5**

Dana  
Rich  
Lee  
Val  
Matt

**Ground Rules**

1. Keep an open mind to comments and questions.
2. Let everyone have a turn to talk.
3. Ask good follow-ups to further the discussion.
4. Do your homework.

**3/20/01 Agenda**

1. Grid
2. Passages
3. Questions
4. Connections

**Skills We Want to Use Today**

1. Getting everyone's opinion.
2. Asking follow-ups.
3. Taking turns.

**3/23/01 Agenda**

1. Grid
2. Illustration (save the last word for me)
3. Passages (save the last word for me)
4. Questions (mix 'em up—pick your best)
5. Connections

**Three Specific Ways Today's Discussion Improved**

1. We asked interesting lead questions.
2. Had fun and stayed on-task.
3. Asked a lot of follow-up questions.

**Most used skill:** Follow-ups

**Least used skill:** Reading passages aloud

**3/27/01 Agenda**

1. Grid
2. Goal setting (based on previous discussion weaknesses)
3. Questions

*(continued)*

Figure 8.10 Completed Processing Sheet

4. Illustrations
5. Best of connections and passages

**Goal:** Get around to all the different discussion starters (questions, passages, illustrations, connections)

### 3/30/01 Agenda

1. Grid
2. Choose a skill focus for the observer
3. Best of notes—make discussion lively, unpredictable

### 4/2/01 Becoming a Better Observer

1. Collect descriptive information
2. Watch for nonverbal messages (nods, smiles, etc.)
3. Don't try to record everything
4. Write down specific words/phrases that members say
5. Give each group member personal feedback

**Today's goal:** Work on using names

### 4/4/01 Agenda

1. Grid
2. Ways to make this discussion our best:
  - Everybody is encouraging and encouraged by others.
  - Everyone gets to give his opinion.
  - Don't interrupt somebody in the middle of a thought.
3. *Goal:* get more follow-ups
4. TKM Discussion

**Observation Sheet Predictions** Before the observer shows the data, have the group make predictions for each of the following categories. After seeing the sheet, put stars by the predictions that were accurate and cross-out and correct those that weren't.

- Best Group Skill: Using Names \*
- Weakest Group Skill: ~~Discussion Starters~~ Supporting answers with text
- Most Improved Group Skill: ~~Supporting answers with text~~ Asking follow-up questions
- Best Personal Skill: Asking follow-ups and using names \*
- Weakest Personal Skill: Supporting answers with text \*

### Biggest Positive Skill Changes I Made in the Literature Circle

1. Talked a lot more—not so shy.
2. Staying on-task.
3. Keeping people involved by using names and asking specific questions.

Figure 8.10 (Continued)

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## Refining Literature Circle Skills

As the Literature Circles progress, I often notice that many groups have the same skill problems, so here are some strategies that are helpful. If the problem is contained to one group, gentle yet direct teacher intervention is the best course to take. Most of the time all you need to do is make an explicit statement such as, “I’ve noticed that only two people do most of the talking during a discussion. What could your group start doing differently so that everyone participates more equally? I’m looking forward to hearing your solutions. I’ll be back in five minutes; be ready with them.” When severe dysfunction occurs, it’s best to interview each member separately and discreetly before deciding the best course of action. I once had a girl who ended up in a Literature Circle with another girl who had harassed her in junior high. No monitoring, T-Chart, or processing would have ever uncovered the root of the problem. In that case, allowing the girl to switch books and groups was the necessary solution. On the other hand, many times a majority of the groups will struggle with the same skill problem, so here are some skill tune-ups you can introduce during the off-days and then practice in the next discussion.

**One person dominates the conversation.** Have students use “talking chips.” Before the discussion begins, each member gets three or four chips. You can use poker chips, pennies, or squares of paper. Whenever a member answers a question or voices an opinion, he must surrender one of his chips. They can just be placed in the center of the table or each group can assign a banker. Once you’re out of chips, you can only listen and ask Follow-up Questions until everyone else has used up his chips as well. Once all members are “out,” the chips are redistributed and round two begins. After one or two discussions, the chips can be abandoned. By then, most groups develop a more even participation pattern.

**Students are not using Follow-up Questions.** This might be a time when the teacher needs to assign the goal of increasing the number of Follow-up Questions asked during a discussion. Instead of a full Literature Circle meeting one day, students might break up into pairs in order to review Follow-ups using the drill activity mentioned earlier in the chapter.

It is also useful for a class to brainstorm different kinds of Follow-ups that can be used with different parts of the Literature Circle notes. Here is a list of questions that a class brainstormed for increasing the discussion about each person’s illustration.

1. Why did you choose that character to draw?
2. What interested you about this part of the story?
3. Where was this in the story? What passage would you use for a caption?
4. What details would you have added if you had more time?
5. What feelings does this scene show?
6. What’s another part of the story that would make a good illustration?
7. Which details in your drawing are most important to the story?
8. What were you thinking while drawing this picture?
9. How does your illustration show symbolism, irony, or a moral?
10. If you became a new character in the story, where would you be in the drawing? What would you be doing?

Before the next discussion, each member can pick the two or three questions he wants to use when discussing the illustrations of others. Be sure to challenge each group to think of some new questions that could be added to the master list.

Andrea  
3-13-01  
with Hours

Briar Rose

Lit Circle #4 March 13, Page 188

Notes

Page 146 Who were the guards telling them not to look at?  
- Where were they running to?  
- Why did the crowd pelt things at the prisoners?  
- Why couldn't the people talk to them?

Page 147 Why did the man hit Josef?  
- Why was the boy laughing about it?  
- Why did they think he was a spy?  
- Why did they decide to keep Josef and not turn him in?

Page 180 Why did Josef like the Yiddish lullaby she sang?  
- What did it mean exactly?  
- What did she mean?

Passages

Page 151 Top section Why did the German guards make the Jews roll in snow?  
- Why did only the Jews have to do it?  
- How long would they have to roll in the snow for?  
- Would any of them die from the coldness of the snow?

Page 154 Middle section Why did they think the woman was a 'liar' for not giving up the baby?  
- Why didn't Josef understand what they meant?  
- Why did these people think Josef understood?  
- What happened to the woman who didn't give up her baby?

Page 174 Top section Why didn't the girl speak to any of them?  
- Why wasn't she curious



**Figure 8.11** Student notes with Follow-ups

Another way to get students to use more Follow-up Questions is to have them think while they are doing their notes of ones they might use with each of their lead questions and passages. Students can list the Follow-ups directly underneath the item or they can set up the paper in the two-column Lead and Follow-up format, using the left-side column for questions or passage notes and the right-side column for potential follow-up questions they could ask. This assignment forces students to imagine what kind of conversation their questions and passages might illicit. Hopefully, if they can't imagine any kind of conversation, they'll think of a new discussion item for their notes!

**Students are coming up with weak connections.** Students seem to have a particularly rough time with this part of the notes. Many times students find making a connection to the text overwhelming because they think they have to connect with the entire text. A student might be reading a novel about the Holocaust and say, “I don’t have anything to connect with. I’ve never been in a war, and I’ve never felt discrimination.” What students fail to grasp at first is that connections can be much smaller. While most students have never experienced anything remotely like the Holocaust, most have lost a pet, a relative, been forced to be nice to relatives or family friends they detest, etc. Once students begin to understand this, their connections become much more personal, meaningful, and interesting.

Making good connections takes practice. Though personal connection is what makes reading come alive, many students don’t automatically use this skill. A teacher modeling connections with her own reading is very instructive for the class. An important part of the modeling is describing the thought process behind the connection. Likewise, some students will be much more adept than others at making meaningful connections. Ask them to explain how they do it. What do they think about? The more students can share their thought processes with each other, the better they will all get at reading and making connections.

**Students immediately explain their illustrations and passages rather than letting the others comment first.** A great way to solve this problem is using the strategy called “Save the Last Word for Me.” Here are the steps:

1. One student shows her illustration or reads her passage aloud.
2. In turn, each student in the group explains why the passage was chosen or why the illustration was important to the story. Each student is challenged to add something new to the comments.
3. Once everyone else in the group has given his opinion, the student with the illustration or passage adds anything that wasn’t already mentioned.
4. Before moving on to a new passage or illustration, the group asks some Follow-up Questions to get more information about the artist’s thinking or the meaning behind the chosen passage.

**Some groups finish earlier than others.** If everyone is finishing early, then consider shortening up the time or reviewing Follow-up Questions. If a group is finished a couple of minutes early, that’s really okay as long as they can continue talking together as a group rather than breaking off into cliques or starting to distract other groups. If a group is consistently finished well before the others, it’s a signal that the teacher probably needs to intervene directly. It might be because their discussion notes aren’t very useful, they aren’t using Follow-up Questions, or they just aren’t interested in each other. In any event, once the real problem is uncovered, turn it back to the group to solve and then monitor them more closely in subsequent meetings.

If you notice it’s a different group finishing early here or there, a universal back-up plan is helpful. On a day when Literature Circles are not meeting, have the class brainstorm questions or activities to pursue when they finish early. Have the kids copy the list and put it with their Literature Circle Processing Sheets. When that extra time arises, there should be lots more to talk about if they look back to the list. Here’s part of a list my Novel class developed.

1. What’s your favorite part from the story so far?
2. Based on what we’ve read so far, how do you think it’s going to end?

3. Who is your favorite character? Why?
4. Everyone rereads a page and finds a new passage or vocabulary word to share/discuss.
5. What do you think the author thought about or experienced in order to write this story?
6. How do you feel about the story now compared to when we first started reading it?
7. Look through the text for literary devices: simile, metaphor, irony, symbolism, alliteration. After everyone finds one, discuss them.
8. What advice would you give each of the characters?
9. If this story were made into a movie or television show, how would the story need to be changed?
10. If this story were made into a movie, how would you cast it?

**Some students read ahead of the rest of the group.** You'll probably be able to pick these kids out at the same time you hand the books to them, since because of SSR, you already know what kind of readers they are. Pull the speed readers aside for a chat. If you can, get them to agree not to read ahead. Have them mark the place they need to stop for each upcoming discussion with a sticky note or, better yet, put a rubber band around the "off-limits" pages as long as they can be trusted not to shoot someone's eye out with it! If they won't promise to quit reading, then at least make them promise not to ruin it for the slower readers. Kids hate it when a group member tells them how the book ends before they're even half-way through. Just a few weeks ago, I pulled a few kids from various groups to model a small group discussion. One student, who apparently had read *To Kill a Mockingbird* before, gleefully revealed story details to her group that wouldn't appear until six chapters later. After the demonstration, I asked the class to list discussion Do's and Don'ts. At the top of the "Don't" list was "Don't talk about parts of the book that the other members haven't read yet." Whenever the message can come from the class rather than from you, it is much stronger. From now on, I am going to purposely try to choose a "repeat reader" for demonstration, just so that the students can come to the conclusion that "spilling the beans" is never helpful to the group. A "repeat reader" is a valuable asset since a second or third reading will always reveal details never noticed on the first trip through a book. In the case of fast readers, remind them to skim through the assigned reading the night before a Literature Circle meeting so that they can remember what took place in that part of the story. Otherwise, these members will unwittingly reference story events in their answers that the other members haven't run across yet. Another option is to offer the fast reader a chance to read any of the other Literature Circle books as well, since his extended reading might offer the group the opportunity to discuss a different kind of connection.

**Some students come unprepared.** Since more and more employers are making use of work teams out there in the business world, it's getting easier to find business books on the topic of teamwork. Christopher Avery makes an interesting point in his book *Teamwork Is an Individual Skill: Getting Your Work Done When Sharing Responsibility* (2001). He says that a work team can only be as strong as its weakest, least-motivated member. If I notice that preparation is an issue, I talk to the kids about workplace skills. On the days notes and reading are due, they write down the date and pages due in their composition books. Underneath that heading they write Asset or Liability. Then I tell them that a member will be an asset to her group if she's finished the reading, remembered and thought about the reading, and completed the notes with high quality. Someone is likely to be a liability if they've done less than what was due that day. Next, I have each student list as many specific contributions they think they can make to the discussion that

day, keeping in mind that learning more about the book and gaining greater insight is a goal of a Lit Circle discussion. Finally, I have the kids go back to the words Asset or Liability, and I ask them, “Are you going to help your group learn more about the book or are you going to slow them down? You decide whether you will be an asset or liability to your group.” I think it’s really important that students acknowledge how lack of individual accountability hurts an entire group, not just themselves. The students who decide they are assets join their groups. The students who are insufficiently prepared need to take personal responsibility and decline to join the group of their own volition rather than making me call the shots. After all, they can more accurately estimate their possible contributions than I can. I instruct those who choose not to join the group to first figure out what’s holding them back from being prepared, and then make a homework plan so that the subsequent preparation gets done.

While the Literature Circles are meeting, I also try to get to the solo workers to discuss their plans and encourage them to get back on track. The other thing I like about this approach is that sometimes, even though students haven’t done all the work, they can still participate effectively as long as they finished the reading. Lisa wasn’t much for completing her Literature Circle notes and often didn’t finish the reading, but for her last meeting she chose to participate. Now, if it were up to me, I would have barred her because she had no notes. However, she did have a beautiful illustration from the last chapter of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It was readily apparent that she had read, remembered, and paid attention to detail as she drew. Her picture created lots of discussion, and because she wanted to be with her group, she was highly involved, responding to the ideas of others and asking her own spontaneous questions.

**Students know how to use the skills but need to use them more in discussion.** When students are starting to engage in Literature Circles or Books Talks, I always use a Skills Checklist as I observe and monitor the groups. Signing names on the sheet next to a specific role or a set of skills reminds students of the skills needed for a successful discussion and it seems to help them stick more closely to the academic task. However, as students become more experienced, I try to turn the observation and assessment over to them.

One of the best ways to help students focus on specific skills in order to increase their usage is through the use of an Observation Sheet. When this device is used, one student’s main job is to observe the interaction of the remaining members, recording who is using what skills as well as jotting down any notes on specific things members say that are good examples of the skills being observed (Johnson 1998, 6:11). Though teachers are often concerned that an observer is shortchanged because he can’t actively participate in the discussion, this is far from the truth, because the observer is engaged in a different kind of learning. Whoever observes leaves the experience with a heightened awareness of which skills are important and how those skills influence discussion. The next time that student is an active participant, he’ll more than likely use the discussion skills he previously observed with greater fluency. Using observers and Observation Sheets is particularly useful when there are four or five people in a group since these sizes are conducive to those shadow members who the others forget to encourage. Also, taking one person out of the discussion completely shifts the discussion dynamics in interesting ways.

Since using an observer effectively is a more complicated strategy, steps must be taken so that students understand what to do. The best way to begin is by using a fishbowl demonstration where one group engages in a Literature Circle discussion while the rest of the class observes them. If every group has a different book, recruit one confident group to repeat its last Literature Circle discussion for the entire class. If you are using Literature Circle style discussions for a whole class book, choose students from different groups to repeat a discussion or use the demonstration in the place of a Literature Circle meeting. While the demonstration group is dragging



**Figure 8.12** Lisa's illustration of Boo Radley

their desks into position, pass the Observation Sheets to the rest of the class. On the overhead, show them where to put the names of those being observed and how to record the skills being observed by using tic marks and notes. Then sit down with the observers and let the demonstration group proceed with about ten minutes of discussion. At the end of that time, thank the group and let them return to their original seats.

Now, the rest of the students tally the results from their individual observations. Students add the numbers across each row to determine how many times the group used each skill, and students add the numbers going down each column to determine how many times each person in the group participated while using the observed skills. Then we compare the results between students. When numbers widely differ, such as one student recording twelve Follow-up Questions while another student has thirty-three, we discuss what could have accounted for the difference in perception. It might turn out that one student counted all questions, while the other one didn't count Lead Questions or yes/no Follow-ups. What I try to emphasize is that, as an

# OBSERVATION SHEET

DATE 5-14-01 PERIOD 1 OBSERVER Brittany

SKILLS	GROUP MEMBERS					TOTAL
	Kathryn	Joanna	Andy	Dana	Christine	
Follow-ups						16
Have Fun						28
New Discussion Starter						16
Keep Everyone Involved						14
using Names	 	 	 	 	 	71
<b>TOTAL</b>	34	30	22	29		24

**OBSERVATION NOTES:**

- "What do you think, Kathryn"
- "Christine should explain it"
- "Joanna move back"
- "Andy we haven't heard from you"
- "Christine, what do you think?"
- "I can't hear"
- "Everyone listen"
- "Christine, why don't you go"
- "Any concluding thoughts"

Figure 8.13 Observation Sheet data

observer, you have to be clear on how you are defining a skill and then be consistent in your recordkeeping. We also talk about whether observing was easy or difficult. Often, some students will notice that for a while they forgot to observe because they became focused on the content of the conversation. Another will comment on how hard it is to keep up; while you're trying to decide where to record a comment, the discussion keeps moving forward. It's important for students to know that they'll never catch everything, but they need to be as accurate as possible with what they do record. We end the analysis by looking at the numbers, trying to detect discussion patterns and skill strengths and weaknesses.

# OBSERVATION SHEET

DATE \_\_\_\_\_ PERIOD \_\_\_\_\_ OBSERVER \_\_\_\_\_

SKILLS	GROUP MEMBERS				TOTAL
<b>TOTAL</b>					

**OBSERVATION NOTES:**

© 2002 by Nancy Steineke from *Reading and Writing Together*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

**Figure 8.14** *Blank Observation Sheet*

Once I start using Observation Sheets, I try to use them in at least four or five consecutive Literature Circle meetings so that everyone gets a chance to be observed several times and be an observer at least once. Always choose the skills you really want to emphasize as the ones being observed. It's best not to try to observe for more than four or five skills at a time. When groups are using Observation Sheets, I collect them and make a photocopy for each member. Being able to set them out side-by-side is a useful tool when students begin to analyze their own skill growth. Also, as students get more adept in the use of Observation Sheets, I let each group decide which skills will be observed. Here is a list of observable skills that one class brainstormed.

### Observable Skills

- Using quiet voices
- Directing the group's work
- Describing personal feelings/reactions to the reading
- Paraphrasing
- Using the text to support an idea
- Being friendly and supportive
- Recognizing good ideas
- Energizing the group
- Disagreeing with ideas respectfully
- Asking follow-up questions
- Using names
- Taking turns to start discussion with one's notes
- Answering questions

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## Trial and Error

Probably one of my most personally humiliating moments of epiphany came at the hands of Edye Holobec Johnson, a fact that I never revealed to her until now. I was enrolled in a week-long summer course entitled *Advanced Cooperative Learning*. I had that beginner course under my belt, I had been diligently using cooperative learning for a whole year, and, boy, did I know everything! To top it off, I was the best cooperative group member anyone could ask for; just ask me! Of course, it did not take long for my own hubris to take me down a few notches.

Mid-week we were practicing using groups with observers. Because I was such a *useful* group member, I let someone else volunteer to be the observer. Our group task was to rank items necessary for survival in the dead of winter after a plane crash. We had five active participants and one observer. Though I can't remember all of the skills observed, the two that stick out now were "Encouraging the Contributions of Others" and "Giving Information." As I recall, another woman and I did most of the talking. We had lots of opinions and did not hesitate to share them. As a matter of fact, we had so much to share we never even bothered to ask the rest of the group members if they knew anything about winter camping or cold weather survival. Our domination reduced the rest of the members to shadows. One woman who we totally ignored kept murmuring, "I've done this exercise before; the steel wool is important; it needs to be ranked near the top." Did we listen? Of course not, we were too busy talking!

When we scored the rankings, our group froze to death because we had discarded the one item that would have helped us start a fire: the steel wool. Then it was time to look at the Observation Sheet. I think I had "Giving Information" checked off about eight hundred times and "Encouraging the Contributions of Others" two times. How pathetic. I was mortified! If I had only listened to that woman who SAID she had done this ranking before, we would have lived! From that time on, I've tried my best to hear others before trying to be heard.

***Moral:** Teach your students that listening and asking follow-up questions might be more important than voicing every thought and opinion that comes to mind. The Observation Sheet is just the tool to drive this point home!*

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## How Do I Assess This?

When I assess students during Literature Circles, I think of assessment in terms of four categories: preparation, participation, idea expansion (thinking deeply in a new way), and summation.

### *Preparation*

Each time students meet in their Literature Circle, their notes are turned in and evaluated by me. Remember the stamp system I described earlier? Literature Circle notes plus the illustration are worth up to three stamps. When I scan the notes, I look for legibility, good discussion questions, page references, full coverage of the assigned reading, and opinion details related to the passages, and connection. I make sure that students have some good samples and a rubric to work from (see Figures 8.6 and 8.8). If there's time at the end of a meeting, I like to have the students do a self-evaluation and explain how their notes contributed to the day's discussion. After all, that's the whole point of doing the notes! Few students can successfully argue their notes' usefulness when they must defend why their questions were all fact-oriented and their passage selections were all from the first three pages. With the illustration, I'm looking to see if they followed the directions. Does it fill the page? Are there lots of details? True artistry is not the issue; it's whether the illustration reflects time, effort, and thinking. If lots of extra effort is apparent, I'll award an extra point if I'm feeling generous. Stamped notes get stored in the Reading section of the binder.

Before you panic and think, "Oh my goodness, I don't want to have to read all of these," keep in mind that I used the word "scan" not "read." Once you know what you're looking for, it's easy to move through a class set in about fifteen minutes. But, let's say you don't even want to do that. Figure out how you can collect them at random. When the kids say, "Are you going to grade these?" just reply, "I haven't decided yet." Collect the notes some days but not all days. I follow-up more closely on the kids that tend to be unprepared. However, before you get too lackadaisical about all this, I strongly recommend that you regularly inspect the notes from at least the first two meetings so that you can get the kids on the right track of creating truly useful discussion notes.

### *Participation*

I've already mentioned two "gradable" ways to assess participation: direct observation via Observation Sheets and ongoing post-discussion group processing. After any discussion using Observation Sheets, I collect them from the observers and make photocopies for each group member. These are stored in the Leadership section of the binder so that they can be easily accessed for goal setting or examination of group skill progression. I collect the individual Processing Sheets every few discussions and stamp each entry. Current Processing Sheets get stored in Miscellaneous for easy retrieval. Once a Literature Circle cycle is completed, these sheets go into Leadership. Another assessment, though a more informal one, is the sharing during the large group processing which takes place at the end of a Literature Circle meeting or the following day.

Sometimes, particularly when working with older students, I use another form of participation self-assessment by having students write more detailed reflections in their composition books, reflections which describe the course of the interactions among the group members. The composition books work particularly well for this because they keep the entry dates in order. In the end, when students look back at the entries in order to draw some final conclusions about their group's interactions, these entries become chapters that chronicle their Literature Circle experience. When requiring a post-discussion journal, I use some specific prompts. The thing

**5/6 Group Discussion Reflection**

*Present: Rhonda & Melissa*

I felt comfortable with Rhonda and Melissa. They helped me understand things that were confusing me. We shared good ideas about the possible plot of the book. We also discussed our opinions on the book, whether we liked it or not. I need to work on letting other people answer questions. When a question is asked, I always am the first to answer.

**5/10 Group Discussion Reflection**

*Present: Rhonda & Melissa*

I felt even more comfortable. This discussion was based on opinions. We talked about what we thought was going to happen, what we wanted to happen, and what we thought of what had happened already. Today I did not answer as fast. I wanted to see if anyone else had something to say. If they did, I let them talk. If they didn't, I talked. We had a great discussion.

**5/10 Group Discussion Reflection**

*Present: Rhonda & Melissa*

Today was the best discussion yet. We discussed so many confusing ideas. We all helped each other understand better. I let everyone answer, but also answered some questions myself. We discussed what the author went through to write this story. Our group never argues; we get along great.

**5/12 Group Discussion Reflection**

*Present: Rhonda, Melissa, & Jennie*

This discussion was not so good. One member told the rest of us that we were stupid and she didn't like us. I thought this was ignorant and rude and said so, but ever since this incident everything has been fine. We discussed the book's humor. We also talked about next week's assignments. I didn't talk as much, maybe because of the remark made by that one person. Whatever the reason, it was a good time to allow the others to give their opinions. Next time my goal is to not get involved in an argument.

**5/17 Group Discussion Reflection**

*Present: Rhonda, Melissa, Jennie, Nicole*

This discussion was a lot better from last time. The one person I mentioned didn't say anything rude. I think maybe she realized I wouldn't listen to it because last time I told her she was ignorant. But anyway, we all discussed opinions about the conclusion of the book. Some of us thought McMurphy would remain in the hospital and some of us thought he would escape. We also discussed the essay questions a bit. It was a good discussion.

**Figure 8.15** Julie's Literature Circle reflection journal for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

that needs to be emphasized most as students record their experiences is to describe them in as much detail as possible. What was said? Which skills were being used? How did you know it? Giving specific examples is what makes these journals useful in the end because upon rereading students can really remember specific discussions.

### **Group Discussion Reflection**

When writing, consider/reflect on:

Strengths

Weaknesses

Emerging patterns

Successful skills/techniques/plans

Breakthroughs

Personal improvements

How problems were solved

Interesting ideas

It never hurts to use student samples to show what a good journal looks like. A way to improve this kind of reflection is to get the crayons out after a few entries (remember the question coding activity from earlier in this chapter?) and have the kids highlight the anecdotal evidence and specific details that illustrate their descriptions of each group meeting. This exercise sends an immediate message to the students who write in vague, general terms because they won't be doing much coloring. How to recall and cite anecdotal evidence is another minilesson to address during a Literature Circle off-day. Students can offer a few of their general interaction descriptions and the entire class can brainstorm what kind of descriptions or stories would illustrate them. I also recommend that if you choose to use this journal approach, tell students to examine problems objectively and not slam other students; avoid using names. That's another reason to show some good examples before embarking on this assignment.

The nice thing about the journals is that they lead directly to a concluding activity I often use called a Processing Letter, previously mentioned in Chapter 4. The letter is addressed to me and is written after the conclusion of a Literature Circle cycle. Its focus is a series of questions that, hopefully, get kids to look back at the participation artifacts they've stored in the Leadership section of the binder. In order to write a good letter, students need to re-examine their group Processing Sheets and large group processing notes. Journal reflections and Observation Sheets, if used, provide further evidence from which some conclusions can be drawn.

### **Idea Expansion**

A problem that sometimes arises in Literature Circles is that a few students will think they know everything and there is no point listening to the opinions of others because all opinions are inferior to their own. The flip side of this is the student who doesn't pay much attention to anything anyone says, whether it's his opinion or someone else's. In both cases, some individual accountability is needed to increase the value of listening to those diverse opinions. Unfortunately, the only way I've figured out how to get kids to document their idea gathering is through writing about it. The good news is that these pieces of writing don't need to be very long nor do they need to be done after every discussion. Before a meeting begins, I always remind students to remem-

### Literature Circle Processing Letter

**DIRECTIONS:** Write a letter to me, Mrs. Steineke, thoughtfully answering the following questions. Use complete sentences and a separate paragraph for each question. Fragments, one-word answers, or cryptic responses will receive no credit. Your letter should be at least a page long and needs to answer each question thoroughly, using specific events/anecdotes for evidence.

1. How would you rate your most recent group? What were your group's strengths and weaknesses? Out of all the groups this semester, which one worked together the best? How do you explain it? What skills did this group have that the others were missing? Tell me about some specific successes; explain using specific anecdotes. What problems arose? How did you deal with them? If the solutions did not work, what would you do differently the next time?
2. Examine your group Processing Sheet and Observation Sheets carefully. How have you changed and grown as a contributing group member? What are your best skills? What is your weakest skill? What do you need to start doing differently so that you continue to improve and grow as an effective group member?
3. Later in the semester, we will once again be moving into Literature Circles. From working in the last group, how would you try from the very start to make this group enjoyable and academically productive? If it were up to you, what should be the ground rules that everyone functions under? What skills would you want to emphasize?
4. What's new in your life? What's happening in your other classes? What have you been up to since the last Processing Letter?

**Figure 8.16** *Processing Letter instructions*

ber the prompts and their need for listening to others carefully just in case they may be writing about it. Here are some prompts I often use:

1. What did people talk about when they looked at your illustration? What was something you hadn't thought about before during this conversation? Which illustration did you find the most interesting? Why?
2. Which of your passages created the best discussion? What did people talk about? When other people read their passages and discussed them, what was something you hadn't thought about or noticed before?
3. Describe an interesting idea that originated from a recent Literature Circle discussion. Describe the discussion progression in detail.

Once again, I'm looking for specific details concerning what took place in a discussion. The better the student listens and pays attention to his group members, the better he will be able to write about the ideas discussed. Sometimes, I have students write a short discussion summary at the conclusion of a meeting. If time permits, students can write them during the last few minutes of the period; otherwise, they are done as homework. When a student remembers the specific academic contributions of others, it shows she's been a good listener.

**9/28/01 Discussion Report**

Today was a very good discussion, for everyone was very well prepared to answer each other's questions. We talked about the arrival of Aunt Alexandra. We wondered if Atticus had really told her to come or if she kind of invited herself. We don't think Atticus wanted her to come and tell him he is raising his kids poorly and to get rid of Cal. We talked about how Cal kind of has two personalities, one with the Finches and one with the Black people. We wondered how Dill really got to Maycomb after running away because Dill lies a lot, so it is hard to believe what he has to say. We also talked about how Scout isn't afraid to say or do anything in front of others. All together, it was the best discussion so far.

Allison

**Figure 8.17** Allison's discussion report on *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Another kind of writing, the Discussion Journal, helps students record how their ideas and opinions change in the course of reading and discussion. In the example on the next page, Jill recorded her thoughts as she and her group worked their way through the often perplexing novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey. Though the wording reflects the roughness of a first draft, the evolution of ideas through the entries creates a map of the reader's changing opinions in regards to the book, as well as an illustration of how important a discussion group becomes when the reading is challenging.

A slightly different route to text insight and reflection is the Literature Circle Pen Pal Letter. This is an idea I've used when I've had two or more classes reading the same books. Each student writes to a member of the corresponding Literature Circle in the other class. I tell students to write about what they think of the book so far, anything interesting that their group has thought about, and what questions they have thought about as they've read. On the day the letters are due, students bring in three copies: one to keep, one for me, and one for their pen pal. The following day I distribute the letters and the students write back. This can be done in class or at home that night. A couple of days later, the students get their return letters. Kids always enjoy this assignment and it's a way to get more conversation going about a book outside of class, since students often seek out their pen pals for further discussion. The examples on the following pages are somewhat of an anomaly. A trio of senior girls in my 7th hour Novels class chose to read *The Rainmaker* by John Grisham, but they had no matching group in the other class. Since I had wanted to read that book anyway, I became the unofficial fourth member of their Literature Circle. Whenever the other groups looked like they were functioning well without my monitoring, I would join the Grisham group. Of course, I had my sticky notes ready! When it came time for the Pen Pal Letters, that group corresponded with me.

The thing I like best about Pen Pal Letters is that they're fun. Even though students have to do a significant amount of thinking about the text in order to come up with interesting points and questions, there is only positive feelings apparent when students get a letter in response to their own. After a round of Pen Pal Letters, the most frequently asked question is "When are we going to write back?"

**5/7/93 Pre-Discussion**

The story is starting out pretty slow, so it is not that exciting. I don't think the main person, McMurphy, is really crazy. He just wants to get into the mental home and change it. He seems like the type of person that wants to take charge all the time. Maybe the book will get better once the characters start getting some action. Otherwise, this whole book will pretty much suck because it does already. The only good thing about this book is the fact that the author wrote a lot of it under hallucination, so it's interesting to see what kind of things he can come up with. Hopefully, something better than what I've read so far will happen. Otherwise, this book is probably going to be a waste of time.

**5/11/93 Post-Discussion**

After reading the first couple chapters, I started to enjoy the book a little more. The characters seemed to pick up with interest and the action seemed to pick up the pace. After the discussion with my partners, I gained some useful insight on what McMurphy is actually doing and how the Big Nurse thinks and reacts. I also gained some information on how Chief thinks. I really didn't understand how the Chief thinks concerning the white fog and how the black boys mistreated him while shaving and washing him. After discussing my partners' responses, I realized the points of the book I was missing out on.

**5/13/93 Post-Discussion**

After the second discussion I was able to understand the story a little bit better. McMurphy now has pretty much established his place in the institute, and the battle has begun between McMurphy and the Big Nurse. McMurphy had begun to influence the other patients into doing what he wanted. I recognize the actions the Big Nurse is taking. She does not appreciate how someone is belittling her authority and making things run out of sync. That is how some teachers seem to run classes. People don't appreciate it when others run things the way they don't like it. That's why I feel the war between McMurphy and Big Nurse began.

**5/17/93 Post-Discussion**

After each discussion I realize that I learn more and more about this book. I really do enjoy this book because it's interesting to read about the brave and wild things that McMurphy does. I admire the way he stands up to the Big Nurse. I think that's what the world needs most: people that will stand up for what they believe is right. I like people that aren't afraid to take a stand and voice their opinions. Our discussions made me realize that that is what the book is really trying to say. People need to stay awake and take charge of their lives. Otherwise, people will continue to run things their way for you and take advantage of you for their own personal benefits of gain and power.

**5/19/93 Post-Discussion**

It has now become very clear to me after our group discussions that no matter what happens, authority can pretty much overrule everything and everyone. The Big Nurse had such power of

*(continued)*

the institution that she literally ran the patients' lives. I feel one very important fact was learned after reading this book and discussing it: people should not allow others to run their lives for their satisfaction. Everyone should have a say in what happens in his life. People, even mentally unstable ones, need to be respected and not treated like robots that are trained and manipulated by any other authority figure.

**5/25/93 Post-Discussion**

I'm really happy we read this book. I found it highly entertaining and intellectually stimulating. The characters, especially McMurphy, had such a unique outlook on life, even if it was in a crazy, irrational way. However, I do believe that in most cases, authority will rule the majority of the time. Somehow the people with the most power will usually come out on top, even if it's for the worse. A lot of unfairness occurs to people who have the best intentions for others. They are trying to help make a difference and make the world a better, more respectable place to be. That is what McMurphy tried to do.

**Figure 8.18** (Continued)

Nancy Steineke  
12/15/96  
7th Hour  
*The Rainmaker*

Dear Readers,

Right now my cat, Cleopatra, is doing her best to sabotage my typing by nudging my hands with her nose and stepping on the keyboard, but I'll do my best to try to pull my thoughts together.

First of all, I was somewhat surprised by how entertaining this novel is so far. The last Grisham novel I read was *The Chamber*, and that novel took itself *very* seriously. By the time I was finished, I had learned a lot about the arguments against the death penalty, but I can't say that I was very entertained. The only novel by Grisham that I haven't read so far is the one that is still out only in hardcover. One of the things that's different about this book is that it is written in present tense and first person. I'm not sure, but I think this is a departure from the previous novels. If it isn't, then this is the first narrating character that I've found engaging.

Speaking of Rudy, I still can't figure out how he made it all the way through law school considering how much he seems to loathe his colleagues, fellow students, classes, lawyerly practices (looking for business in the hospital cafeteria), etc. Although he said he did it just to spite his father, his father has been dead for years. Maybe Rudy likes being a lawyer better than he's letting on at the moment, or he's just tremendously stubborn. How did you feel about him starting to befriend that abused wife, Kelly, he met at the hospital? As I read that part, I couldn't decide whether she was pathetic or manipulative or both. However, I do think Rudy is nuts to continue that relationship in any way, shape, or form. Kelly's husband is *very* dangerous, and I

(continued)

**Figure 8.19** Literature Circle Pen Pal Letter

don't doubt for a moment that he would not hesitate to kill Rudy and Kelly if he thought there was something going on between them.

What do you think about Miss Birdie? She's another one who has more to her than she's letting on. On page 116 she off-handedly mentions that she's done twenty wills already and knows all about them. What is that all about? Also, all of that money her second husband left her when he died. I've got the feeling that this money was gotten illegally. Otherwise, why would Birdie keep it a secret and even refuse to spend it? She definitely could hire a full-time gardener and not have Rudy hauling those bags of bark chips around. Is she afraid of spending the money for some reason, or is she just too cheap?

Finally, why do you think the Lake firm got torched? (Jill, don't spill the beans; try to remember what you were thinking the first time you read it.) Though I don't think Rudy was involved directly, does it have something to do with that insurance case he handed over to them?

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Mrs. S.

**Figure 8.19** *Literature Circle Pen Pal Letter (Continued)*

12/16/01

Dear Mrs. Steineke,

I think this novel is very entertaining as well. I think it's entertaining because the characters are written down to earth and you kind of feel like you know them. I have read other Grisham novels such as *The Firm*, *The Client*, and *The Pelican Brief*. I enjoyed all of those books, but they were all much more serious, like you stated about *The Chamber*.

I also don't understand how Rudy could stay in law if he hated it. I just can't believe he'd devote himself to such a difficult, time-consuming career just because of his father. I do not think Rudy should get involved with Kelly because she has a lot of emotional problems which I do not think Rudy can handle. Also, she has that psycho husband who could hurt Rudy.

Miss Birdie is a very strange character. She seems to be very with it for her age and very smart. However, if she is so smart, why doesn't she let Rudy in on some information about her money if he is going to draw up her new will? I also thought that the money was somehow illegal. I don't think Miss Birdie would have done anything illegal. Maybe her husband did something, but I don't think she knows about it. I never thought Miss Birdie was hiding anything serious about the money. I just think she is a cheap old lady who knows how to get the good end out of the deal.

I thought the Lake Firm got torched to cover up some type of scandal, maybe about the insurance case. I never thought that Rudy torched the firm because he just seems too good to do that.

Jill

**Figure 8.20** *Literature Circle Pen Pal Response*

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## Ideas for Replacing the Unit Test

Summative assessment takes place after all groups have finished their books. I like this assessment to be a combination of individual and group activities. Some ideas follow.

### *Final Letters*

Just as the ongoing group processing can serve as notes towards a final Processing Letter, the shorter pieces of discussion content writing mentioned in the Idea Expansion section can contribute to a final content-oriented letter, which takes the place of the traditional final. Letters make nice reading for the teacher because they can take on a more personal tone and voice, something often absent in the more traditional essay forms. However, like those traditional forms, students can still focus on all of the conventions that they normally need to use such as paragraphing, topic sentences, supporting details, correct grammar and punctuation, correct format. You'll notice that I am very firm in my directions about length. As you have probably found, many students have mastered the art of going on for pages without saying much. After years of wading through this muck in the search of a cogent thought, I finally concluded that having to write with brevity and conciseness creates a much more challenging assignment since students have to make every word count.

The letter example in Figure 8.22 was written by a freshman student after her Literature Circle had finished discussing two books that connected with the class novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*.



*These photos show a student group acting out their tableau scenes from To Kill a Mockingbird. In scene #3, Calpurnia calls Atticus to warn him of the mad dog. In scene #6, Atticus, Calpurnia, Heck Tate, Jem, and Scout look on after Atticus has shot the dog. The accompanying scripts for these tableau scenes can be found on page 187.*

## Literature Circle Letter

### Counts as a Test!

**Directions:** Write a letter to me, Mrs. Steineke, that is interesting and also convinces me that you spent some time thinking about your book and your discussions. Your letter will have three paragraphs, each focusing on one of the following questions. Your letter should be one-page long, no longer, 1" margins all around, 12-point Times New Roman, letter format. Don't forget to sign your name!

1. Describe an interesting idea that originated from one of your Literature Circle discussions. What was the initial topic/question? What ideas were presented? How did it relate to the text? How did you think differently after you listened to the ideas of others?
2. Explain a specific connection between your Lit Circle book and another book that we have read as a class or one that you have read on your own this year. Be sure to show depth of thought in your explanation. Use lit circle text references.
3. Explain a point that explores a feeling of yours related to the book. Below are some topic ideas; however, these are just suggestions.
  - How did this book make you feel after you finished reading it? What did it make you think about that you hadn't thought about before?
  - What connections can you make between this book and your own life?
  - To what degree were you involved with the characters and their actions?
  - I think the relationship between \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ is interesting because . . .
  - I like / dislike (name of character) because . . .
  - Why or why not would you recommend this book to other readers?

This paper will be counted as a 100 point test. We will not be spending class time on this; it must be done for homework. Since final draft quality is expected, I strongly suggest that you use the following writing process: outline or other form of detailed notes, rough draft, final draft.

### Point Break Down:

Question #1	25 points
Question #2	25 Points
Question #3	25 points
Conventions	25 points
<b>Total</b>	<b>100 points</b>

Figure 8.21 *Literature Circle Letter directions*

May 21, 2001

Dear Mrs. Steineke,

Our Literature Circle read two books, *Montana 1948* by Larry Watson and *Spite Fences* by Trudy Krisher, but one of our most interesting discussions occurred while reading *Spite Fences*. It started off when Lee asked, "How do you think Maggie was feeling when Virgil was trying to rape her?" This question made our group explode with answers. The thought of fear came into play. She felt fear of her mother because of the laundry that was strewn over the dirty ground. Virgil caused most of her fear. Val brought up, "She might have been thinking of escape. She was thinking of how she could get out of the situation without hurting herself more. She was thinking of hurting him also." This coincided with Gina's idea . . . revenge! "Maggie was probably having thoughts of murder, how she could hurt Virgil without any consequences." When Gina brought that up, I was taken aback. I never thought of Maggie thinking of revenge as Virgil was molesting her. It put a different perspective on her character and her innocence. This discussion made me think about the different views that characters in books can have.

The second thing I would like to bring up is another part of our discussion. This specific part showed a connection between *Montana 1948* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Jill felt the father in each book showed characteristics that were very similar. "Atticus and Wesley were both reserved. They felt it was their duty to have their children on the correct path and were always willing to teach a lesson." Lee seemed to disagree with Jill when she first brought up that connection. Lee said, "I think the complete opposite!" However, once Jill described her point of view more thoroughly, everyone understood the comparison and agreed with her. I also brought up two particular scenes in which the fathers were alike. In *Montana 1948*, Wesley has to take charge of the situation when he finds out that his brother has been molesting Indian girls. Wesley arrests Frank, his own brother, and tries his hardest to do the right thing. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus tries to do the right thing by defending Tom Robinson even though he knows that it will expose his family to ridicule and possible danger. In both cases, the characters needed a lot of courage to make those decisions. Everyone agreed that this connection was one of great importance.

The third point I'd like to make is a feeling I acquired while reading *Spite Fences*. One thing that bothered me in particular was the character of Maggie Pugh. She was the main character in the book. She caused me distress because I felt she was so unlike me. While reading, I wanted to reach into the book and give her some common sense! I hated that she didn't do anything about her mother beating her. She told her best friend, Pert, but that did little in the long run. Her mother needed a slap in the face from Maggie herself. Maggie should have left the house in the beginning of the book, not in the last section. The whole situation with Virgil made me feel sadness towards Maggie, but I wish she would have reacted more quickly and run away. The best thing would have been to talk to the police after the first incident! I wanted to give her some confidence and make her gain respect from others. I think her character really enhances the book; my strong feelings were actually the reason I kept reading.

Rachel

Figure 8.22 Literature Circle Letter—student example

<b>Literature Circle Letter Rubric</b>				
<b>Discussion</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Topic introduced in first sentence</li> <li>• Stays on <i>one</i> topic</li> <li>• Some description of “who said what”</li> <li>• Concluding sentence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describes evolution of conversation in detail</li> <li>• Shows members ideas/viewpoints</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cites strong text details to connect with discussion points</li> <li>• States how personal interpretation changed as a result of hearing other ideas</li> </ul>	
<b>Text-to-Text Connection</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Topic sentence introduces comparison</li> <li>• Clear comparison between 3 novel incidents and 3 details from connection text</li> <li>• Concluding sentence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflects repeated reading of connection text in the thought and details discussed</li> <li>• Comparisons explained in greater depth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shows in-depth thought/feelings/personal opinion when comparing details from novel and connection text</li> </ul>	

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**Figure 8.23** Literature Circle Letter rubric

<b>Personal Opinion</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Topic introduced in first sentence</li> <li>• New topic versus rehash of something discussed earlier</li> <li>• Opinion points are clearly stated</li> <li>• Some specific details from novels</li> <li>• Concluding sentence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traces topic through entire story</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal interpretation clearly and thoroughly explained</li> <li>• Opinion backed up by strong, specific text details</li> </ul>
<b>Conventions</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All words spelled correctly</li> <li>• No homophone errors</li> <li>• Complete sentences</li> <li>• Complete paragraphs</li> <li>• Writing is clear, easy to follow</li> <li>• Book title underlined/italics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Correct comma usage</li> <li>• No run-ons, comma splices, or fragments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Error free</li> </ul>

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**Figure 8.23** (Continued)

### ***The Traditional Five-Paragraph Essay***

Coming up with something worthwhile that fills an extra long final exam period is always a challenge when students have spent most of the semester in Literature Circles. One super-duper long Scantron test just won't do the trick. That's when I thought of this idea for my second-semester seniors who had already been showing serious signs of senioritis since the beginning of fourth quarter. Besides finishing up discussion of the novel, the other Literature Circle assignment for the last meeting was to come up with three good essay-style questions on their book that could be turned into a five-paragraph essay. The questions had to reflect the entire book rather than one portion. I told the groups that they could create and discuss the questions together, but the group didn't have to reach a consensus. Each member was free to choose the three questions he would be most interested in writing about. At the end of the period, students wrote their questions in their composition books and also on index cards. As I collected the cards, I told them that on the day of the final exam, I'd return the cards with one of the three questions circled. That question would be the topic of their essay. Therefore, they would be best prepared if they thought about and took notes on all three questions. Here are some examples of the group-generated questions.

#### *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

- Why did the patients need McMurphy in order to realize they didn't need to be hospitalized?
- Do you think McMurphy has helped or hurt the other patients' chances of becoming well again?
- In the end, who do you think really won the battle: Big Nurse or McMurphy?

#### *The Chocolate War*

- Compare Archie to one of the rabbits from *Watership Down*.
- Compare your experiences as a freshman and a senior with those of the characters in *The Chocolate War*
- Why are the Vigils tolerated by Brother Leon and Brother Eugene? Explain.

#### *Around the World in Eighty Days*

- How would the story be different if Passepartout hadn't gone on the trip?
- What were the advantages and disadvantages of rescuing Aouda and taking her with them?
- How would the story have changed if it took place in the 1990s?

#### *The Catcher in the Rye*

- How would Holden fit in at a public school like Andrew?
- What significance did the "ducks in the park" have in relation to Holden and his life?
- What does Holden think of himself? Does he think he's wonderful or terrible?

On the day of the exam, I passed back the cards with the question I wanted them to answer. Though I was stuck with a bunch of essays to grade right at the end of the semester, there were a few advantages. First, since final exams are never returned, grading them goes quickly

because there is no need for written comments. Second, each student wrote on a different question, so I never got bored reading them.

After the exams were turned in, we still had a few minutes left, so I had the kids do a little processing on the back sides of the index cards. Here was the prompt: *If another class did this same type of final exam, what advice would you give them?* Here were some of the responses.

- Go over the book the night before and get quotes and pages that describe each question so that you are prepared.
- Think of questions that you would want to write about. Pick something from the book that you liked. Don't write a question down until you've thought about how you would answer it.
- You should tailor the questions to your knowledge of the book. Don't necessarily choose the same questions everybody else chooses.
- Don't just write down two good questions because you may be stuck with the third one.
- Don't rely on your partners for ideas and information because they won't be able to hand the information to you during the test.
- Read the book. If you don't, you won't be able to think of any good questions and you won't be able to bluff your way through the answers.

### ***Literature Circle Portfolio***

A portfolio is a collection of artifacts, usually some “best” pieces but also artifacts that demonstrate “work in progress.” I think a portfolio would be particularly useful if a class were to engage in more than one Literature Circle. That way, each student would have a starting point, the chance to develop improvement goals between the first and second Literature Circle, and then the chance to compare artifacts in order to show that growth. The final “test” grade on the second portfolio would be based on how well a student met or surpassed his goals. What categories would I use for a Literature Circle Portfolio? Students would have to show accomplishment and growth in the four assessment areas: *preparation*, *participation*, *idea expansion*, and *summation*. The portfolio contains no more than eight pieces, possibly four from the first Literature Circle and four comparison pieces from the second. Each artifact pair would have an explanation of the growth demonstrated or the reason why the student failed to move past her roadblock. If this assessment intrigues you, Chapter 10 discusses the portfolio process in much greater detail.

### ***Book Talks***

Here's a structure that's already established in the classroom and needs little further explanation or class time. Besides giving students the opportunity to engage in some interesting discussion around a common book, another purpose of Literature Circles is to get the class interested in reading more of the books on the list. Book Talks are an excellent way to get the word out. Also, since each student will be preparing her Book Talk Sheet individually, it's another way to see how much of the book each student has taken with her.

### ***Projects***

If you've read Harvey Daniels' book *Literature Circles* (2002), you've definitely thought about concluding your Literature Circles with projects. On the plus side, projects can be a lot of fun and

also give students a wider choice in how to show what they know. On the minus side, high-quality projects require the class time for each group to develop its own grading rubric based on specific criteria and benchmarks (Burke 1993). Unless students take the time to clearly define what an “A” project looks like, project presentations will range from highly entertaining to highly excruciating. For this reason, I tend to limit the performance choices to formats we’ve already studied as a class. My favorite projects revolve around oral interpretation and drama.

### ***Found Poetry Project***

This really works if students have been keeping character diaries. After a brief introduction of the book, the group highlights different parts of the novel by having each student read a journal entry. The presentation concludes with a free verse poem created from the most powerful lines in their journals. An alternative to using journal lines is for students to choose a particularly powerful passage from the text and rearrange the lines to create a “found” poem (Bleekers 1996). In either case, students perform the poem in Readers Theater style. This means that all members share in the reading and certain lines are read in unison by the group in order to create emphasis. This example of a “found poem” originated from pages 130–131 of *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher.

#### **Whale Talk**

I never knew what it is to be human  
I’m just finding my way  
Mad at myself, my parents, my relatives, my teachers  
They never warned me that this kind of pain  
Even exists in the world  
Their true thoughts and feelings secret  
I walk outside and scream  
My anguish travels maybe two blocks

Whale songs travel for thousands of miles  
A cry unleashed  
Every whale in the ocean  
Will run into that song  
Whales don’t edit  
The joy of lovemaking  
The crippling heartache of a lost child  
All heard and understood  
No secrets  
Whale talk is the truth  
If you’re a whale  
You know exactly what it is to be you

**Figure 8.24** *Found poem from Whale Talk*

## Readers Theatre

### ***Watership Down, Chapter 2: “The Chief Rabbit”***

(adapted from pages 19–21)

*Introduction:* After Fiver’s horrific vision, the brothers try to warn the rest of the warren about the impending disaster. Bigwig, a close friend of Hazel’s and a respected Owsla member, uses his connections to arrange a meeting for them with the Chief Rabbit. Unfortunately, Hazel’s audience with the Chief Rabbit does not bring the results he had hoped for. Rather than taking Fiver’s prediction seriously, the Chief Rabbit treats the brothers as though they were suffering from over-active imaginations.

**Parts:** Chief Rabbit (Chief)  
Hazel  
Fiver  
Narrator (Narr)

Chief: Ah, Walnut. It is Walnut, isn’t it?

Hazel: Hazel

Chief: Hazel, of course. How very nice of you to come and see me. I knew your mother well. And your friend—

Hazel: My brother

Chief: Your brother . . .

Narr: Said the Threarah with the faintest suggestion of “Don’t correct me anymore, will you?” in his voice.

Chief: Do make yourselves comfortable. Have some lettuce.

Narr: The Chief Rabbit’s lettuce was stolen by the Owsla from a garden half a mile away across the fields. Outskirters seldom or never saw lettuce.

Chief: Now, how are things with you? Do tell me how I can help you.

Hazel: Well, sir . . .

Narr: Said Hazel rather hesitantly.

Hazel: It’s because of my brother—Fiver here. He can often tell when there’s anything bad about, and I’ve found him right again and again. He knew the flood was coming last autumn and sometimes he can tell where a wire has been set. And now he can sense a bad danger coming upon the warren.

Chief: A bad danger. Yes, I see. How very upsetting.

*(continued)*

**Figure 8.25** Watership Down Readers Theater example

Narr: Said the Chief Rabbit looking anything but upset.

Chief: Now, what sort of danger I wonder?

Narr: He looked at Fiver.

Fiver: I don't know. B-but it's bad. It's so bad that—it's very bad.

Narr: He concluded miserably.

Chief: Well, now, and what ought we to do about it, I wonder?

Fiver: Go away. Go away. All of us. Now. Thearah sir, we must all go away.

Chief: That's a rather tall order, isn't it? What do you think yourself?

Hazel: Well, sir, my brother doesn't really think about these feelings he gets. He just has the feelings, if you see what I mean. I'm sure you're the right person to decide what we ought to do.

Chief: Let's just think about this a moment, shall we? It's May, isn't it? Everyone's busy and most of the rabbits are enjoying themselves. No elil for miles, or so they tell me. No illness, good weather. And you want me to tell the warren that your brother here has got a hunch and we must all go traipsing across country to goodness knows where and risk the consequences, eh? What do you think they'll say?

Fiver: They'd take it from you.

Chief: Well, perhaps they would, perhaps they would. But I should have to consider it very carefully indeed.

Fiver: But there's no time, Thearah, sir. I can feel the danger like a wire round my neck—like a wire—Hazel, help!

Narr: He squealed and rolled over in the sand, kicking frantically, as a rabbit does in a snare. Hazel held him down with both forepaws and he grew quieter.

Hazel: I'm awfully sorry, Chief Rabbit. He gets like this sometimes. He'll be a all right in a minute.

Chief: What a shame! What a shame! Poor fellow, perhaps he ought to go home and rest. Yes, you'd better take him along now. Well, it's really been extremely good of you to come and see me, Walnut. I appreciate it very much indeed. And I shall think over all you've said most carefully, you can be quite sure of that. . . . Bigwig, just wait a moment, will you?

Narr: As Hazel and Fiver made their way dejectedly down the run outside the Thearah's burrow, they could just hear, from inside, the Chief Rabbit's voice assuming a rather sharper note. Bigwig, as he had predicted, was getting his head bitten off.

Figure 8.25 *Watership Down Readers Theater example (Continued)*

## Readers Theater Rubric

### Scripting

	1	2	3
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A few “alls”</li> <li>• Everyone has a part</li> <li>• Predictable script divisions—parts are all in big clumps or show repetitious order</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More “alls”</li> <li>• Everyone has a part</li> <li>• Parts are more split up—not predictable/repetitious</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Alls” are at the parts that need unity or emphasis</li> <li>• Parts for 2 or 3 in unison or echo</li> <li>• Line divisions play with words and emphasis, catch poem mood of text</li> </ul>

### Interpretation

	1	2	3
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some eye contact</li> <li>• Easily heard (outdoor voices)</li> <li>• Clear diction</li> <li>• Good posture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good eye contact with audience</li> <li>• Most lines convey emotion</li> <li>• Enthusiastic</li> <li>• Correct pacing</li> <li>• Facial expressions show emotion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotion comes through on all lines</li> <li>• Vocal control: variation in volume and pitch</li> <li>• Advanced pacing: speed up, slow down, pause—for emphasis</li> </ul>

(continued)

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Figure 8.26 Readers Theater rubric

Collective Performance	1	2	3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Well practiced, few stumbles</li> <li>• Group stands so that members can see/cue each other</li> <li>• No upstaging</li> <li>• Everyone knows where to stand</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good eye contact with each other</li> <li>• “Alls” are in unison</li> <li>• Individual parts read with emotion and confidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Alls” are precise</li> <li>• Lines feed off each other—smooth transitions</li> <li>• Choral parts ring with feeling</li> <li>• Script is close to memorized</li> </ul>	
<b>Originality</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stationary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some movement and gestures</li> <li>• High energy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Movement and gestures regularly incorporated</li> <li>• Play with levels/line arrangement</li> <li>• Props</li> <li>• Something “new”</li> </ul>	

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**Figure 8.26** Readers Theater rubric (Continued)

### Theater Tableau Rubric—Actor

Facial Expressions	3	4	5
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Face can be seen clearly</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Some emotion, fits context</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Clearly identifiable, exaggerated expression, accurate characterization</li></ul>
Pose	3	4	5
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Remains frozen entire time</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Identifiable gestures, fits context</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Exaggerated gestures, accurate characterization</li></ul>

### Theater Tableau Rubric—Narrator

Reading Pace	3	4	5
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Slow enough to hear all words easily</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Uses pauses appropriately</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Varies pace to intensify emotion and emphasis</li></ul>
Interpretation	3	4	5
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reads loudly and clearly</li><li>• No stumbles</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Moments of identifiable, appropriate emotion</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pitch and volume vary for emphasis and intensity</li><li>• Feeling/emotion constant</li></ul>

(continued)

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Figure 8.27 Tableau rubric

## Theater Tableau Rubric—Group

<b>Blocking</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All actors fully visible</li> <li>• Tight compositions</li> <li>• Well practiced</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Body heights staggered</li> <li>• Spacing shows relationships between characters</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each frame is substantially different</li> </ul>	
<b>Scene Selection</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Makes sense to those who have not read the book</li> <li>• Holds the audience's interest</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scene is important to the story</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scene reflects high drama, conflict, action</li> </ul>	
<b>Script</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Key information" introduction given before tableau is performed</li> <li>• 5–6 Frames presented</li> <li>• Script is typed/written out</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scene progression/flow makes sense</li> <li>• Uneven editing (some good "captions," some too long)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Well edited</li> <li>• Captions fit scene perfectly with tableau frame</li> </ul>	
<b>Props/Costumes</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slight suggestion of character/scene</li> <li>• Contributes positively</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definite planning and thought reflected</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creativity and obvious outside effort reflected</li> </ul>	

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Figure 8.27 Tableau rubric (Continued)

*Introduction:* Our tableau is from Chapter 10 when Tim Johnson, the mad dog, wanders into the neighborhood. In these scenes you are about to see, Scout and Jem will learn something astonishing about their father. We chose courage as the motif that best reflects this part of the book because Atticus showed courage when he took the gun from Mr. Heck Tate.

**Scene #1**

One Saturday Jem and Scout decided to go exploring with their air rifles to see if they could find a rabbit or squirrel.

"Watcha looking at?"

"Mr. Tim Johnson, down yonder," Jem replied.

"What's he doing?"

"I don't know Scout; we better go home and tell Cal."

**Scene #2**

When they arrived at the house, Jem described the dog's unusual behavior to Cal.

"Are you telling me a story, Jem Finch?"

"No Cal, I swear I'm not!"

**Scene #3**

When Calpurnia saw the dog, she stared and then grabbed the children by the shoulders and ran them home.

She shouted into the telephone, "Mr. Finch! This is Cal. There's a mad dog down the street, and he's headed this way!" She hung up and called Miss Eula May, the town operator. Cal told her, "Can you call Miss Rachel and Miss Stephanie, and tell them a mad dog's a comin'."

**Scene #4**

Mr. Heck Tate was the sheriff of Maycomb County. He carried a heavy rifle as he and Atticus stepped out of the car.

"Stay inside, son," said Atticus. "Where is he, Cal?"

Calpurnia pointed down the street at Tim Johnson.

**Scene #5**

"Take the rifle, Mr. Finch," Mr. Tate told Atticus.

"You know I can't shoot that well. I'll hit the Radley's house!"

Atticus slowly took the gun and walked to the middle of the street. He bent down, adjusted his glasses, and aimed the gun. After what seemed like forever, Atticus brought the gun to his shoulder and the rifle cracked.

**Scene #6**

Tim Johnson leaped, flopped over and crumpled on the sidewalk. He didn't know what hit him.

"You were a little to the right, Mr. Finch," Heck Tate called.

"Always was," answered Atticus. "If I had my 'druthers I'd take a shotgun."

Jem was paralyzed.

**Figure 8.28** *Tableau script example taken from To Kill a Mockingbird*

### ***Readers Theater Project***

Another oral interpretation project I like is Readers Theater. The group starts by taking a high-interest excerpt from their novel and dividing it into parts. An ideal excerpt has a mixture of dialogue and narration. For example, let's say an excerpt contained two characters speaking to one another plus narration. If the Literature Circle group contained five members, two members would take the speaking parts while the remaining three would divide up the narration (Latrobe 1993). Along with creating the Readers Theater piece, students would also need to write an introduction. (See Figures 8.25 and 8.26, pp. 181–184.)

### ***Tableau Project***

A good drama project is for students to take an important passage and turn it into a series of four or five tableau scenes. While one student reads the text, the others create the scene by freezing in position (Wilhelm 1998, 54). This project requires students to be ruthless in their scripting since the narration is reduced to a series of captions. Also, students must think seriously about the accuracy of their blocking and characterization; this requires them to reread the text carefully. As in the readers theater project, the tableau also requires an introduction to the scene. It's fun to videotape these, because upon playback, the getting into position movement is eliminated and the audience just gets to see the tableau with the narration. However, I must repeat, for the kids to be successful at any of these three performance activities, they already have to know how to write found poetry, create a readers theater script, or block tableau scenes. (See Figures 8.27 and 8.28, pp. 185–187.)

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## **Parting Words**

Always remember that Literature Circles will probably work poorly before they work well. When it comes down to it, a highly functioning Literature Circle is a complex endeavor. It requires thoughtful preparation and skillful discussion. Unless most of your students have already participated in well-structured Literature Circles, it's going to take some time to lead them to true enlightenment. Sometimes it takes a complete Literature Circle cycle before the kids finally understand what makes them work. I recently completed my Holocaust Literature Circle unit with my freshmen. When I asked them to suggest something that would make the next Literature Circles more successful, most wrote something about how they never realized how much the quality of their notes affected the quality of discussion. Well, duh! But as you well know, the only truth to an adolescent is something found through self-realization. Celebrate the positives publicly and greet the disasters as opportunities to problem solve. Observe carefully and keep revisiting the skills that seem weak or lacking. Never forget to have students monitor and process their group's functioning as well as their growth as individual members. Gary wrote this letter after participating in several different Literature Circles over the course of his freshman year.

Dear Mrs. Steineke,

The skill that I have most improved on is support and friendliness. In the first semester, I did not get used to that very well, so I concentrated on that skill the most

*(continued)*

**Figure 8.29** Gary's Literature Circle Processing Letter

second semester. It helped because I got that checked off more on my sheet than I did before. I have been able to relate to other people's ideas better too. By doing that, I mean I can see their point of view and look at both sides. What I need to concentrate on the most next year will be follow-up questions. I did not do well on that either semester because I probably wasn't prepared enough and couldn't think of topics that related to the conversation.

I will be best remembered for my questions that related to the person more than the book. For example, "What would you do in Lennie's place at that time" or "Do you think that was wrong of Curley to go after Lennie?" Those questions give you more of an understanding of the person you are talking to, their thinking processes, and even how they react in real life. A lot of people's opinions reflect how they are in life. If somebody says, "That was mean of Curley to go after Lennie," they are probably a nice person and forgive others for their mistakes. If they say, "Curley should have finished off Lennie," they are probably a little too aggressive and would probably be good at being a manager for a company.

I have learned *many* things working with my group members. Each person is better at some skills and weak in others and some people have fewer weak skills than others. To learn successfully with your group members, you must use everyone's strengths. You must also give in and listen to their reasoning as if it were your own so that you don't take their differing opinions as an insult to your ideas. There is probably just about no one that would have the exact same opinion as someone else for every question, so differences are part of being in a group. Therefore, you just have to say, "That is a good point; that might be why he did that" or something like that. The variation in people's thinking and questions is what makes your group better not worse. If you have a different idea, you should state it so there will be a *discussion*, and not everyone just agreeing to someone's answers. In my opinion, that is what makes a group succeed: when everyone is not afraid to say what's on his mind and not be worried about another person putting them down or arguing with them.

Sincerely,

Gary

Figure 8.29 (Continued)

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## Resources

Bleeker, Gerrit and Barbara Bleeker. 1996. "Responding to Young Adult Fiction Through Writing Poetry: Trying to Understand a Mole." *The ALAN Review* (Spring): 38–40.

This is a fantastic article that offers several different ideas for connecting the writing of poetry with reading novels. The even better news is that you can actually find this article on line! <<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/alan-review.html>>.

Burke, Kay. 1993. *The Mindful School: How to Assess Thoughtful Outcomes*. Palatine, IL: IRI/Skylight Publishing, Inc.

When I started diving into alternative assessment, this book was my bible. All of the chapters are short and practical with lots of examples: rubrics, checklists, reflection sheets, you name it.

Daniels, Harvey. 2002. *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Book Clubs and Reading Groups*. York, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

Daniels is to Literature Circles what Atwell is to reading/writing workshop (do they still have that analogy section on the SAT test?). I found this book an invaluable resource on the topic. Your library is incomplete without it.

Dixon, Neill, Anne Davies, and Colleen Politano. 1996. *Learning with Readers Theatre*. Winnipeg, Canada: Peguis Publishers.

If you want to dive into the dramatic depths of readers theatre, this book offers specific tips on oral interpretation, scripting, and blocking. It is very thorough.

Latrobe, Kathy. 1993. "Readers Theatre as a Way of Learning." *The ALAN Review* (Winter): 46–50. Bad news. This article is going to be hard to find since the online version of ALAN doesn't go back this far. You'll have to search the bound periodicals of a university library for this one. However, once you find it, you'll be rewarded by great ideas on how to turn any novel into a Readers Theatre script.

Santa, Carol M., Lynn T. Havens, and Evelyn M. Maycumber. 1996. *Project CRISS: Creating Independence Through Student-owned Strategies*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

This handbook is available only to those who go through the CRISS training. However, if you are looking to expand your repertoire of reading strategies for adolescents, particularly those that cut across all curricular areas, you are looking in the right spot. Here's the web address: <[www.projectcriss.org/](http://www.projectcriss.org/)>.

Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. 1998. "Not for Wimps! Using Drama to Enrich the Reading of YA Literature." *The ALAN Review* (Spring): 52–55.

This article explains the steps for creating tableau scenes as well as several other drama-inspired reading strategies. The good news is that you can find this article online. <<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/alan-review.html>>.

## **Workshops/Courses**

The Walloon Institute 847-441-6638 or <[www.walloon.com](http://www.walloon.com)>.

This institute, run by Harvey Daniels of Literature Circle fame, is language arts/integrated curriculum heaven. A week at the institute offers keynote speakers, a variety of break-out sessions, and daily afternoon strands devoted to your particular grade level and learning interest. This past summer offered over twenty different workshops per day. Topics included reading and writing workshop, Literature Circles, poetry writing, dramatic performance, portfolio creation, and interdisciplinary teaming.

## **Supplies**

*Transparency Spinner*: available at <[www.kaganonline.com](http://www.kaganonline.com)> or by calling Kagan Publishing at 1-800-933-2667.