

Literature Circles / Discussion Groups

See our [General Information and Classroom Management Suggestions](#)

As our students spend less time engaging in face-to-face communication with others, and more time in front of televisions, computers, and video games the need to emphasize oral communication, listening skills, and focused social interaction with others becomes apparent. These skills play a central role in students' learning in all areas of the curriculum. Teachers may use the literature circles strategy to emphasize the development of these skills (see expectations below), or focus instruction with other expectations in mind.

Every literacy activity involves a myriad of skills and potential areas on which to focus instruction. The curriculum expectations listed below are focused on **oral and visual communication**, and although the codes apply to Ontario teachers, the expectations are suitable for students everywhere.

Curriculum Continuum:

Expectations: Activity expectations based on the grades 2, 4, 6, and 8 curriculums.

Students will:

1. Oral & Visual Communication

- (2e50) ... talk about characters and situations in stories, and information in non-fiction materials, and relate them to personal experience;
- (2e60) ... participate in group discussions, demonstrating a sense of when to speak, when to listen, and how much to say;
- (4e53) ... ask questions on a variety of topics and respond appropriately to the questions of others;
- (4e55) ... express and respond to ideas and opinions concisely and clearly;
- (4e66) ... listen to others and stay on topic in group discussions;
- (6e52) ... demonstrate the ability to concentrate by identifying main points and staying on topic;
- (6e61) ... use constructive strategies in small-group discussions (e.g., invite other members to contribute; ask questions to clarify a point; negotiate to find a basis for agreement).
- (8e47) ... listen attentively to organize and classify information and to clarify thinking;
- (8e49) ... express and respond to a range of ideas and opinions concisely, clearly, and appropriately.

About Literature Circles

(a discussion group literacy activity)

Literature circles promote the pleasure of sharing reading experiences and thinking about what has been read through discussion and the opportunity to speak and be heard. This strategy encourages students to dig deeper into their books through questions and comments from group members and teachers. Literature circles usually comprise of three to five students - too many could result in less chance of being heard and feeling comfortable contributing, and partner work lacks the group diversity and dynamics that is central to this strategy.

It takes time to establish literature circles, and once established they tend to evolve from groups of students retelling the story read, to groups intensively talking and thinking about books. This includes discussing and comparing various aspects of books and making personal connections. Literature groups can become so motivated that the groups are totally student directed and monitored, with high levels of enthusiasm and commitment.

The reading preparation for literature circles is usually done independently before meeting for discussion. Younger students however may require, or prefer, reading with a partner or in a guided reading group to prepare for their heterogeneous literature circle.

This strategy is suitable for students of all ages. Responses to, and interpretations of, books help students of any age gain a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. (Please see page 4 of this document for an organizer of **Literature Circle Possibilities & Responses**. For useful professional resources about literature circles, please use the search engine on this site and type in the keyword 'circles'.)

Primary Literature Circles - Learning The Strategy

Teacher-directed whole group work will help students to understand the procedure and purpose of literature circles. Teachers may wish to begin by sharing a read-aloud and then sending groups of students off to retell the story to one another, and discuss the accuracy of the retellings. To demonstrate the difference between retelling and voicing an opinion about the story heard, teachers may ask various questions that will generate a personal reaction to the story, and hopefully create fodder for discussion. By observing the students in groups, the teacher will be able to judge at which level his/her students are approaching this activity, and which direction to take in the establishment of literature circles.

The following are some example activities that may help students to work more effectively in literature circles.

1. Purpose: To learn how to note sections of interest, or details/elements of a story students have been asked to focus on when preparing for literature circles.

Teacher read-aloud / or text everyone is familiar with → Teacher models → All discuss → Students experiment.

The whole class could discuss story elements in general, (or those being focused on) in a book or poem read by all of the students. After the initial reading, teachers may model rereading to prepare for circle discussions. This preparation during rereading may include : answering questions about the story; writing a synopsis or illustrating the story for retelling in the group; jot notes on a bookmark relating to a focus and listing page numbers for easy reference; writing ideas, thoughts and opinions in a response journal for sharing; writing questions to answer ones'

own queries or to get others thinking. (Older students may decide if the rereading step is necessary for them. They may want to prepare for discussion during their first reading of a new text.) After whole class discussion, students should attempt a method of preparing for literature circles. Working with a partner encourages further discussion about the process they are experimenting with.

(The resource, *Literature Circles by Paziotopoulos & Kroll*, suggests the use of blank bookmarks with the story element or focus listed on the top. Students jot notes related to the focus as they read and use the bookmark to guide their literature circle discussion. This resource also suggests a clear procedure for implementing literature circles in primary classrooms and is available on this site.)

2. Purpose: To allow the teacher to observe, monitor, facilitate learning, solve problems or join in on discussions as literature circles get established in the classroom. (The teacher may want to start with one group at a time, adding groups as he/she sees fit.)

Teacher read-aloud / or text everyone has read → Students prepare for 'circles' with partner → Conduct literature circles all with the same focus → Teacher facilitates learning as circle discussions are in progress.

Literature circles (group members may be assigned at first), could meet after a common read-aloud or book, and all be focusing on the same story element or response activity. Their preparation before meeting in groups could be with a partner, discussing their thinking as they jot notes, etc, about the book. The teacher could circulate monitoring both the preparation, and actual literature circle discussion time - drawing the class's attention to good ideas and thinking, as well as noteworthy group interactions and behaviors that will assist in the establishment of productive literature circles in the classroom. Learning Log notes could be taken at the end of the session.

3. Purpose: To gradually allow the literature circle to become a more student-centered and controlled learning structure.

Students read own text and prepare for 'circles' → Literature circle meetings (according to schedule or workboard sign-up) → Teacher or group assigned reading and focus for next meeting.

As students become more familiar with the strategy, they may choose from amongst three or four books related by author, genre, theme, or illustrator to read and then discuss during literature circle time. The teacher may wish the students to assume certain roles within the literature circle structure such as, discussion director, word wizard, etc. to encourage fuller participation of all members. (Later, these roles may be assigned and swapped by the group members themselves.) When the strategy is secure, teachers may wish to add it to the class's literacy activity inventory and display it as an activity choice on the class workboard during language/reading periods.

An excellent resource for the use of this strategy with primary through to college-level students is, *Literature Circles - Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* by Harvey Daniels. This resource is available from this site.

Literature Circles For Older Students

Teachers of older students may wish to read the above activities for the establishment of literature circles and use or adapt them for their classes.

When students begin to read longer novels or chapter books, they may meet following:
the reading of each chapter ;
after each reading session - even if an entire chapter has not been read, or if it involves the reading of more than one chapter ;
a specified number of times within a week.

Older students can do their silent reading and journal notes/entries in preparation for literature circles, in class or at home for homework. Students having difficulty reading a specified text may listen to and read along with a taped version of the book. This allows all members of heterogeneous literature circles to participate equally in discussions, learn from each other and promote self- esteem.

The literature circle structure is very flexible and adaptable. There are many ways to use and institute this strategy within any classroom.

(Please see page 5 of this document for an organizer of some **Literature Circle Possibilities & Responses**. Also, please use the search engine on this site and type in the keyword 'circles' for useful resources related to this strategy.)

Assessment

The assessment of literature circle activity may take many forms. Students of all ages must be aware of which aspect of their literature circle activity to focus and concentrate on. A teacher's expectations or objectives for the activity must be clear. Please see suggested expectations on page one. A teacher may choose to take anecdotal notes, use a checklist, devise a marking rubric, or merely assess the written output of the students.

If students are aware of expectations and work to achieve proficiency levels, teachers can make more meaningful assessments that will lead to appropriate instruction, which in turn should lead to significant gains in student achievement along with greater enjoyment of the literature being studied.

Literature Circle/Discussion Group Possibilities

Reading / Input	Type of Reading	Response Ideas <small>Usually completed in heterogeneous groupings.</small>
<p>A video ----- /</p> <p>Teacher read-aloud</p> <p>A book - picture book - novel</p> <p>A poem</p> <p>A book- informational</p> <p>An article - magazine - newspaper</p>	<p>Students may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • read alone silently in the classroom / at home • read with a partner • read in a small group (if this situation is not stressful) • listen to and follow along with a tape (especially good for ESL students) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell about the book and discuss what may happen next, if you are still reading it. • Discuss your response to what has been read to date. (What you noticed, understood, did not understand, liked, disliked, etc.) • Relate the book (meaning, message or events) to your own life. (Does it have an affect on you, change you? Do you agree / disagree with the actions of the characters? How would you have reacted in the same situation? Does the book remind you of your own life?) • Share favourite / exciting / funny / sad / descriptive parts of the text. Discuss the reasons for your choices. Compare them to other group members' choices. • Think about the characters, setting, and main idea of the book. (Do you know anyone like the main character? Have you been to a place similar to one mentioned in the book? Have you read a book similar to this one?) • Discuss the genre of the book, elements noted, and common characteristics, i.e. main character, other characters, setting, plotline, type of problem, how the problem if is fixed, climax, ending. • Compare - versions of a story / fairy tale or books by the same author. • Do you think this book is well written? Can you give proof and examples from the text? • What is this book really about? Why do you think the author wrote it? Do you agree with the author's point of view? • Can you do anything in real life to help solve the type of problem described in the book?
<p>VARIATIONS Students may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • all read the same title. • read different titles within a theme. • read any of selected titles by one author. Try to have two students in each circle who read the same title. • read writing that belongs to a certain genre - folk tales, science fiction, mysteries, biographies, etc. • follow an individualized reading program and bring whatever they are reading to group. • decide what to discuss at the next meeting, assign roles, amount of reading, deadlines etc. when they are experienced and confident with the strategy. <p>NOTE: ESL students may read a book in their first language allowing them to participate more fully in the literature circle discussion conducted in English. (Many students speak and understand more English than they can read and write.)</p>		