

# Big-Idea Groups

## Scaffolded Reading Instruction Where Engagement Rules

Do we really need another approach to small-group reading instruction? After all, we can choose from literature circles, book clubs, guided reading, and strategy groups—to name a few. As I began to write this book, what kept me saying, “Yes, teachers do need this twist we’ve been using in Connecticut schools,” is that the lesson framework we share gets us back to the core reason we read anything: to better understand life and the big questions within it. And it gets us back to the core reason we teach: because each lesson helps students approach reading a text with a little more engagement, confidence, and collaboration than occurs with many other small-group protocols.

Colleen, Paraskevi, and I teach in Connecticut, in the luminous shadow of the famous aviation engineer Igor Sikorsky, who designed the first helicopter and lived in nearby Stratford. He once said, “Whatever contribution I have been able to make to aeronautics has been a product of diverse intellects working together in freedom and harmony” (Calhoun & Knapp, 2004, p. 37). I’ve always admired that quote, because *freedom* and *harmony* are all too rare in our discussions about teaching reading—perhaps especially the concept of freedom.

When I give professional development workshops, I ask teachers, “As you think about your own classroom, how much freedom of thought do your students have in the day?”

Do their students have opportunities to

- ▶ Take risks in response to texts?
- ▶ Engage in inventive thinking about what an author might be getting at, shaded by their own experiences?
- ▶ Expect that a book is meant to engage their emotions?

Most teachers shake their heads, no. We are all feeling such pressure to have students comprehend at high levels, but we may be actually creating conditions for students to disengage from reading because we’ve overfocused the lens.

A final set of questions to ponder: If we spend the majority of small-group discussion time nose down, attending to what the text says, are we neglecting something important about the reading process? Are we neglecting the reader?

Author Lois Lowry wasn't asked this question per se, but in her 1994 Newbery Medal acceptance speech for *The Giver* (1993), she sure does remind us that when it comes to a book's meaning, the reader matters: "Those of you who hoped that I would stand here tonight and reveal the 'true' ending, the 'right' interpretation of the ending, will be disappointed. There isn't one. There's a right one for each of us, and it depends on our own beliefs, our own hopes."

In big-idea lessons, students figure out what the text says and means, and do all the interpretive, evaluative, and critical response work of best practice, but what sets this approach apart is that it builds in more room for students to bring their own personal beliefs and hopes into the response process. It embraces the transactional theory of reading, and as explained in this chapter, we have designed interactions with texts that tap both the efferent and aesthetic responses defined by Rosenblatt (1995; Rosenblatt & Progressive Education Association, 1938). Students are given the chance to bring their own aesthetic, personal, and emotional response into discussion from the outset of the lesson design, yet are guided to tether it to universal understandings of concepts like fairness, justice, and love. And when they read a text, they learn to adjust their response to the information and ideas on the page.

We devised the big-idea framework based on the questions teachers often raise about deepening comprehension during book discussion:

- ▶ How can I see more interaction during small-group reading sessions?
- ▶ How can I make responding to texts hands-on, literally, for students who need it to be as concrete as possible?
- ▶ How can I get students to discuss a text with one another and not through me?
- ▶ How can I encourage deep thinking?
- ▶ How can I assess my students for thinking across levels of comprehension and levels of thinking?
- ▶ How can I get students to see the small-group work as a session that links to other parts of the day and night (their independent reading, their homework, their dinner-table talk)?

## The Ultimate Goal: Real Student Independence

Behind all these questions is a teacher's desire for *students* to own more of the learning, something more and more educators are concerned about. There seems to be a groundswell of voices around this issue of student independence. In her book *Mindsets and Moves: Strategies That Help Readers Take Charge* (2016), Gravity Goldberg goes so far as to call it an ownership crisis and puts forth a wise first step when she says, "We have to step back so our readers can step forward" (p. 2). And she's right. We all want to witness that "aha" moment, when we see our students are using what we've taught them on their own, but it's easier said than done.

How do we turn small-group reading sessions into high-spirited discussions among students working together? How do we get students to reach out—sitting on the edge of their seats, fired up with thought and opinions, and fueled by curiosity?

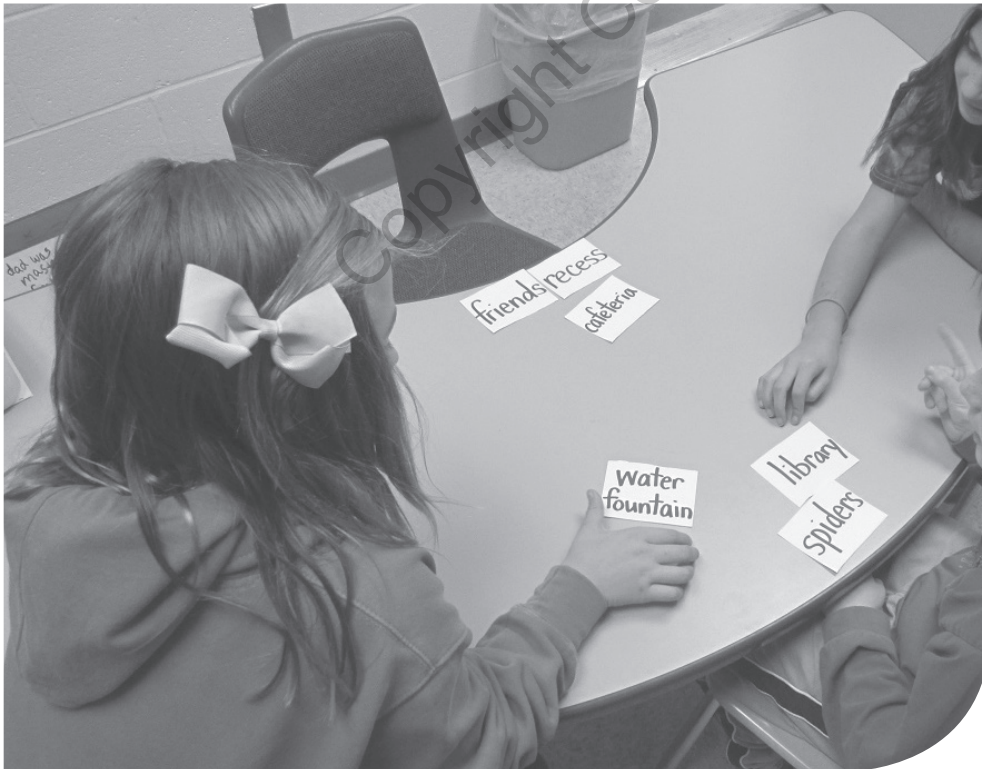
## Now Look at Student Independence During Big-Idea Groups

"Reading and writing float on a sea of talk," educator James Britton famously said in 1970 (p. 164), and we hope that as you look at the following photos, of what my

colleagues and I are doing with small-group reading and discussion, you will sense the energy of students' talk. See what you notice (or, rather, what you *don't* see!).



Inviting readers to think first.



Students have time to ponder and change opinions.

The students go off to work on their own and hold themselves responsible to the task and ideas.

## Four Facets of the Framework

**1. The texts are deep—and brief.** The first ingredient is a set of carefully selected, brief but theme-rich, stand-alone texts or excerpts from longer works that provide students with sufficient challenge. When I travel to their classrooms, teachers often ask if I can provide them with exciting and discussion-worthy texts. This is where the journey to this new brand of small-group reading groups started for me: In order to be a real resource as a curriculum leader in language arts, I was faced with supplying teachers with engaging texts that would provide sufficient stretch for students. What I found is that discussion-worthy texts are those that are rich in their ideas and invitations to inference. So, as you will see in this book, the texts are often spare, but the thinking around them is always robust. The first one you'll come across in this book? "Humpty Dumpty."

**2. Students converse—but with the teacher in the wings.** What didn't you see in those photos? The teacher! The teacher is coming on and off stage from the wings, modeling his or her thinking when needed, but the key is that students are asked to think, talk, and ruminate *on their own—even before they read the text*. So the second ingredient is to have students lead their own thinking and reading sessions. Stepping back allows students to take over the task because you trust the ideas you've put in front of the students. Yes, it is a big measuring cup of collaborative learning, during which students are reading, writing, speaking, and listening, bringing their own selves to bear on the topic, first. The research shows that students learn more deeply when they are engaged in complex tasks that involve collaboration, and peer collaboration is a high-impact practice, meaning that, when implemented well, it brings about a year or more of growth in students (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016).

**3. The conversation starter is high—but low.** The teachers I work with always give me an amused, puzzled expression when I mention this ingredient. What I mean is that the spark—the initial prompt—has a high degree of reliability for students and a high level of thinking attached to it, but it's low-hanging fruit in that it is accessible and taps into students' lived experience and knowledge. For me, the spark happens when we make the discussion more interesting from the get-go, when we dare to lead with a well-considered, debatable idea or topic that can be talked about *in advance of the text*. In a way, this prereading discussion question helps students do their own frontloading, building peer-to-peer understandings that will be mirrored and refracted by the text the teacher has selected.

**4. Students move toward conceptual knowledge—but with physical tools.** The fourth ingredient: concrete, touchable tools so students of any reading level can literally have something to hang onto as they work to grasp abstract textual ideas. My colleagues and I have been bowled over by how much these materials help advanced and striving readers demonstrate how their thinking changes as they read and talk. There should be ideas on the table worth discussing—ideas you can literally reach out and touch. Word sorts, graphic organizers, and concept maps all have strong research support (Fisher et al., 2016).

## How Big-Idea Groups Fit Within Other Small-Group Models

Big-idea groups are another tool in your toolbox, along with guided reading, close reading, literature circles, book clubs, strategy groups, and the whole-class novel—all *choices* that we make at different junctures for different reasons, and for different

students. Each of these formats offers a different pathway toward the same goal: to have students understand the reading process and use it independently. As a teacher, it's your knowledge of your readers that will guide you in deciding which students need which format when.

## A Few Important Frameworks for Reading Closely

We think of big-idea groups as scaffolded, small-group reading instruction, meaning the teacher has carefully choreographed the reading experience. We also would say these groups fall under the umbrella of close reading, if we define close reading as an approach that has been around since Gutenberg invented the printing press and people began poring over pages. That is, whenever readers read and reread a text, analyze it, and think about how and why the author put it together, they are close reading. Big-idea groups adapt and borrow from several other comprehension approaches that have been described over the years to help students read deeply and acquire the behaviors and habits of insightful reading. The one that most informed our thinking goes way back to 1969. Yes, the same year we landed a man on the moon, Russell G. Stauffer gave the comprehension field the Directed Reading Thinking Activity (DRTA). We'll describe it in more detail in Chapter 2 when we discuss lesson design. For now, and especially apt for literary reading, we'd like to mention the brilliance of Judith Langer's envisionment model, also known as the four stances. In this highly influential research and writing, Langer (2000) described a process readers go through, and distilled all the mind work to four critical stances as they react to and read a text:

1. Inviting Initial Understandings
2. Developing Interpretations
3. Taking a Critical Stance
4. Stocktaking

Questioning the Author (QtA) (Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan, & Worthy, 1997) is another important protocol with which to be familiar, and it reawakened the teaching field's attention to the author behind a text. It works especially well for developing nonfiction comprehension. First introduced in the 1990s, QtA galvanized elementary school teachers and students reading and rereading passages, and like today's close reading, the process requires teachers to know the text well enough to devise questions ahead of the lesson—for example, "What is the author trying to say? Why do you think the author used the following phrase? Does this make sense to you?" With QtA, teachers need to model when needed; students in turn need to actively engage and ask questions of the author and the text—for example, "What is the author's message? Does the author explain this clearly? How does this connect to what the author said earlier?"

Taffy Raphael's Question Answer Relationships, more commonly known as QAR (Raphael & Au, 2005), is another procedure that helps students engage with a complex text's ideas, reckon with the author, and work through to understanding using an ordered universe of questions. Raphael's four types of questions, in a sense, were the forerunners of the close reading protocol:

- ▶ **Right There Questions.** Readers find the answer "right there" in the text, usually in the same sentence as words from the question. These are literal-level questions.



- ▶ **Think and Search Questions.** The answer is in the text, but readers must search for it in different parts of the text and put the ideas together. These are inferential-level questions.
- ▶ **Author and Me Questions.** Readers use a combination of the author’s ideas and their own to answer the question. These questions combine inferential- and application-level questions.
- ▶ **On My Own Questions.** Readers use their own ideas to answer the question; sometimes they don’t need to read the text to answer it. These are application- and evaluation-level questions.

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (2015) developed a valuable new construct for these kinds of questions with the following framework for text-dependent questions:

<b>Key Detail Questions</b>	are the who/what/when/where/why/how questions that are essential to understanding the meaning of the passage.
<b>Vocabulary and Text Structure Questions</b>	bridge explicit with implicit meanings, especially in focusing on words and phrases, as well as the way the author has organized the information. Text structure questions may include text features and discourse structures (problem/solution, cause/effect, compare/contrast, etc.).
<b>Author’s Purpose Questions</b>	draw the reader’s attention to genre, point of view, multiple perspectives, and critical literacies, such as speculating on alternative accounts of the same event.
<b>Inferential Questions</b>	challenge students to examine the implicitly stated ideas, arguments, or key details in the text.
<b>Opinion and Intertextual Questions</b>	allow students to use their foundational knowledge of one text to assert their opinions or to make connections to other texts, using the target text to support their claims.

Source: Fisher & Frey (2015).

## The Effective Environment Around Close Reading

In *Rigorous Reading* (2013), Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher provide a clear, five-point framework for helping students understand complex texts that is tremendously valuable in helping educators see all the classroom moves that go on in close reading to create effective reading instruction.

**Access point 1:** Purpose and Modeling

**Access point 2:** Close and Scaffolded Reading Instruction

**Access point 3:** Collaborative Conversations

**Access point 4:** An Independent Reading Staircase

**Access point 5:** Demonstrating Understanding and Assessing Performance

What we have observed is that teachers sometimes neglect to give enough attention to the first access point—purpose and modeling—so it’s something we kept in mind as we developed our big-idea framework, this notion that teachers need to be explicit

about stating the goal of the work, and showing students what it looks and sounds like, whenever necessary.

As we watched the second access point—close and scaffolded reading instruction—play out in classrooms, we saw that teachers, for whatever reason, were controlling the process to a degree that frankly left too little time for the collaborative conversations. Our hunch is that, as teachers deepen their experience with close reading, they will loosen the reins a bit to ensure sufficient time for students to do the work of responding to complex texts. Our structure attempts to hasten this process of handing over the work to peer-led and independent students.

P. David Pearson, in his Jeanne S. Chall lecture, *Theory and Practice in Reading Comprehension: Reflections on a Half-Century of Work* (2015), addressed the ongoing need for teachers to strike the right balance between “too much” privileging of students’ experience during text discussion and “too little.” Building on the current question protocols in the field articulated by Fisher and Frey (2015), Shanahan (2015a), and others, Pearson offered the following set of questions:

- ▶ What does the text say?
- ▶ What does the text mean?
- ▶ What does the text do?

And

- ▶ What do you think?
- ▶ Why do you think that?

To us, the last two bullet points are especially resonant, as they speak to both the renewed attention to *students’* doing the comprehension work (Taberski, 2015) and the ongoing, valid caveat that students must base their thinking on the text.

## What About Guided Reading and Strategic Reading?

Where does guided reading fit into the current landscape of small-group instruction? In our view, this approach is effective for Grades 3–6 students who need significant teacher guidance on knowing and using reading skills and strategies. Guided reading offers a framework for gathering students *at a similar reading level and skill need* into a small group to read a common-level text.

Strategic reading is most often implemented in strategy groups, which are formed on the basis of which students need to work on a particular reading strategy. They are based on the important comprehension work of the 1980s that identified 10 key metacognitive skills (Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman, 2011).

In big-idea groups, a teacher selects a text for discussion and may consult Lexile levels or Fountas and Pinnell levels to determine a text that is sufficiently challenging, but doesn’t use it to form groups of readers all at that particular reading level. And in big-idea groups, the metacognitive strategies are addressed within the big-idea framework but are not the organizing purpose for the group or the purpose for the work.

Guided reading is the most common small-group practice in elementary schools currently. To some degree, it gained ascendance because with the response-to-intervention (RTI) initiative, many educators viewed the guided reading model as a natural fit to solve the issue of coherence of teaching and learning over time. RTI is a highly effective initiative—but in our view, guided reading wasn’t meant to be the one and only small-group approach beyond Grade 2—the marketplace made it so. By

## How Big-Idea Groups Compare to Guided Reading and Strategy Groups

Guided Reading	Big-Idea Groups	Strategy Group
The teacher uses oral prompts to promote strategic thinking.	<b>Students use sliding scale visuals to speak about, synthesize, and challenge thinking across time and text(s).</b>	The teacher uses coaching to model or correct strategy use.
The teacher does most of the talking, and most talk goes from teacher to student and back.	<b>The teacher uses a quick introduction centered on meaning or models the thinking needed to achieve the task. Students read and work together on a big idea. The teacher facilitates conversation across students. Ideas are first debated and then challenged.</b>	The teacher models a strategy, and students take on the work. Most talk goes through the teacher.
The teacher stays with the group for the entire lesson. The teacher coaches students on reading behaviors as they arise.	<b>The teacher leaves the group to grapple with new ideas and apply strategies and self-directed thinking. Feedback sessions take place over time, promoting independence and deeper thinking through rumination.</b>	The teacher stays with the group for the entire lesson. The teacher links strategy to independent text.
Students practice in instructional-level texts.	<b>Students work in instructional- and independent-level texts.</b>	Students practice in independent-level texts.
The teacher develops an introduction and purpose for reading.	<b>The teacher draws purpose out of students and sets up a way to synthesize their thinking over the text sample, which transfers to all reading. Purpose is always related to deeper thinking when dealing with ideas, words, and personal expression.</b>	The teacher shares the strategy and how it relates to transfer texts. Reading purpose links to the strategy use teachers want to see in readers.

Grade 3, our instructional time with our student readers has to look and feel a little differently than it did in Grades K–2. For many students, the heavy teaching emphasis on decoding, word knowledge, and general understanding is largely behind them. The model of guided reading, as a reading recovery lesson, is largely inappropriate for most readers in the intermediate grades (Burkins & Croft, 2010).

When our students have to take on longer, more complex texts, they are most likely ready for greater independence—and greater emotional and intellectual discussion. Yet the commercially produced guided reading programs have led to skewed implementation of some worthwhile practices. We say this out of respect for Fountas and Pinnell (1996), the foundational authors of guided reading, because to a large degree it is hard to control how protocols get implemented. Put bluntly, too often these approaches tend to hinder intermediate-grade students' reading independence rather than provide pathways to it.

In Grades 3–6, these approaches are powerful, *but for a select group of students* who need attention to foundational skills (decoding, fluency, and summarizing) or for strategic teaching. We don't think it works as the default approach for all students.

We want the time students spend in school to be devoted to reading real literature. Instead, with guided reading programs used as the reading curriculum, students are nose down in leveled readers often written by freelance education writers rather than trade book authors. And, to make matters worse, students are given the impression that they can only read books at their current reading level. If you think back to your own childhood, you can probably point to that amazing trade book you read on your own, well into the night, that was, who knows, level Z, but it didn't matter one bit. *The Godfather? The Lord of the Rings? The Golden Compass? Harry Potter and the Philosopher's*



*Stone? The Hunger Games?* It doesn't matter what it was—every decade had “the” book that adults and kids alike were grabbing off the coffee table and reading. The important thing is, it changed you as a tween or young teen, right? With that one book, you suddenly felt like a full-fledged adult reader. Big-idea groups use texts that every reader in the class can read, but give this same amazing stretch in the complexity of *ideas* featured, discussed, and debated.

As you will see on page 10, where we give you two model lessons, the design of big-idea groups, much like the comprehension approaches reviewed above, give students a compelling reason to go back to the text to dig deeper. The design develops children's capacity to summarize, infer, find evidence, annotate, and apply their thinking to other texts. And, because we know how little time you have to develop your own lessons at first, we have included 30 lessons in this book to give you plenty to run with (see Chapter 4). The other chapters address more how-tos and principles.

## What's Ahead in This Book?

**Chapter 2, The Lesson Design**, asks if lesson design matters. It does—because action on the part of the student is a basic tenet of all learning. Students should be acting and reacting upon things, events, and people (Stauffer, 1969). Good lesson design needs students in action.

**Chapter 3, The Tools of Engagement**, explores the concept of interactive reading through hands-on engagement. We show you how to get students physically involved in reading ideas, which is hardly ever equated with reading groups but should be.

**Chapter 4, The 30 Lesson Planners**, is—let's face it—the prize at the bottom of the Cracker Jack box because it is a bank of 30 lessons to use right away with texts that are popular and readily available. You are provided with engaging tasks to guide students to think, argue, reflect, and transfer their thinking across genres and ideas to develop competency in reaching the standards in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These lessons cross grade levels and reading levels to start the fun right away. The lessons will help you specifically confront some of the most interesting dimensions of discussion: interpretive, thematic, writer's craft, and moral/ethical.

**Chapter 5, Transferring Thinking Across the Day**, guides you in promoting and connecting work from small-group sessions with short texts to application in longer texts and novels. It also provides concrete practice examples to follow through on to build agency and transfer with practices that remind students that ideas discussed in small-group reading appear in health, social studies, and science class, and even on the playground.

**Chapter 6, Assessing Readers Within and Beyond the Group**, conquers the challenge of assessment and keeping track of student thinking over time in order to follow up in subsequent sessions or across content areas. Addressing different ways to assess student work in reading, thinking, and responding in small groups is grounded in easy-to-use forms and work-sample suggestions for providing feedback to students. Effective feedback can double the rate of learning and is among the top 10 influences on achievement (Hattie & Yates, 2014).

**Chapter 7, Useful Forms and Lists for Big-Idea Groups**, provides clear and easy forms for teaching before, during, and after thinking and reading work. Our graphic organizers are simple yet powerful representations of scaled thinking to apply across multiple settings.

Now, let's take a look at how you might launch a first discussion, and one that sets the foundation for all other small-group discussions.

## An Introductory Big-Idea Lesson

Start with two simple texts (one classic, one visual). This text should be one that lends itself to thinking about a topic in a lot of different, divergent ways. Do this first one with the whole class, so everyone is introduced to the routines at once.

One text that serves as an excellent starter text for helping students think through big ideas is "Humpty Dumpty." (See page 13 for an enlarged text so you may use it on a Smart Board or projector.) While the text may seem simplistic, the big idea and what the character of Humpty Dumpty symbolizes are not complex. There is a reason the tale still exists hundreds of years later. It's not about an egg!

On the following page, you will find a sample mini-lesson for "Humpty Dumpty." Use this to help you know how to connect your small-group work to students' independent reading, no matter the genre.

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## “Humpty Dumpty” Stands the Test of Time



### Engage

Hand out a topics card to each student, or simply display one on a screen for all students to see (see topics card on page 14).

Say: “Most stories are usually about the same human conditions. Books can be about family, friendship, love, change, never giving up, courage, or loss. In fact, if you think about any book that you have read, chances are it is about one of those topics!

“Take a look at the topics card. These topics pretty much cover life, too, right?”

“Today we are going to explore how, as a reader, you sometimes begin to think about the topic before you start reading and, as you read, you keep testing out whether the story is indeed ‘about’ this topic, or about something else.

“The other reason I am sharing this topics card is that it’s a handy cheat sheet of ideas. These are ideas that you and I will have in common to talk about most of the books we will read this year. They are the ideas that bring people together. These are why authors write and painters paint and people fight for causes.”



### Discuss

Read aloud “Humpty Dumpty.” You can use the questions below as the basis for a think-aloud in which you model some of the kinds of thinking you want students to do, or you can use them to have students immediately turn and talk to each other. Point out each topic one at a time in the following order and ask the questions:

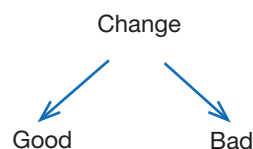
- ▶ Is “Humpty Dumpty” a story about family? (*No, there are no mothers, brothers, fathers, uncles, or sisters.*)
- ▶ Is “Humpty Dumpty” a story about not giving up or perseverance? (*No, they quit. They said they couldn’t put him back together again.*)
- ▶ Is “Humpty Dumpty” a story about friends? [You could have a turn-and-talk session here.] (*Some people think that the king’s horses and men are his friends, but I think they are just doing their jobs. They are not his friends.*)
- ▶ Is “Humpty Dumpty” a story of change? (*Yes. Humpty was whole before the fall, and now he cannot be put back together. He has changed since the beginning.*)

Now it is time to push beyond just identifying the topic. Many students can land on a topic, but as part of your foundation, you will want to start dividing the thinking to always create this element of argument and discourse.

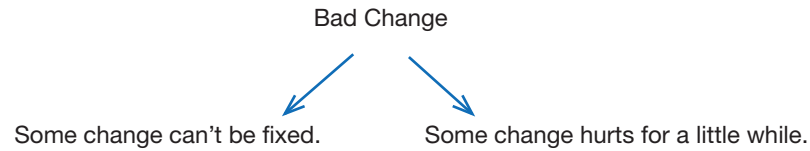


### Deep-See Think

Ask students to think about the concept of “change” in the text. Next, ask them if the author is saying change is good or change is bad (another opportunity for a turn-and-talk session). Say, “Which do you think, and why do you think that?”



Now ask students to think about, if they chose a side, which of the following statements is better supported by the text:



You could also have students go to different corners of the room depending on whether they think “Humpty Dumpty” is a story of change or loss. They could strategize with their group and then partner up to debate each other. Students will benefit from discussion anchors like these. When students are given choices of answers, the conversation is usually richer and deeper. From here, you can begin your curiosity campaign. Set the ground for curiosity and deeper thinking by telling your students that you will challenge them to start thinking big.



### Connect

Tell your students that the tale of “Humpty Dumpty” has lasted for hundreds of years because of the mystery behind its meaning. Great stories make things and thinking mysterious. Have the following prompts available for students to turn to each other and talk about as you introduce the challenge:

- ▶ Historians believe that “Humpty Dumpty” may be about three different topics. But they all agree that “Humpty Dumpty” is not about an egg. There is no text evidence to support that the main character is an egg. (The fact that he can’t be put together opens the possibility of hundreds of things.)
- ▶ If you think about the theme—some things that change can never be undone—what could the character of Humpty Dumpty be a symbol for?

See below for some answers that students have provided.

#### Student 1

- ▶ *Humpty Dumpty is a metaphor for the Great Recession. The wall is Wall Street. The fall was the stock market’s charts. The king’s horses and men were the bailouts. And the last line represents the notion that the economy is not coming back. (This was mentioned in 2013. Let’s hope the student’s last line no longer works in the near future.)*

#### Student 2

- ▶ *Humpty Dumpty is a metaphor for Egypt fighting for democracy. The wall is the people lined up in the streets. The fall is when the ruler lost power. The king’s horses and men fought in the street. Egypt will never be the same.*

#### Student 3

- ▶ *Humpty Dumpty stands for a broken heart. Everyone can try to help, but when a heart is broken, it sometimes can’t be fixed.*

#### Student 4

- ▶ *I still think it’s an egg!*

And that’s from just two classes. Imagine if you asked your students!



## "Humpty Dumpty"

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Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.

All the king's horses




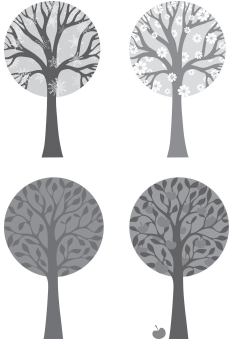


And all the king's men

Couldn't put Humpty together again!





# Topics Card

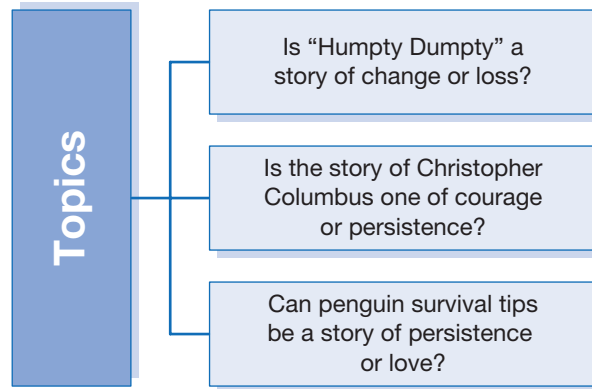
<p><b>Family</b></p> 	<p><b>Friends</b></p> 	<p><b>Loss of Object</b></p> 
<p><b>Change</b></p> 	<p><b>Never Give Up</b></p> 	<p><b>Courage</b></p> 

A Starter Card for Introducing the Topics for Most Texts

Images courtesy of clipart.com.

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Many texts can be about more than one topic. So, in order to help guide your students, always ask questions. When working with topics and texts, it is helpful at times to guide your students to think about a text's two or three primary topics and challenge them to decide on which one is speaking more powerfully to them as a topical message in the text:



## On Another Day: Adapting the Introductory Lesson With an Informational Text

After the lesson using "Humpty Dumpty," on another day, use an informational text in a similar fashion. Doing so sends the message to students that even fact-based texts have plenty of room for debate, unanswered questions, and themes that are relevant to their lives. This taps into the power of inquiry (Hammond & Nessel, 2011) to support reading of informational texts that raises the investment of your readers. The first order of business? To look at any text with an eye to figuring out the central topic or topics, what it's mostly about, and to think about whether there is a theme as well.



Courtesy of Marcel Langthim, <https://pixabay.com/en/elephant-baby-zoo-870531>

You could use the screen shots from a video to help students practice this. For example, I have shown my students a short nature video about elephants. In quick summary, a baby elephant falls in a ditch, the elder elephants come to the rescue, and finally the elders surround and protect the weaker elephant. Show a similar video to your students and ask them, “What *topic* are we learning about from these elephants?”

With this text, which is a visual information piece, students tell us that it is a story of family or friendship. This also allows us to introduce and work with the idea of a single theme versus multiple themes. We can also introduce the notion that informational writing can have a theme or lesson for humans. Using other texts, for example, we can ask students, “What do hurricanes teach us?” or “How do cars impact families?” Returning to the elephant example, the students tell us, “What I have learned about elephants is that when something goes wrong, your family will surround you and help you.” Informational text has topics that ground our conversation and provide starting points to go deeper. So, if we ask our students, “Do you think elephants can provide a lesson for humans?” most will say yes. They believe that families can learn how to help one another like the elephants.

Teachers can take the question to another level by asking, “Do you think the baby elephant would learn better if the elders let him try to get out of the ditch before running so quickly to save him? Do you think that perhaps the elephants are setting a bad example by running in too quickly?” And this is a real behavior. When introducing informational texts, there are ways to consider the journey of salmon, the use of bottled water, or the importance of community as potential topics of debate for our young citizens. Challenge your young readers to find their voice.

## The Great White Space

These two sample lessons, and the 30 lessons in this book, start you on a venture into what we call the **great white space**. By launching your community with these lessons, you will always have a starting point for any conversation with your readers, because you and your students are anchored in common talking points. But from here, you enter the great white space of teaching readers. It is unwritten. Your responses and questions follow what your readers are thinking. This is the area where the teacher moves across the continuum of thinking to challenge students’ ideas. It is where we take students from where they are to someplace better. Once students can engage in deeper foundational thinking and discourse, you are ready. We ask them to challenge the ideas—the author’s choices with plot, language, and the lessons authors want us to learn. From here, you have time to consider how to link your whole-group work with your small-group and individual work with students. This is where the suggested lesson structure and your classroom routines will work together to serve all your students.

When students know they are in a community of readers and thinkers, they will rise to the occasion. They will hold themselves responsible. When you have strong topics, your students will have a base from which to start the conversation, and you will get strong discourse and engaged debate. Reasons for reading and meeting become obvious. From here, the students will start the journey of holding themselves engaged to the thinking, and they will go beyond just meeting requirements or assignments. There will be no shortage of curiosity, freedom of thought, and harmony.