

Role Sheets: Use with Care (or Just Don't Use)

While literature circles have generally been a wonderful success story in American schools, teachers have had to make some changes in how they support kids' book clubs over the long haul. Have you seen those book club "role sheets" that circulate throughout Teacher World and on the Internet? They are one-page student handouts with jobs like Discussion Director, Questioner, Connector, Literary Luminary, Illustrator, Word Wizard, Passage Master. Some simple versions of these sheets appear in Smokey's book *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* (2003), and about a zillion homemade iterations (Recipe Reader, Subordinate Clause Catcher, Preposition Policeman—some of them downright absurd) reside in every corner of the Internet.

The original purpose of these sheets was to give a different, substantive, and rotating task to each kid in a lit circle—setting both a cognitive purpose for the reading and an interactive one for the group discussion. All of the roles were designed to support genuine collaborative learning by giving kids clearly defined, interlocking, and open-ended tasks. The sheets also embodied a key assumption about reading—that readers who approach a text with their prior knowledge activated and with some clear-cut, conscious purposes will understand better and remember more. Further, several of the standard role sheets (questioner, connector, summarizer, illustrator) prefigured the comprehension strategies research that Steph has done so much to popularize. So the role sheets had two purposes: to help kids read better and to discuss better.

But these tools can backfire, big-time. If "doing the sheets," rather than discussing ideas, becomes the main purpose of your kids' literature circles, then you can accidentally create just one more mechanical, spiritless classroom assignment. And if you grab sheets off the Internet with roles that *real readers never take*—like Preposition Policeman, whatever that means—things can get even worse. Kids are very alert to fake practices; we should never imply to them that "this is how smart people think" unless it is true.

So, the single greatest (and most easily solvable) problem we see with lit circles is the overuse of "role sheets" of all kinds, and the consequent limiting and numbing of the conversation. We are really serious when we say "use with

care.” In fact, we never use role sheets in our own classrooms anymore, not ever. First of all, we don’t really need them since so many kids have already learned the comprehension strategies in their previous schooling and don’t need to be shown the ways smart readers think! And second, we have developed better, more open-ended tools kids can use to capture their responses while reading and spur discussion when they meet: sticky notes, bookmarks, drawings, journals, and more. For detailed advice on how to replace role sheets, see Smokey and Nancy Steineke’s book, *Mini-Lessons for Literature Circles* (2004).