

# Questions for Group Study

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First, a confession: from my second year of teaching on, I've taken a hard-line stance against book study questions for my students. That's because during my first year, I discovered that in digging through the text to write them, I was the one doing all the hard interpretive work. The questions weren't much more than a thinly veiled classroom management tool that I as a new teacher needed to help students stay on task in small groups. From my second year on, however, I told my students to come with something to say about the text they were reading and taught them response strategies to guarantee they would do so.

Fast-forward a couple of decades later to my own book club experience with other adults. Even though everyone came to our meetings with something to say, more often than not, it wasn't about the book. Our passing attempts amounted to little more than, "Did you like the book?" before we moved on to more "important" matters like, "How's your back?" At one meeting my friend Denise was fed up; she turned to the "reader's guide" at the back of the book and started asking questions. And . . . it worked. For the first time in our book club's history, we actually talked about the book for more than five whole minutes. Turns out that we—independent adult readers—needed a classroom management tool of sorts. The guide was a useful starting point that helped us stay on track.

I offer these questions for group study in the same spirit. I don't suggest that you work down the list of questions slavishly but rather that you use them insofar as they help deepen your thinking and/or keep your discussion focused on the book. You may want to preview the questions before you begin a chapter as a way of framing your reading, divide the questions up among you so each person is reading with only one question in mind, or star a few after you've finished reading that you'd really like to take up with your colleagues.

By all means consider your own questions as well or use any methods you would use otherwise as a reader—sticky notes, marginalia, dog-eared pages, and the like. You may also want to try dailies or another response strategy you regularly assign your students. (Nothing like completing your own assignment to determine whether it helps you engage with a text or only amounts to busy work!)

Teachers who've read *The Book Club Companion* have told me that they also like a strategy I feature in that book called the “punctuation prompt.” The method is simple: pencil a *question mark* in the margin when you come to an idea that makes you wonder, a *comma* when you find a passage that gives you pause, and an *exclamation point* when you have a strong reaction to something you've read. Then when discussion rolls around, simply flip back through the chapter and choose one or two items that seem most critical for your group to discuss.

Whatever response method you choose, what's most important is that you come to the discussion with something to say and with an openness to what others think, too.

Oh, one more thing: to maintain that openness in your group and to honor everyone's precious time, I strongly recommend setting some group norms for interaction and accountability prior to your first discussion. Would that it were not so, but adults need them at least as much as kids do. The questions in Figure 5.1, Goals and Ground Rules, can help get you started.

## Introduction

1. A six-word memoir challenges writers to tell their life stories in a mere six words.<sup>1</sup> Try out the genre by using six words to explain why you became an English teacher, then share your six-word memoir with others in your study group. What has remained constant about your original motivation and what has changed? Do you believe English teachers can change the world? How does your opinion shape your work with students?

<sup>1</sup>The six-word memoir is said to have originated with Ernest Hemingway's perhaps briefest story: *For sale: Baby shoes, never worn*. Taking their cue from Hemingway, Larry Smith and the creators of the online *Smith Magazine* created the Six-Word Memoirs Project, publishing best-selling anthologies and websites of six-word memoirs on various themes. Read more at [www.smithmag.net/sixwords/](http://www.smithmag.net/sixwords/).

2. Think about a controversial issue or cultural conflict that has arisen in your classroom or school recently. How did your students deal with it? What have you observed about how your students deal with these issues outside school? What role models do your students have for dealing with controversy? Would you describe these role models as positive, negative, or somewhere in between? What are the implications for your teaching?
3. As described on page xiv, high school students in Rebecca Garrett's English class contended that teachers should share their views on controversial issues as long as they don't impose those views on students. Do you agree or disagree? If a student asked your opinion in class about a controversial issue, how would you respond? Why?
4. One way of thinking about achieving social justice in education is to increase equity and access for all students so that they can build a more socially just world in turn. What part might students' literacy practices play in working toward this goal? What does this mean for your teaching?

## Chapter 1

1. As I point out in this chapter, the oft-used term *civil discourse* is seldom, if ever, defined, suggesting that people "know civil discourse when they see it," or perhaps more often when they don't. What is your definition of *civil discourse*? What does it look like in a classroom setting? What does it look like outside of school? How does your definition of the term compare to the bulleted list on page 12? What would you add or omit from this list?
2. Aphorisms like "talk is cheap" and "actions speak louder than words" suggest that talk and action are separate entities. Do you agree or disagree with this claim? Is it possible for talk to be a form of action in and of itself?
3. When you look at the characteristics of tough texts described on page 14, how do you feel about asking students to read them in your classroom? What are the risks and benefits? How does your teaching context influence what you are able to teach? What challenges do you anticipate in teaching tough texts in your school?

## Chapter 2

1. How would you have responded to the questions posed by the workshop participant in the first paragraph of this chapter? What do your responses reveal about the books you assign your students?
2. What literary texts engage your students most? What books do they “take to heart”? What do those texts have in common? What evidence do you have that the books you assign make a difference to students’ lives beyond your classroom?
3. Do you assign young adult literature? Why or why not? What observations do you have about the crossover between YA literature and mainstream fiction and how it might benefit your students?
4. At the confirmation hearings for her seat on the Supreme Court, some legislators criticized Justice Sonia Sotomayor’s assertion that empathy helped her judge more fairly. Is the capacity for empathy a liability in today’s world? What role do you observe empathy playing in students’ reading processes, their learning, and their interactions with peers?

## Chapter 3

1. Which of the books that you have taught over the years have had the greatest impact on students? What about those books made them worth teaching for you and worth remembering for students?
2. What are some essential cultural issues you believe students might productively address by reading tough texts? What are some books you don’t currently teach that could help students view these issues from various perspectives?
3. By definition, tough texts deal with thorny issues and often have ambiguous endings. If you observed students in a small group who were struggling through a rough patch in the book, how much would you intervene?

4. In this chapter, I argue that “there are books you teach to a whole class, those you make available to small groups, and others you recommend to individual students.” Considering your teaching context, can you think of one book in each category? Why would you label these books in these ways?
5. What would you do if a parent formally challenged a book you were teaching or recommended that it be banned from the school library or curriculum? Are there books you would be willing to “go to the mat” for, even if you met resistance from students and parents? What makes these books worthwhile?

## Chapter 4

1. Take a look Figure 1.1: What Is *Civil Discourse*? Have you seen similar scenarios when students work in small-group discussions? How have they played out? How might you use the strategies in this chapter to help students work through such conflicts?
2. If you agree that quickwrites could be useful for your students throughout a CDS, which, if any, of the strategies from this chapter might you use to deal with the paperload? What are some other grading strategies you’ve tried that will allow your students to write as much as they need to and still allow you to “have a life” at the same time?
3. Brainstorm as many potential starter texts as you can. With good colleagues nearby and a pencil in hand, make some preliminary plans for selecting and sequencing the texts in a CDS by working through the questions on page 67.
4. Whether you use sticky notes or not, how do you help students learn to read texts closely on their own?
5. How might you use the think-aloud strategy with your students? What’s a text you might use? Knowing that students could get overwhelmed if you modeled every thinking strategy that you use, what processes would you emphasize?

## Chapter 5

1. Do you feel more comfortable assigning one tough text to the entire class for a CDS or dividing students into book clubs to discuss a text of their choice? When and why would you use one method over the other?
2. *If you're considering the whole-class option*, which of the recommended strategies would you use to divide students in groups? Why does this method seem more appealing to you than the others, or does the method depend on the class?
3. *If you're considering the book club option*, think about a book you might like to use and, with good colleagues nearby and a pencil in hand, sketch out a booktalk, using the list on pages 86–87 to prompt your thinking.
4. Do you think you'll frontload the norming process like Beth and Rebecca do or weave it throughout the CDS as Cam does? Why does this choice seem most appropriate for your classroom?
5. Depending on the grade level you teach, take a look at the sticky-notes bookmark for middle school students (Figure 5.2) or high school students (Figure 4.3). How would you use or modify the prompts in panel three to help your students tackle the range of difficulties readers encounter (Steiner 1978; see also Figure 4.1)? What are some other prompts you might add?
6. Think back over small-group discussions you've observed in your classroom, and identify an incident when a drop-in visit would be in order. How did you respond? If a similar incident occurred in the future, what amount of endoscaffolding would be most judicious? How will you judge when to intervene and when to let students work out the problem on their own?

## Chapter 6

1. Reread the epigraph at the opening of this chapter. Think about the typical kind of assessment you were asked to complete at the end of literature units in your English classes *as a student*. How well does it

align with the twenty-first-century skill set Ken Kay describes as the “new coin of the realm”? Now think about a recent assessment you asked your own students to complete at the end of a literature unit. How well does it align? What are the implications of these comparisons for your teaching and your students’ learning?

2. Which of the projects in this chapter can you imagine using in your classroom at the end of a CDS? Would you use them as is, or would you adapt the assignments? If so, what would these be?
3. One of the primary goals of all of the response strategies and assignments in this book is to help students transfer the civil discourse skills they have developed in the course of a CDS to settings outside school. To meet this goal, students must be aware of the skills they are using. How can you build a reflective component into the final assessments you ask students to complete at the end of a CDS?
4. All of the projects in this chapter are multimodal to some degree. That is, they require students to use print, visual images, digital tools, and/or verbal means to demonstrate their knowledge. How will you deal with concerns that colleagues, parents, or even students might raise that nontraditional forms of assessment like these are not academically rigorous?
5. How do you define “authentic assessment”? Who determines whether an assessment is “authentic”? What does authentic assessment look like in your teaching?

## **Chapter 7**

1. Was there a time when the river forked in your teaching and you had to decide what kind of teacher you wanted to be? What happened? How have the decisions you have made in the moment affected the teacher you are today?
2. How central should advocacy, as it is defined in this chapter, be to teachers’ work with students? Why do you think so? Do you consider yourself a teacher advocate? If not, why not? If so, what do you advocate for?

3. In my study at home where I wrote much of this book, I have a sticky note affixed over my desk that reads, “Is it possible to be gently radical?” How would you respond to this question in relation to your teaching? What relationship do you see between academic rigor and social change?
4. Why does it matter whether students learn to engage in civil discourse in and beyond your classroom?
5. Paolo Freire said, “One of the most significant abilities we men and women have developed throughout our long history . . . is the possibility of reinventing the world and not simply repeating or reproducing it” (2004, 107). Now that you’ve finished the book, do you agree or disagree with the premise that it is possible to teach English to change the world? Why do you feel this way? How do your views shape your teaching?