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Stimulating Student Inquiry to Improve Reading Comprehension

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This article will:

1. Describe curiosity and the reasons for its power.
2. Explain the affective nature of reading comprehension.
3. Describe strategies for optimizing curiosity and encouraging questions as students read informational and narrative texts.

Introduction

When students' interest catches fire, teachers feel deep satisfaction in leading them to actively seek knowledge and meaning. All teachers have experienced this at one time or another. In my role as a middle-school classroom teacher and learning specialist working with individual or small groups of students, I have been lucky enough to see this several times.

For example, Chas attended my strongest eighth-grade English Language Arts class. For this group, decoding and spelling were not an issue. Vocabulary development, however, was a focus throughout the year, based on the work of Beck, McKeown, and Sandora (2020). Chas was not a strong reader or academically inclined. Yet, he asked to read Anton Chekhov's highly philosophical story, "The Bet." In discussions of this story, Chas was an engaged, analytical participant. He had discovered a new side of himself.

Another student, Juan, a sixth grader whose reading level was a full four years behind his peers, worked year after year in our one-on-one sessions to bring his reading ability up to grade level. He faithfully attended our sessions to learn decoding, spelling, morphology, fluency, and vocabulary, but in the classroom, he remained a class clown. He had made progress, though he still could not spell. A switch flipped, however, when a newly discovered fascination with animal biology drove him to read and absorb all he could about the topic. At the same time, during our instruction, he increasingly paid close attention to spelling. His orthography improved markedly within a short time.

Curious Question: Can you match these nine words to the correct language origin?

words	language
alligator	Anglo-Saxon
ire	Arabic
jungle	Chinese
lemon	Czech
robot	Dutch
sugar	Italian
tea	Persian
umbrella	Sanskrit
wagon	Spanish

Memorable teaching moments come from observing students whose curiosity has suddenly awakened. For students with reading difficulties, curiosity can have a transformative potency, motivating them to search for answers they really want to find. In the examples above, because both students had sufficient knowledge in decoding, vocabulary, and language conventions, their curiosity could then take over as a force leading to improved skills, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

What Is Curiosity and How Does It Act as an Engine of Learning Achievement?

Curiosity is inquisitiveness driven by a desire to explore something and understand it. As a bridge between thinking and feeling, curiosity could be called a cognitive itch that compels us to seek new answers, filling in what we don't know. Curiosity has rewarded our species, helping us to learn and develop methods for survival. The exploratory impulses that come so naturally to babies and children are expressions of this drive, which helps them to learn about the world and thrive.

Discoveries in brain science explain the power and impetus of curiosity (Kidd, C. & Hayden, 2015). A driving interest sets up a reward system, a positive feedback loop, in the hippocampus. Dopamine is released, enhancing motivation and pleasurable discovery, and setting up intrinsic rewards. The location of this brain activity has an additional benefit. In the hippocampus, long-term memories are created and stored. The activation of this brain area leads not only to more active and deeper engagement, but also to greater ease in anchoring facts within long-term memory. Thus, the remembered facts can be more easily accessed later, minimizing mental overload when students encounter new material on a similar topic (von Stumm, 2011) and become the background knowledge so helpful in reading comprehension (Catts, 2022; Rand, 2002).

How Can Teachers Stimulate Curiosity in Their Students?

For classroom teachers, nurturing and igniting the force of curiosity is a challenging and worthwhile goal. I will describe a number of methods for eliciting and honoring students' questions. Oakhill and Cain (2016) state, "Teacher-generated questions, applied skillfully, could be used to activate and develop a number of comprehension strategies in children" (p. 36). This is an important step in fostering curiosity. Further, as teachers, we need not only to tolerate, but also to cultivate ambiguity, presenting and encouraging questions like, "I wonder if . . .?" or "What if . . .?" As literacy teachers, we want our students reading narratives to notice and wonder about unexpected behavior in characters and to identify certain truths about human nature and relationships. Teachers may find pre-teaching interpretive elements and plot complexity necessary for some students struggling with comprehension. When possible, we also want to create experiences and to find nonfiction readings that induce a sense of awe and wonder. Finally, the more we know about our students and the more we encourage them to express the wonderings and wanderings of their minds, the better we will be at providing experiences that spotlight and utilize their curiosity.

Students may have questions about things as mundane as the components of lipstick and as likely to induce fascination as the size of the universe or the life and death of stars. Identity concerns are critical for adolescents as they grow and change into adults. They are likely to wonder about these questions: *Who am I? What is my place in the world? What are my core values? How best can I navigate life's challenges?* Books and narratives that touch on these issues have been favorites with my students.

Within just the last two years, I have noted the following examples of this. Bart, a high school senior, chose to read Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, and he chose the connection between free will and suffering as an essay topic. Cam was a bright, impulsive eighth-grader. He was notably quiet and attentive as we discussed a metaphor for a well-lived life in Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*. In one scene, Mrs. Whatsit explains that life is like a sonnet. Within the strict rules of sonnet poetry, the poet has total freedom of expression, and we can see our lives in the same way. Uncharacteristically, Cam listened quietly as I explained all the features of the sonnet form, and he mentioned the next day that he had enjoyed it. While he didn't speak of the life lesson, I suspect that this was a part of what grounded him and kept him on topic. Finally, in my small ELA class, Theo was unwilling to participate in classroom activities. However, he joined the others with enthusiasm as we read and discussed Jennings Burch's *They Cage the Animals at Night*. In this memoir, Jennings describes his quest for a wise mentor to offer understanding and guidance as he navigates a series of unloving foster homes and a number of difficulties within his own family. Ultimately, with his mentor's guidance, Jennings learns to accept the joys of love and friendship and to heal himself when he loses them.

What is Reading Comprehension, and How is It Related to Learning?

It is helpful for teachers to understand the mind's actions in the comprehension process. The act of comprehending text is a dynamic operation with many components. Writers have translated their thoughts into sentences – strings of letters that are words, phrases, and clauses. Readers must decode words and sentences, paying attention to paragraphs and text organization, to discern the ideas these elements convey. Readers use their working memory to integrate new ideas or story events into their previously established understandings, allowing these coalesced facts and perceptions to enter into long-term memory. In this way, comprehension is a dynamic, back-and-forth process. Decoding, establishing meaning, and integration occur in parallel, almost simultaneously. This procedure provides a bridge to the author's thoughts (Beck, McKeown & Kugan, 2013; Willingham, 2017). Once they understand an author's thinking, proficient and curious readers can then confront and question the author's ideas by thinking critically as they further integrate the author's message into their previous assumptions. The juncture of new information with previous assumptions reorganizes or adds to prior knowledge, and this rich combination can be a catalyst for curiosity.

Selecting more difficult texts challenges students, but too great a stretch can lead to cognitive overload, thwarting the development of curiosity. To understand this, we need to attend to the differences between short-term and long-term memory. Short-term memory has a limited capacity, and the information in it disappears quickly. On the other hand, long-term memory is permanent and capacious. Its contents are more easily retrievable for most students. Students who struggle with memory or expressive language difficulties may need support in anchoring information and retrieving it. To provide a boost for these students, teachers can create templates and guides for use while reading. These may take the form of sentence stems to be completed (see Figures 1 and 2), templates designed for students' responses to chunks of text, and copies of the text in which some important nouns and/or verbs have been omitted and must be filled in. In completing these sentence stems, students were able to see that, in this story, every character had difficulty fitting in. Creating sentence stems with “because,” “but,” and “so” is a suggestion from The Writing Revolution (Hochman & Wexler, 2017).

Figure 1. *Sentence Stems*

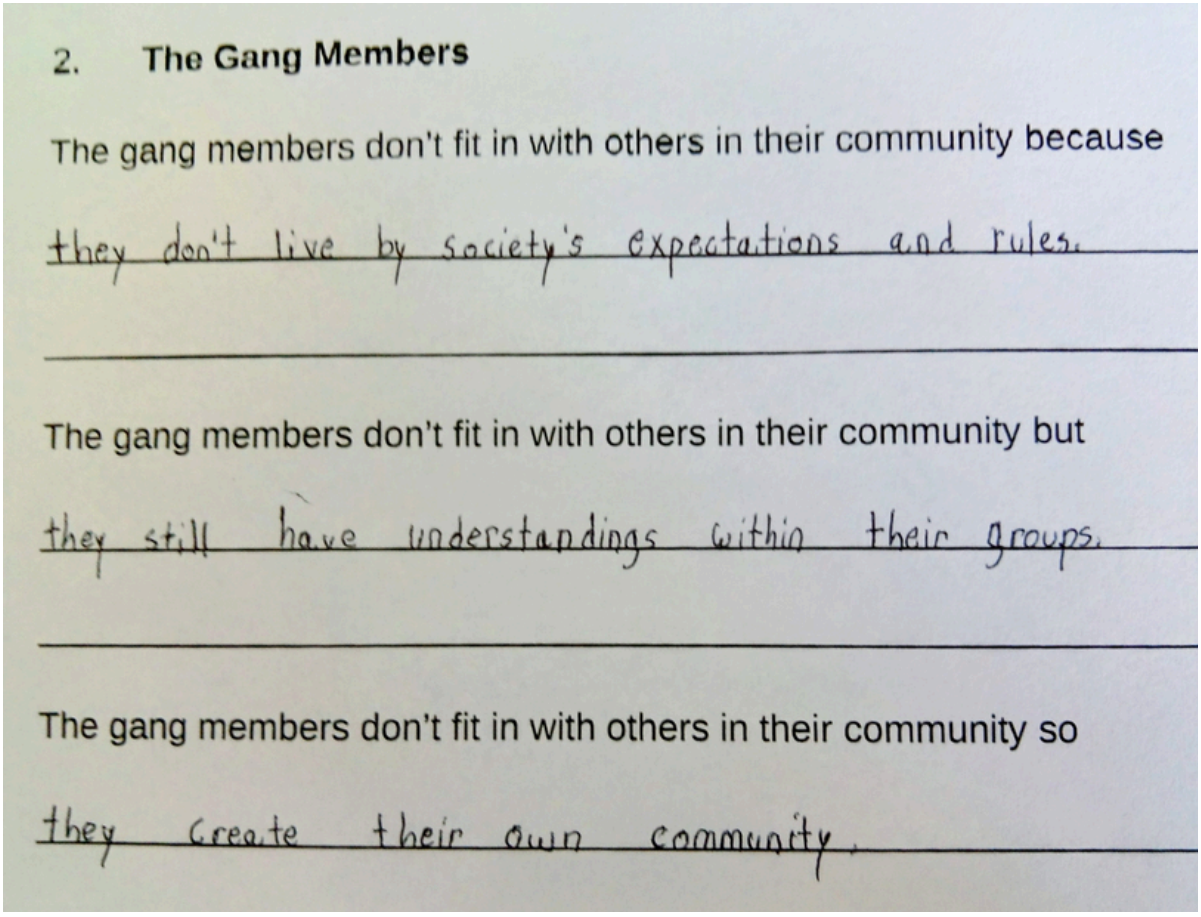
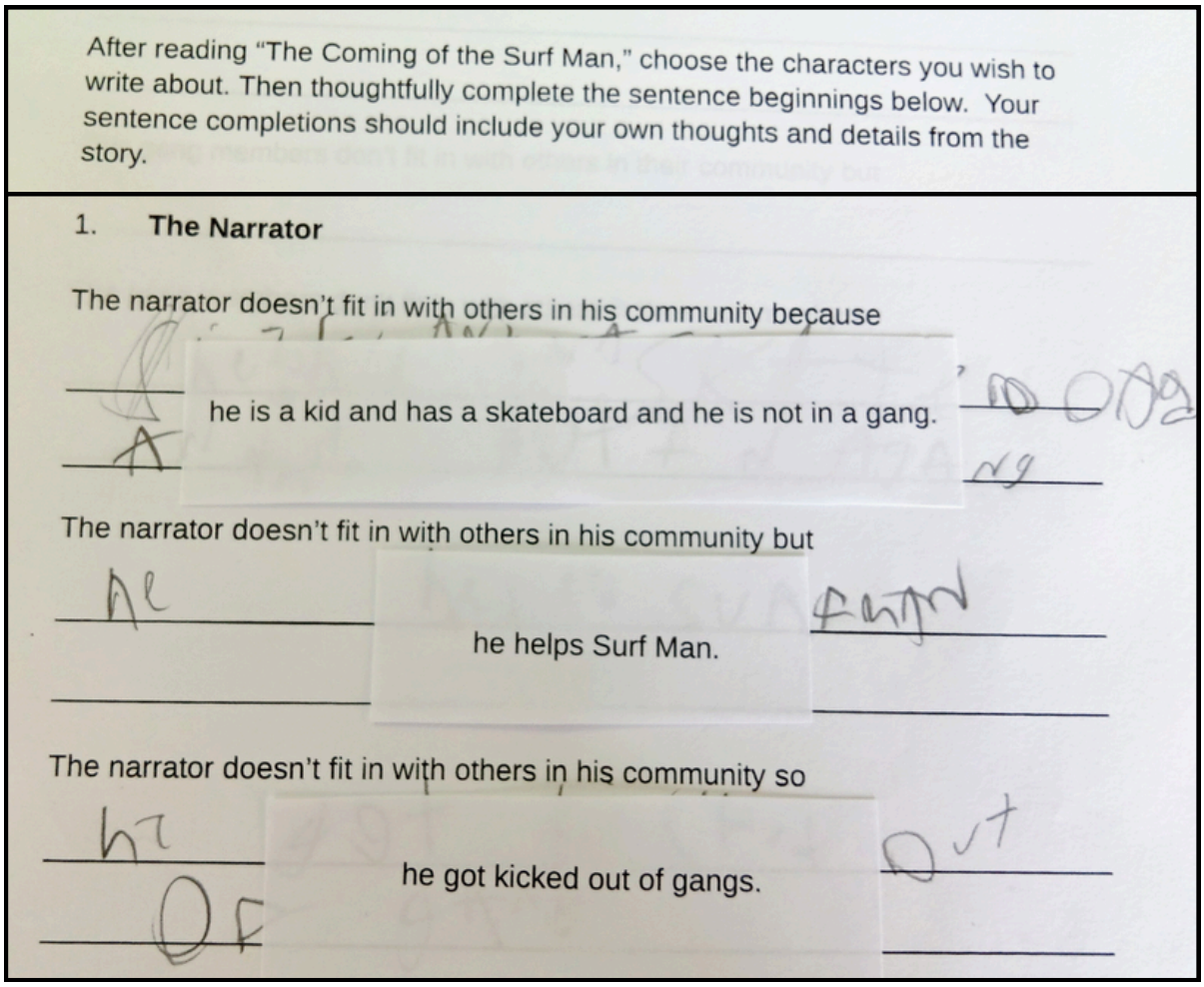


Figure 2. *Sentence Stems*



Note: For this article, I typed out the responses of one of these students, who is dysgraphic.

For all students, comprehension makes many demands on the brain. It stands to reason that teachers can support the development of curiosity by prioritizing long-term memory, thereby reducing mental overload. Teachers can identify and minimize barriers to students' understanding in several ways. Pre-teaching vocabulary is one. Regular lessons in new vocabulary and language conventions are helpful. Using nonfiction articles to introduce students to cultural, historical, or scientific contexts is another. For easier understanding of informational selections, students need to be comfortably knowledgeable about text structures, which Meyer (1975) categorized into sequence, description, comparison, problem-solution, and cause-effect. Wijekumar et al (2023) recommend teachers directly and explicitly teach text structures using the Knowledge Acquisition and Transformation (KAT) Framework and incorporate school-based textbooks to (1) identify the overall text structure, (2) apply a sentence stem consistent with that structure to write the main idea, (3) write a detailed summary, (4) respond to "inference questions by integrating the top-level structure, main idea, and prior knowledge," and (5) respond to multiple-choice questions pertinent to the text (p. 36).

The RAND Reading Study Group (2002) conceptualized three primary factors contributing to reading comprehension: "the reader, the text, and the activity of reading" (cited in Catts, 2022, p. 28). Catts (2022) argues that building students' background knowledge during instruction is paramount for improving their reading comprehension. The RAND study showed that students benefit when teachers prime their minds to accept and integrate new vocabulary, facts, concepts, and stories by introducing them to supplementary readings or experiences. The more background knowledge students have, the more prepared their minds are to absorb new material. Adding further knowledge is easier than breaking ground in an unexplored area.

What does this mean for classroom practice? There are a number of ways to help students approach an unfamiliar time and place with more ease by providing them with the context they may lack. For example, in introducing S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, a teacher may want to share the lyrics or a video of "Gee, Officer Krupke" from *West Side Story* or possibly the sociological concept of "juvenile delinquency" in the 1950s, or an article on gang behavior or restorative justice. Students can be invited to write about the various ways people might see themselves as outsiders. These pre-teaching activities prime students' minds to more readily comprehend the novel.

In another example, prior to reading an informational article about the medical uses of horseshoe crabs' blue blood, a teacher might show a picture of these strange-looking crustaceans and then play a video or show the lyrics to the group IVE's song "Blue Blood." A discussion of the several meanings of "blue" and "blue blood" might ensue. The students could also read an article about biomedical implants that can lead to bacterial infections.

Another method for developing curiosity is to provide students with a view into the lives and personalities of the authors, whom they can then see as individuals rather than unknown authorities. For example, Joyce Carol Oates, a physically petite writer and college professor, is the last person we would expect to have a love of boxing. Gary Paulsen's need, as a child, to feel and keep himself safe, along with the many and varied jobs he held as an adult, gave him extensive knowledge and authenticity for the unusual circumstances and problems his characters must work through in his novels. Hinton's unusually young age when she wrote *The Outsiders*, and her reasons for doing so, can pique and engage students' curiosity.

There is a two-fold purpose for presenting these types of introductory materials. These provide background knowledge to scaffold text and inform students of potentially unfamiliar cultural or historical information. They also bring narrative and informational topics into a zone of greater ease for students. Comfort with the subject promotes curiosity and question generation. For this reason, teachers will want to choose supplementary materials that are at a comfortable reading level for their students. In most of the above examples, reading is combined with visual and/or aural elements to add interest while supporting comprehension. Appealing to these senses more readily captures students' attention. It is a nudge that can set curiosity into motion.

Clearing the Way for Curiosity: Tuning in to Students Through Their Questions

Students' questions are an expression of their curiosity. They also communicate students' confusion. We value their questions, but we can't always know what they are. This is a teaching conundrum: How can we support students during silent reading, or to a lesser extent, when the class reads aloud together? When students are reading silently, we can't know in real time where and why false impressions develop. When the class reads aloud together, misapprehensions may still occur, but they become easier to spot and fix. Misunderstanding can drive students' thinking in the wrong direction, keeping them from noticing important revelations about a character or surprising facts in a text. This can hamper the development of curiosity. The strategies I discuss in this article enable teachers to tune in to students' thoughts, questions, and misapprehensions.

Questioning the Author

One procedure for helping teachers ensure accurate reading comprehension is called Questioning the Author (QtA). Beck, McKeown, and Kugan (2013) developed this approach over many years of teaching students and observing classroom interactions. This strategy calls for whole-class reading in which the teacher plays an active role. First, the teacher carefully prepares for the reading and discussion of the text, noting potential problems and providing breaks for discourse. Then, during reading and the give-and-take of discussion, a teacher can spot students' misinterpretations as they occur.

The inventors of QtA see students not as passive accumulators of information but as active developers of concepts and connections as they perceive an author's ideas and knowledge. Readers attend to text information, decide what is important, hold that information in memory, and proceed to encounter additional information. The QtA process honors and utilizes students' questions, the expressions of their curiosity. Untangling misapprehensions immediately, rather than waiting until reading is completed, contrasts with a more standard way of teaching reading comprehension. Traditionally, teachers question students after they have finished reading, not during reading time. With QtA, students are more likely to build a clear understanding of the author's thoughts and develop their own ideas, preparing a path to expressions of their curiosity.

Teacher planning is an important part of this process. In the questions teachers ask during reading, they can promote ambiguity in some of them, facilitating varied opinions, discussion, and curiosity among students. For example, at the beginning of Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, we are introduced to an unusual set of family-planning customs in Jonas's community. Each family is expected to have only one boy and one girl. Babies are cared for outside the family for one year. At that time, a child receives a name, and a family receives the baby. This raises questions about Jonas himself. As his parents' oldest child, was Jonas the biological offspring of his parents? If not, might this affect Jonas's feelings about his father under later circumstances in the story? Readers are not told the answer to this question.

It's a question the class can discuss, and the students' opinions are likely to differ. Hearing alternate opinions can spur curiosity.

Careful and thoughtful preplanning is an important element of QtA. To prepare, the teacher reads the selection once, then rereads it, thinking about places where the students are likely to stumble. The teacher "chunks" the text, identifying reference points for stopping and asking questions as a check for understanding. Reference points can be unknown vocabulary, sentences with complex syntax, unusual cohesion or sequence structures, and text formats. Text understanding prepares a path to students' questions and expressions of their curiosity.

In any classroom, some students confidently answer questions and share ideas in contrast to more reticent and less assured students. A teacher will want to hear from a broad cross-section of students in the class. Here are a few approaches teachers can use to encourage students who are quieter and perhaps less self-assured. A teacher can watch for the raised hands of more reserved students and be sure to call on them when this happens. As the students grow more comfortable with the questioning procedure, the teacher can ask a question first and then call on specific students by name. Praise for insights and, importantly, for questions instead of insights, is also helpful. Similarly, using the "turn and talk" strategy offers students a chance to rehearse responses before they share them with the whole class.

In the QtA procedure, teachers' queries – questions for discussion – are open-ended. The purpose of a query is not to check on concrete facts or actions. A query is a more general question intended to inspire a give-and-take discussion relevant to the author's ideas. Common examples are, "What do you think the author is trying to say here?" or "What is happening here?" They invite students to tell in their own words what the author means. Through the discussion that follows, misunderstandings are uncovered in real time. In pre-planning, the authors of QtA encourage teachers to formulate initial and follow-up queries. The follow-up queries can help stimulate discussion of the original query when, for some reason, the original query draws blank stares.

I tried this method with a heterogeneous group of students from grades 6 through 8 as we were reading Jennings Burch's *They Cage the Animals at Night*. My beginning query was often, "What do you think the author wants us to know here?" The first time I asked this, Cam answered, "He wants us to know that Jennings and Mark played tic-tac-toe together." This was true but more concrete than what I had hoped for, so I used a follow-up query: "What do you think the grown-up Jennings, writing his book as an adult, wants to show us about himself and Mark?"

At a later time, while discussing the boys' friendship, I asked the group, "How do you know when there might be a friendship between you and somebody you just met?" This led to a discussion about friendship, deepening the students' understanding of the text, and most

likely anchoring it in their long-term memories. The question asked them to connect their own experience to the developing relationship between two boys. While connecting text events to students' own experiences can be helpful, students also need to recognize that their life experiences may be parallel but not necessarily identical to the experiences of the people or characters in a narrative. Teachers can help students understand this by starting a follow-up discussion or assigning a short written response to a prompt that invites students to compare and/or contrast their personal histories with the experiences of the book's characters.

With practice, my students became accustomed to answering questions with responses to the text rather than merely simple facts. They also noted places where the story's action was unexpected and asked questions when needed. Later in the book, they learned that, following a long separation and then a joyous and unexpected reunion between the two friends, one of them suddenly died. One student, with great surprise, declared, "Well, I wasn't expecting that!" The ability to be surprised by text is important, reflecting a student's connection with and understanding of the narrative, and also opening the way for curiosity and further questions. Again, I asked, "What do you think the adult Jennings wants us to know here?" Edwin, who had undergone childhood cancer, made a connection with a speech by Matthew McConaughey he had previously studied. He answered with McConaughey's words: "Life isn't fair. It never has been and never will be. Get used to it."

Evidence-aligned Questioning Techniques

The National Reading Panel (2000) identifies eight effective strategies for improving students' comprehension. Recommendations 4, 5, and 6 involve questioning (***emphasis added***):

> 4. Story structure from which the reader learns to ask and answer ***who, what, where, when,*** and ***why*** questions about the plot and, in some cases, maps out the time line, characters, and events in stories.
> 5. Question answering in which the reader answers questions posed by the teacher and is given feedback on the correctness.
> 6. Question generation in which the reader asks himself or herself ***what, when, where, why, what will happen, how,*** and ***who*** questions (National Reading Panel, 2000, 4-6).

By teaching the comprehension strategy of shared inquiry (Johnson & Evans, 1992, as cited in National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 5-25), students responded to my questions and generated their own. This brought factual, interpretive, and evaluative questions to the fore, thereby generating intrinsic curiosity about text. The series of activities included short journal writings, pair-shares or give-and-take in groups of three, and whole group discussion. This sequence provides an opportunity for students to study a text closely, reading it and rereading, to ask questions, examine and change their thinking as their understanding of the text develops, and communicate their thoughts in both writing and discussion.

As facilitators, teachers invite students to express their thoughts in various ways in response to different types of texts, such as short stories, speeches, or poems. First, the teacher selects a broad theme related to the text to be read, as, for example, the theme of honesty or conformity. The teacher prepares students by asking them to write about their own experiences related to the theme. For example, using the curriculum, Junior Great Books, students respond to the question, "What might make it hard or easy for a person to fit in?" or "Why might a person decide to behave honestly or dishonestly?" (Junior Great Books, 2014, p.1, 57). These deeper questions can awaken their curiosity.

Second, the teacher reads the selection while the whole class follows silently. Students are then asked to write a short response about how their first answer may have changed after hearing the story.

After this, usually on the following day, the students are asked to reread and annotate the story in pairs or possibly three-person groups. It is important for teachers to give the students concrete goals for their annotations. For example, a teacher might ask students to identify positive and negative actions of a character or to find and mark areas of conflict. Giving students a reason for a second read keeps their attention on text and provides them with an opportunity to reexamine the characters and their actions. It counteracts students' usual assumption that one reading is enough. Additional suggestions for annotation approaches are discussed more fully at the end of this article.

After annotating the story, the teacher then encourages students to identify and note any areas of confusion within the text and problem vocabulary. Most importantly, students write questions they have about characters' actions and motivation. The teacher carefully notes all students' questions. One technique for doing this is to ask the students to write their questions on Post-it notes. The teacher then collects and compiles them in a list to be shared with the whole class. A teacher chooses one interpretive question from the list as the basis for a shared-inquiry discussion. Depending on the students' ages and grade levels, the teacher may lead the discussion or a method can be established for a student-led roundtable discussion.

An important element of this procedure is establishing expectations for productive and respectful discourse. The teacher establishes and reminds students of certain rules. For example, students are expected to discuss only the selection everyone has read, focus on the ideas of other participants and respond to them directly, and expect the teacher to only ask questions, not to give answers. When hearing another person's thoughts, participants may politely express agreement or disagreement or ask a question about them. All opinions are accepted and respected as long as the student can back up their opinions with text example(s).

Some teachers are able to lead a discussion with the whole class, and others prefer to use a "Fish Bowl" routine, with an inner circle of students discussing and an outer circle of observers. This method addresses a problem with the typical

fishbowl, when half of the class is expected to listen and maintain focus without participating. In this routine, students are arranged in two concentric circles. The inner circle are participants in the discussion. The outer circle keeps track of the number of discussers who offered opinions, the number who disagreed with somebody, and the number who offered thoughts that expanded the opinion expressed by another person. At the end of the discussion, the teacher checks in with the observers in the outer circle, asking how many of the inner circle's students fell into each category. An additional step is inviting students in the outer circle to contribute their ideas as well. A special chair is designated for this. The student wanting to speak quietly rises and sits in this chair, signaling that they have something important to add.

Following an exchange of give-and-take, the teacher asks students to write about the process by which their thoughts grew and changed during the discussion. They are expected to describe their initial opinions, what changed their minds, or what supported their original perspective.
A very important part of this procedure is the directive that all opinions will be respected as long as students support them with facts and examples from the text. My experience with this approach was with eighth graders. They had been taught much about writing classical five-paragraph essays, but for many of them, the most difficult part of writing was finding and describing supporting text examples. In group discussions, they gained practice in supporting their views with illustrative examples from the text. The experience of practicing this skill carried over into their writing composition.

It's important to note that, once teachers understand shared inquiry, they can apply it to any thematically rich short story. I knew that some grade-level stories could overwhelm certain students, causing them to lose interest. For that reason, I substituted stories with readings closer to their reading capability. We read stories by Cynthia Rylant, for instance, rather than by William Saroyan.

I provided students with several exposures to text, facilitated small-group and whole-class discussions, and assigned writing-response tasks. Throughout this process, students contributed and heard multiple ideas about the meaning of the text, examined the author's meaning, and reconsidered their initial conceptions after hearing their peers' perspectives.

This sequence helps students do what skilled readers do – construct meaning, let it grow and change, and integrate it into prior knowledge. It helps classrooms to be safe spaces for exploration and self-expression, fertile landscapes for considering and questioning ideas. The method prioritizes the search for answers over having the right answers. In the whole process, questions are deepened, ambiguity is recognized, and curiosity is nurtured and encouraged.

Using Annotation to Uncover Questions and Misunderstandings

As a shorthand method for readers to monitor thinking while in the act of reading, annotation is useful either on its own or as part of the above programs. For teachers, it is a method for questions engendered by either curiosity or text confusion.

uncovering opinions, questions, and misunderstandings and often is a springboard for discussion. Coding text with annotations requires readers to become actively engaged in the passage's content. In the process, readers become aware of their own thinking in response to text while teachers become aware of students' questions engendered by either curiosity or text confusion.

While there are many annotation systems, we will begin with a look at the INSERT annotation procedure. In it, students are taught four simple symbols to code their thinking.

Code & Symbol	Meaning
Check mark (✓)	"I knew that!" Confirmation of a prior understanding.
Hyphen (-)	"I thought differently." A contradiction.
Question mark (?)	"I don't understand this." Confusion.
Plus sign (+)	"This is something new, a fact I didn't know."

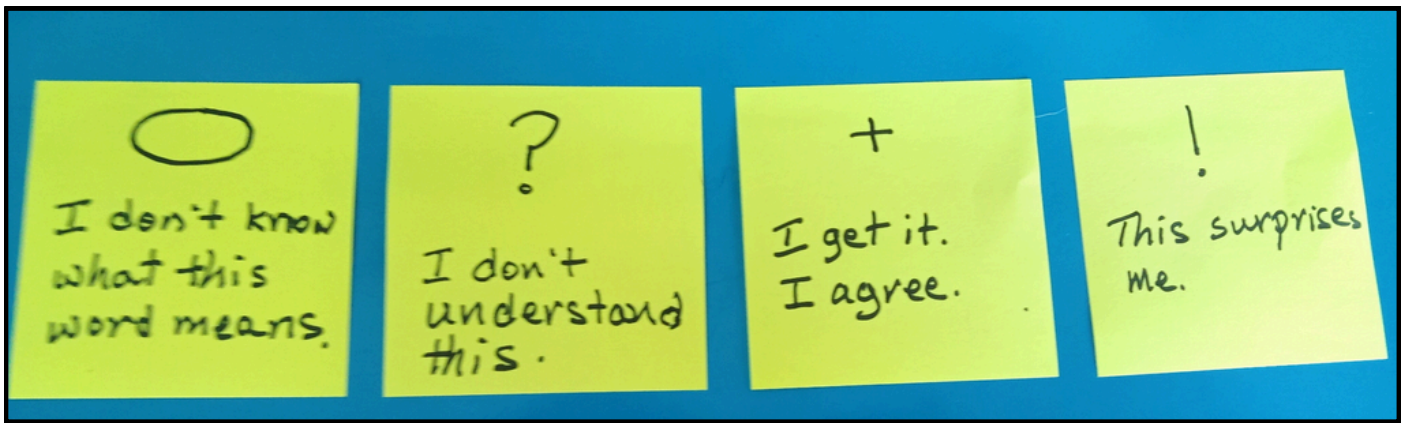
IRA/NCTE (2003). ReadWriteThink.org, Microsoft Corporation.

This strategy has several advantages. Coding is quick, and it only minimally interrupts reading flow. Students can make simple marks in the margins of their texts, or, if marking up books is forbidden, they can make annotations on Post-it notes and affix them to the appropriate pages. If need be, students can use another alternative for noting their responses. They can fold a piece of lined paper vertically to create four columns, one for each of the four symbols. In the column for each type of annotation, students would then list the page numbers where the thought or question occurs. (This method may be too cumbersome to use with students with learning difficulties.) Annotating can be used in a variety of reading formats – whole-class readings, small-group discussions, or individual reading time. In either alternative, it is followed by class or team comparisons and discussions. As the students share their responses to text, the ensuing discussion and the recognition that individuals have a variety of opinions provide the sense of ambiguity that fosters curiosity.

It is helpful to introduce the process of annotating a little at a time. For example, a teacher may want to introduce only the check and plus sign at first. In the "I do, we do, you do" model, teaching would begin with an explicit statement of the reasons for annotating and a demonstration of how the teacher might use it in the act of reading. This would be followed by the teacher and students annotating a text together. Finally, students would annotate on their own, followed by repeated practice that leads to mastery.

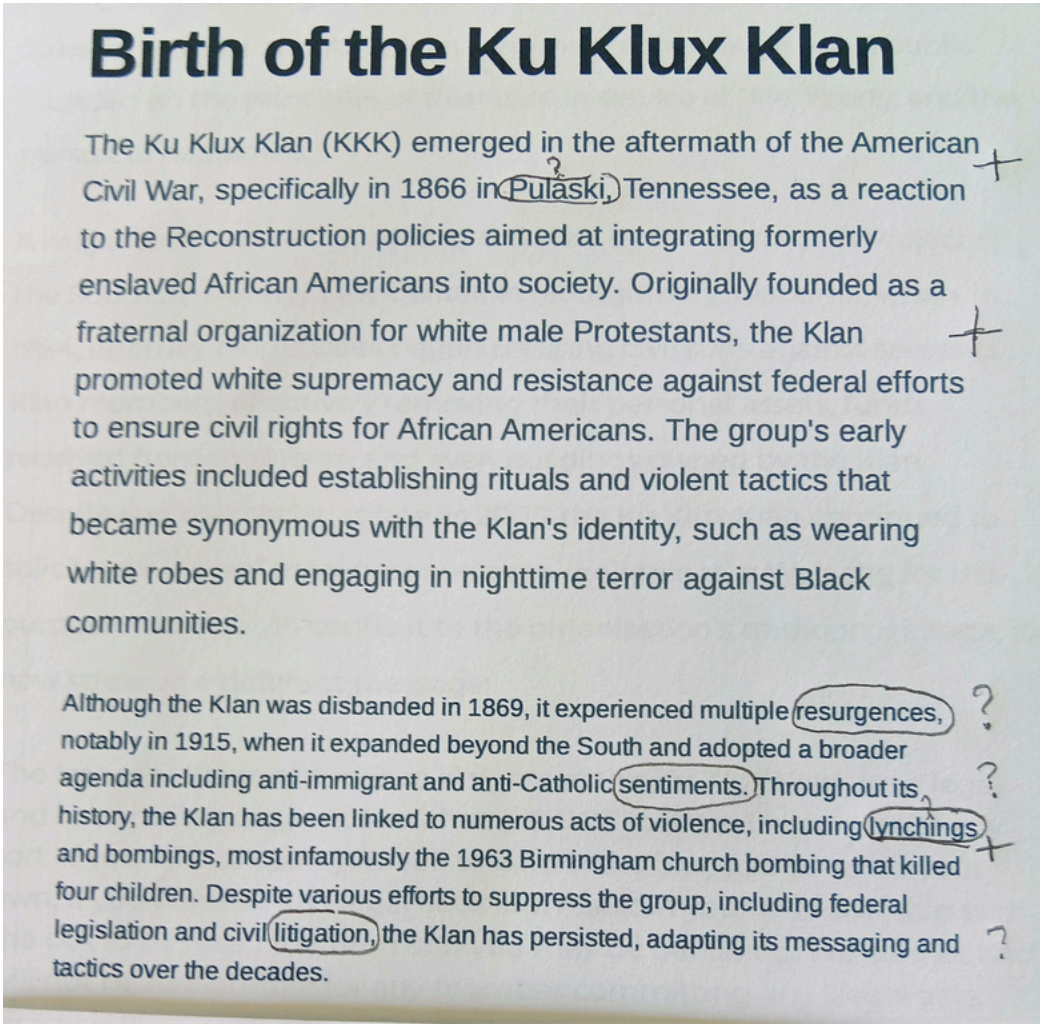
After students have grasped the use of a limited number of symbols, the teacher can add others. With older and more experienced students, teachers may introduce a more expansive list of coding symbols for such things as unknown vocabulary (perhaps by circling the words) or facts that support a main idea (perhaps by underlining useful phrases).

Figure 3. *Post-it Notes for Annotations*



These annotation signs are a slight variation of the suggested annotation signs listed in the chart on p. 12, though I thought a better fit for these students.

Figure 4. *A Student's Annotations Article on the Ku Klux Klan*



Birth of the Ku Klux Klan

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) emerged in the aftermath of the American Civil War, specifically in 1866 in Pulaski, Tennessee, as a reaction to the Reconstruction policies aimed at integrating formerly enslaved African Americans into society. Originally founded as a fraternal organization for white male Protestants, the Klan promoted white supremacy and resistance against federal efforts to ensure civil rights for African Americans. The group's early activities included establishing rituals and violent tactics that became synonymous with the Klan's identity, such as wearing white robes and engaging in nighttime terror against Black communities.

Although the Klan was disbanded in 1869, it experienced multiple resurgences, notably in 1915, when it expanded beyond the South and adopted a broader agenda including anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiments. Throughout its history, the Klan has been linked to numerous acts of violence, including lynchings and bombings, most infamously the 1963 Birmingham church bombing that killed four children. Despite various efforts to suppress the group, including federal legislation and civil litigation, the Klan has persisted, adapting its messaging and tactics over the decades.

Ebsco, *https://www.ebsco.com/who-we-are*

In the younger grades, teachers may want to introduce annotation through symbols for red light and green light. The green light communicates, "I understand this, full steam ahead." The red light says, "Time to stop for an explanation or clarification." Students can use red or green pencils, highlighters, or markers for this.

Annotations encourage curiosity by highlighting students' questions. When the teacher invites students to share their annotations, this can lead to discussion. To encourage further thinking after discussion, a teacher may wish to introduce a culminating question that asks students to compose a paragraph that either elaborates on what they've learned or states and supports an opinion with details from the text. For example, a teacher might ask the class to identify the influences and conditions that led an individual like Christa McAuliffe, John Lewis or Jimmy Carter to significant achievement. When a teacher asks students to identify and share their opinions about the most powerful spurs to achievement, the teacher is recognizing ambiguity and encouraging curiosity.

Concluding Thoughts

Curiosity is a strong motivator for the necessary focus and questioning that leads to reading comprehension. Neuroscientists have found that curiosity triggers a chemical response in the brain. The release of dopamine induces pleasure for a person in the act of discovery. Teachers can develop ways to support authentic engagement and curiosity.

Discerning and respecting students' questions is key, and, fortunately, we don't have to start from scratch in this effort. Questioning the author (Beck, McKeown & Kugan, 2013) and shared inquiry are just two effective strategies for focusing on students' questions.

I hope you will want to try these in your classroom, and I would like to offer some advice. As teachers, we are learning along with our students, and with practice, we are honing our skills. In developing something new in our practice, the important thing is to begin. Experience will show what works and what doesn't. Teachers are authorities on their students' capacities and needs, and I hope you will respect your own knowledge of your students. Most of us are not masters at first, but we can revise and add techniques with time and experience.

Answer to this issue's Curious Question:

Words & Languages of Origin

Alligator – Spanish

Ire – from Anglo-Saxon

Jungle – Sanskrit

Lemon – Persian

Robot – Czech

Sugar – Arabic

Tea – Chinese

Umbrella – Italian

Wagon – Dutch

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Meet the Writer and Editors


Dorothy Leech, MA, CALT

Dorothy Leech has worked as a teacher and learning specialist for over 20 years. A Certified Academic Language Therapist and Language and Learning Specialist, she currently works at the Greenwood School for neurodiverse, adolescent boys.

She has a Master's Degree from Columbia University's Teachers College and completed the Academic Language Therapy Association's rigorous training at Teacher's College under Judith Birsh's direction. Her experience includes international educational collaboration and leadership roles in a study group for examination of neurodiversity and teaching methods. She has given presentations and led roundtable discussions at five national and state conferences on the subject of the connections between reading comprehension and written expression.


Hallie Cohen, CALT, SLDI

Hallie Cohen's expertise in structured language and literacy is grounded in extensive training and over 30 years of teaching experience. She currently serves as a language therapist and assistant to a speech-language pathologist at the Greenwood School in Putney, VT. Hallie is a Certified Academic Language Therapist and an Orton-Gillingham practitioner. Hallie's certifications include: Certified Academic Language Therapist through Academic Language Therapist Association and the International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council; Certified Structured Literacy Dyslexia Interventionist through the Center for Effective Reading Institute; Advanced Orton-Gillingham training through Mayerson Academy, Mt. St. Joseph; and Orton-Gillingham trained through the Children's Dyslexia Center. To expand her understanding of structured-language approaches, she trained in Lindamood-Bell's Visualizing and Verbalizing and Wilson's reading programs. In addition, Hallie has training in the alphabet phonics approach through Literacy Through Multisensory Teaching, a cohort established by Judith Birsh at Columbia Teachers College. Last year, Hallie began presenting her work on sentence-level comprehension at national conferences in New York and Georgia. She attended the Ohio State University, State University of New York - Binghamton, and Ithaca College, receiving degrees in music performance and education.


Dorinne Dorfman, Ed. D.

Dorinne Dorfman, Ed.S., Ed.D., A/OGA, has served as a teacher and principal for nearly 30 years in Vermont schools. After completing her undergraduate studies at Goddard College, she earned her Master's and Doctorate in Educational Leadership at the University of Vermont. As a postdoctoral Fulbright Scholar, she taught at the Technical University of Berlin and conducted research on democratic education in Germany. Since completing an Education Specialist Degree in Reading and Literacy Instruction at Bay Path University, Dr. Dorfman teaches evidence-aligned literacy at Barre Town Middle School.