

activities with newfound confidence and skill—and even, as you’ll discover, enthusiasm.

### Whole-Class Discussion and Debate

People truly do enjoy sharing what they have learned from close reading. Do our teachers know the findings of an ASCD survey that asked students how they like to learn? Eighty-three percent of them indicated that “discussion and debate” was a method that would “excite them most” (Azzam, 2008). How often are the rudiments of effective discussion—and its immense appeal for students—taught in preservice training or reinforced in staff development and faculty meetings (which ought to be among our primary staff development opportunities)? How often do we reward and recognize the successful use of classroom discussion?

Believe me: Once students have had the benefit of close reading, annotating, and partner-sharing, they will be eager to discuss and debate issues they find in their textbooks, historical documents, and editorials, or in print and online publications like *TIME for Kids*. For example, students might debate topics like these:

- The pros and cons of T. Boone Pickens’s “Plan for Energy Independence” (there is a lot of very readable stuff on this available on the Internet).
- Healthcare legislation—good or bad policy?
- President Obama’s 2008 Philadelphia speech justifying his relationship to the Reverend Wright. Most of the speech is very interesting because it’s so personal, and it is very readable by upper elementary students.
- President Lincoln’s second inaugural address. Would it be conciliatory or inflammatory to the average Southerner of the time?
- Jay Gatsby’s character: Should we sympathize with him (as a victim of the culture of the 1920s) or condemn him for the tragic events in *The Great Gatsby*?

We’ll see plenty of additional examples of such interesting topics and texts in the coming chapters.

We greatly underestimate both the educational power and enjoyment students derive from such discussions or debates, if they are adequately prepared for them by the steps described above. But to get the most out of discussion, we should establish clear criteria for productive participation.

Remember that a good discussion is not a free-for-all; it should be tied directly to the posted learning goal or question and follow simple procedures that should be explicitly taught and reinforced like any good lesson.

To become good listeners and communicators, students need modeling, guided practice, and formative assessment as they learn to meet criteria such as the following:

- Always cite the text when making an argument.
- When disagreeing with another’s conclusions, argument, or solutions, briefly restate what they said, don’t interrupt, and be civil and respectful.
- Be concise and stay on point.
- Avoid distracting verbal tics (such as overuse of “like” or “you know”).

This kind of brief rubric could be enough (less is more). But if we want students to become clear, articulate speakers, all of the above must be demonstrated, modeled, and reinforced by the teacher throughout discussions. (If these are consistently reinforced throughout the school, the benefits will be compounded.)

I don’t think we can overestimate the value of such discussions. I recently observed a Socratic discussion at Tempe Preparatory Academy (in a chemistry class, of all places). I was deeply impressed by how the habit of such regular discussions in most of the school’s classes had made the students into such poised, confident, and

effective speakers and listeners. The conversation was so engaging that students stayed after the bell rang.

A nice variation might be the “fishbowl” discussions recommended by assessment expert Rick Stiggins (1994), where an outside ring of students observes and evaluates the discussion shared among the students in the inner ring. This strategy could greatly enhance students’ discussion skills.

Discussion skills are critical in every sphere and as preparation for individual presentations. They are not only for the college-bound or the gifted; they are for *all* students, who deserve to participate in them regularly—at least twice a week in most courses (more on this in the subject area chapters).

Fortunately, effective text-based reading and discussion are, in turn, *the perfect preparation for writing*—which takes thinking to an even higher level. More than perhaps any other activity, writing enhances students’ ability to think, make connections, and achieve clarity, logic, and precision. Writing enables us to discern and then express critical distinctions between truth and half-truth, between good sense and attractive nonsense. Enormous power attaches to those who *do* write and *can* write (Graff, 2003; National Commission on Writing, 2003).

### Student Writing, with Reference to the Text

I won’t be exhaustive or overly prescriptive here; you’ll find more detail in the subject area chapters. And you could modify or rearrange some of the steps I’ll describe.

Writing, from short scribbles to more formal pieces, profits from the previous processes of close reading, annotation, and discussion of one or more texts. Armed with these understandings, students should return to the text and do the following:

- Quietly review and re-read their notes, underlinings, or annotations to decide which they will write about and which would best

students could be doing—in all courses combined—at least 150 hours of reading *every year*—enough to work an educational miracle (no matter where a student might begin). This is especially powerful if joined with regular, purposeful discussions about their reading.

### Discussion

Discussion is a critical companion to reading. The English curriculum must provide plenty of opportunities for students to share, as Conley (2005) writes, their “personal experiences and values,” as well as their opinions and interpretations, as they learn to “support their arguments and provide evidence for their assertions” (p. 81).

I would recommend that students participate in at least three discussions per week about their readings—be they books, poems, or articles. This work would follow the general lines described in the literacy template from Chapter 3. To ensure that these discussions are engaging and successful for every teacher, the team should develop, refine, and share good questions and prompts, informed by something like Conley’s four simple standards/habits of mind, starting no later than 2nd grade.

Students will gain immeasurably more from discussions if we make use of a simple rubric like the one described in Chapter 3:

- Always cite the text when making an argument.
- When commenting on or disagreeing with another’s conclusions, argument, or solutions, briefly restate what they said, don’t interrupt, and be civil and respectful.
- Be concise and stay on point.
- Avoid distracting verbal tics (such as overuse of “like” and “you know”).

Conley also recommends that teachers establish clear criteria and ground rules for discussions. Students should learn to avoid overgeneralizations and to distinguish between strong and weak support for their arguments—and to disagree respectfully (2005, p. 82).

To learn these critical life and college-preparation skills, frequent discussion must become a mainstay of literary and textual studies. These two skills—reading and discussion—would in turn be the basis for success on the required writing assignments.

### Writing

Schools should establish clear, quantitative agreements about the minimum number of writing assignments all students will complete in the same course. Conley recommends that there be approximate specifications for the number of pages for the agreed-upon papers, including both short and long research papers.

To maintain and achieve good writing “standards” (in the best sense), regardless of teacher, there should be at least one “exemplar” paper for each agreed-upon written assignment. Exemplar papers are exceedingly useful as both teaching and learning tools, as teachers guide students through them before and during the writing process.

Guiding all of this should be a “common scoring guide” with adaptations for specific writing assignments (2005, p. 82). Here, too, and consistent with the findings of the “college knowledge” study, Conley recommends that writing, like reading, have an argumentative focus (p. 81). Students should routinely be asked to write several of their papers in at least two drafts, as the second draft is where we learn the craft of writing (p. 81). As William Zinsser observes, “the essence of writing is rewriting” (in Schmoker, 2006, p. 167).

More specifically, I would recommend several formal papers starting in the 2nd grade: one formal, expository/argumentative paper a month, about nine per year, written in at least two drafts. These should be based on close reading, analysis, and discussion of one or more fiction or nonfiction books, poems, or articles read that month. Some of these papers could be short research papers, with a requirement for a certain number of outside sources.