



English, Grade 10 Academic

Coming of Age

A Guide to Working with Literature Circles

Defining Literature Circles (from www.literaturecircles.com)

1. Students choose their own reading materials
2. Small temporary groups are formed, based upon book choice
3. Different groups read different books
4. Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule to discuss their reading
5. Kids use written or drawn notes to guide both their reading and discussion
6. Discussion topics come from the students
7. Group meetings aim to be open, natural conversations about books, so personal connections, digressions, and open-ended questions are welcome
8. In newly-forming groups, students may play a rotating assortment of task roles
9. The teacher serves as a facilitator, not a group member or instructor
10. Evaluation is by teacher observation and student self-evaluation
11. A spirit of playfulness and fun pervades the room.
12. When books are finished, readers share with their classmates, and then new groups form around new reading choices.

WHERE LITERATURE CIRCLES FIT IN "BEST PRACTICE" CLASSROOMS

Integrative Units: Thematic/Interdisciplinary Studies, Problem/Project-Based Learning, Negotiated Curriculum

Small Group Activities: Partners, Teams, Group Investigations, Centers, Peer Writing Groups, *Literature Circles*

Representing-to-Learn: Written and Graphic Thinking; Journals, Logs, Sketchbooks, Classroom Workshop

Studio/Laboratory Method: Teacher and Peer Conferences; Process, Practice, Modeling

Authentic Experiences: Real Materials, People, Places; Primary Sources, Simulations; Community Research & Service

Reflective Assessment: Student Goal-Setting and Reflection; Formative focus; Parent-Teacher-Student Partnership

TIPS FOR SETTING UP LITERATURE CIRCLES

- Explain to students the purpose of the literature circle format. Emphasize students can be the centre of knowledge or “experts” on a text just as a teacher can be. Together, they can make sense of a work of literature without looking to the teacher for the “correct answer” or interpretation of the book.
- Emphasize the need for cooperation (see the Group Roles Appendix—you may want to begin by discussing positive group roles they can take on).
- Set a clear policy for students who miss meetings and/or do not have their role sheets prepared on a meeting day (see Potential Problems and Solutions for more tips).

THE FIRST MEETING

- Once students have chosen their books for study, have a “practice meeting.”
- Have students choose their roles and meet with students performing the same roles in different literature circle groups (for example, all the Summarizers meeting, all the Illustrators meet).
- Let students prepare their first role sheets during class time, to ensure that everyone will be ready for the practice meeting.
- Sit in with role groups and give them tips for their meeting. Begin with Discussion Directors and give them tips on how to manage time, ensure everyone gets a chance to speak and ask thought-provoking questions. Emphasize to Discussion Directors that they are the leaders of the first meeting, and should be well-prepared.
- Have students meet. After the meeting, debrief what worked, what didn’t, and what could be done differently for the next meeting.
- If one group had a particularly successful meeting, use them as a “fishbowl group.” Have them meet again and the seat the rest of the class around them to silently observe the meeting. Debrief afterwards.

RUNNING LITERATURE CIRCLE MEETINGS

- Make Literature Circle meeting dates clear by writing them on the board. You may wish to give students in-class time before a meeting to work on role sheets.
- Have clear consequences for missing a meeting. Have a plan for what you will do if students are absent or don’t have their role sheets complete.
- When meetings are in progress, circulate and intervene if necessary. You may want to sit in on a different group’s meeting each time. You can also tape record meetings.
- Have students hand in their role sheets for formative evaluation at the end of the meeting and give them feedback on what they could do better next time.
- Have students do a peer evaluation and/or reflect on their meetings for a follow up assignment.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

- **UNPRODUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS:** Often literature circle groups will have very short conversations, and this is usually because they are unsure of how to have a productive conversation. You may want to review Bloom’s Taxonomy of question asking to help them pose interesting questions. You can also create an “end product” that they must produce at the end of the meeting. For example, have them make a list of one comment, one question, and one “confusion” that came out of that day’s meeting.
- **ABSENCES/INCOMPLETE WORK:** A literature circle meeting should be treating like a test or presentation date, with a student calling in or producing a note for their absence. If you have many students away in a group, you may wish to regroup or combine groups, or even hold a “class literature circle” with you as facilitator. Students with frequent absences may need to be given an independent assignment instead of meeting with a group.

Completed role sheets should be treated as “tickets of entry” into the meeting. If students have not completed role sheets, they should sit out and complete them; if they do, they may then join their group. Collect role sheets at the end of class to monitor class work.

- **GROUPINGS:** You may want to determine groups by book choices, by ability, mixed ability, student-choice, etc. Having a strong Discussion Director, particularly for the first meeting, can help set a positive tone for the group. Emphasize to students that Discussion Directors should be students with good attendance and punctuality.
- **LACK OF ENGAGEMENT:** Some students may find role sheets too rigid for them. Give students the option of loosening roles, or making new roles for themselves. Give them bonus options, such as creative writing pieces inspired by their books.

OTHER ACTIVITIES FOR LITERATURE CIRCLES

- Begin with a fun activity to “break the ice” for groups, such as a questionnaire or game. This helps them to bond and makes for a better literature circle group.
- Before a meeting, give students 15 minutes for silent writing. You can give a topic related to the day’s reading, or a free choice. This also gives students with incomplete role sheets time to complete them before the meeting.
- Use literature circle groups for other writing activities, such as peer editing and workshop groups. Have them share creative pieces or journals done in class.
- Give students the option of a “bonus” to complete in addition to their role sheets. The bonus could be the completion of a second role or a creative piece (such as a picture or found poem) in addition to their assigned role. Students can then share their creative pieces with their groups and/or the class.
- Keep literature circle meetings relatively short, and reconvene as a class to debrief meetings. Have groups share details of their conversations with the class, or pose a question to the class that they could not answer in their own group.
- Have students read aloud to the class from their books, or present their books in a “book club format.”
- Have a jigsaw activity in which students form new groups of people reading different books. They can share details of their books, read a selected passage, and look for connections between that book and others (this is particularly helpful if all the books are thematically linked).
- Match students with a partner and have them write “pen pal” letters about their books to each other.
- Have groups make a “book club guide” for another group who may read their book, with discussion questions, activities, interesting facts, etc.
- Have students create a “gallery” for their book by posting artwork or creative pieces inspired by their work. This could also be a display for the school library, or a literary festival in the school.
- Have students write or re-enact a crucial moment from the book to the rest of the class.
- Have students write “missing chapters” for their books.

POTENTIAL LITERATURE CIRCLE REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the role you were assigned for this Literature Circle meeting. Describe how you went about preparing for this role and the aspects of this role that you found enjoyable and/or challenging
2. Describe the impressions you had of the reading selection before going into your Literature Circle meeting (i.e. aspects you found interesting, challenging, troubling; favourite events or passages; questions you wanted answered)
3. Discuss one other person’s role in your group and what you found helpful and/or interesting about what they had to say and/or present.
4. Discuss three interesting topics/issues that were discussed during the Literature Circle and how they shaped your understanding of the reading selection and/or novel as a whole.
5. Which questions or topics raised were still unresolved by the end of the Literature Circle meeting? What questions about the novel do you still have as a group?
6. What are your impressions of the reading selection after having your Literature Circle meeting?

7. Are there any suggestions you have for improving the Literature Circle format? How do you feel about Literature Circles as an alternative to a traditional teacher-led novel study? Which style do you prefer and why?