Vocabulary Development & Instruction
Grades K-5: What to Know & How to Grow
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<td>Use grade-level academic vocabulary appropriately in speaking and writing.</td>
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Taking Delight in Words: Using Oral Language to Build Young Children’s Vocabularies
by Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, Linda Kucan

Overview: Learn some of the ways that prekindergarten through elementary school teachers can enhance the vocabulary development of young children. This article focuses on teaching words from texts that are read aloud to children and presents activities that help young children make sense of new words.

The following exchange occurred in a first-grade classroom in February:

Jason: Is this going to be an ordinary day

Ms. H: What would make it ordinary?

Jason: If we like did the same old thing.

Ms. H: What might make it not ordinary, make it exceptional?

Jason: If you gave us prizes for being good — I mean exceptional and mature.

All of the children in this class of more than 20 students had been having difficulty learning to read, and many of them came from poverty backgrounds. In January, these children were brought together for most of the morning for intensive literacy instruction with a gifted teacher. The teacher had two major goals for the children: (1) They would learn to read; and (2) their listening and speaking vocabularies would be enlarged and enriched. By February, it was not unusual to hear the kind of conversation captured in the above example.

The purpose of this article is to explain some of the ways that prekindergarten through elementary school teachers can enhance the vocabulary development of young children. It focuses on teaching words from texts that are read aloud to children rather than read by children, and it presents activities that take into account the kind of support that young children need to make sense of those words.

We start by noting where words for young children’s vocabulary development do not come from — and that is from the basal text materials that children are asked to read early in the course of reading acquisition. This is because, given beginning readers' word identification limitations, the text materials used in the early phases of learning to read should comprise words children know from oral language, that is, simple words like run and ball. As such, the early text materials are not good sources for adding new words to children's vocabulary repertoires. Emphatically, however, this does not mean that adding to and enriching children's vocabulary repertoires should be put on hold, it only means that enriching young children's vocabulary cannot be best developed through the words in the materials that young children read themselves.

Young children's listening and speaking competence is in advance of their reading and writing competence. That is, they can understand much more sophisticated content presented in oral language than they can read independently. As children are developing their reading and writing competence, we need to take advantage of their listening and speaking competencies to enhance their vocabulary development. We certainly must not hold back adding vocabulary to
children's repertoires until their word recognition becomes adequate. Thus, a major source for identifying interesting words are the delightful trade books that are read to children, and we will turn to them in a moment.

But it's important to note that the ideas in the little stories young children read on their own can still be a useful resource. Though the words in the stories are not appropriate for enriching children's vocabularies, some of the ideas in the simplest stories can be characterized by sophisticated words. Thus, after a simple story has been read from a basal, the teacher can describe a character or incident with an interesting word. Consider for example, a story in a first-grade basal in which some children make cookies. The story is mostly built around pictures, with the vocabulary limited to some children's names and words such as pass, pat, pan, and cookies. The story ends with the children eating the cookies and saying, "Mmmm. Good!"

The teacher could remind the children that after the characters in the story ate the cookies they said, "Mmmm. Good!" and explain that another way to say that is that the characters thought the cookies were scrumptious. She could explain the word further by saying that when something is scrumptious, it tastes great. Scrumptious lends itself to a variety of other interactions that children could have with the word. They could be asked to think of foods that they think are scrumptious, as well as suggesting foods that they do not think are scrumptious. The notion could go further with asking the children what would be scrumptious to a mouse? To a cat?

The teacher could also mention that in the story the children ate up all the cookies really quickly, explaining that another way to say that is that they devoured the cookies. The children could be asked to suggest foods that they would devour. Even further the teacher might suggest that the reason the children devoured the food is that they were famished. So, even though the stories that young readers read do not offer words to teach, the stories are still a resource for the teacher to use in generating target words for vocabulary development.

As mentioned earlier, trade books that are read aloud to children are excellent sources of sophisticated words, and in recent work, we have been able to use them to advantage. Specifically, several years ago, we initiated Text Talk, a research and development project aimed at capturing the benefits of read-alouds. Text Talk has two main goals. One goal is to enhance comprehension through interspersed open questions that asked children to consider the ideas in the story, talk about them, and make connections among them as the story moves along. The second goal is to enhance vocabulary development, which is our focus in this article.

For Text Talk, we identified 80 children's trade books, and for each one, we selected about three words per story for direct teaching following the reading of the story. Several issues about the books and words need to be emphasized. First, although we think all the books are good children's books, there is nothing exclusive about the books we used. That is, there are many other books that could have been chosen. Second, although we selected an average of three words per book, we could have selected more. We considered issues of instructional time and the rate at which books were being read to children, which was one or two a week. As such, we thought that about three words per book was a reasonable number. However, there are many other approaches to determining the number of words taught. For example, if fewer books are read to children, more words from each book might well be identified for instruction.

And, though we only targeted three words per book for substantial vocabulary work, each of the books used has a wide and interesting vocabulary beyond these three words. Regular read-alouds from these books allow children to be generally and continually exposed to lovely and delightful words.

Sequenced activities for teaching words to young children

In our Text Talk project, direct instruction in vocabulary occurs after a story has been read, discussed, and wrapped up. This provides a strong context with which to begin the word-meaning introduction. But note that in cases where we thought that a word was needed for story comprehension, we suggested that the teacher stop and briefly explain the word during reading.

Let's consider the vocabulary instruction for A Pocket for Corduroy, a story about a teddy bear (Corduroy) who spends
the night at a laundromat. Our targeted words were reluctant, drowsy and desperately.

As an example of the kinds of instructional suggestions provided to teachers, consider the following activities for reluctant:

Teacher: In the story, Lisa was reluctant to leave the laundromat without Corduroy. Reluctant means you are not sure you want to do something. Say the word with me.

Someone might be reluctant to eat a food that he or she never had before, or someone might be reluctant to ride a roller-coaster because it looks scary.

Tell about something you would be reluctant to do. Try to use reluctant when you tell about it. You could start by saying something like "I would be reluctant to________." What's the word we've been talking about?

- First, the word was contextualized for its role in the story. (In the story, Lisa was reluctant to leave the laundromat without Corduroy.)
- The children were asked to repeat the word so that they could create a phonological representation of the word. (Say the word with me.)
- Next, the meaning of the word was explained using the term student-friendly definitions — that is, a definition that characterizes the word and explains its meaning in everyday language. (Reluctant means you are not sure you want to do something.)
- Examples in contexts other than the one used in the story were provided. (Someone might be reluctant to eat a food that they never had before, or someone might be reluctant to ride a roller-coaster because it looks scary.)
- Children interacted with examples of the word's use or provided their own examples. (Tell about something you would be reluctant to do. Try to use reluctant when you tell about it. You could start by saying something like "I would be reluctant to_____.")
- Finally, children said the word again to reinforce its phonological representation. (What's the word we've been talking about?)

Vocabulary instruction in Text Talk always began with the context from the story because it provided a situation that was already familiar to children and provided a rich example of the word's use. However, it is important to move beyond this context in providing and eliciting examples of the word's use. This is not only because multiple contexts are needed for learners to construct a meaningful and memorable representation of the word. It is also important because young children have a very strong tendency to limit a word's use to the context in which it was initially presented.

Consider the following exchange, which took place when a class of kindergarten children were asked to talk about something they might be reluctant to do:

Child 1: I would be reluctant to leave my teddy bear in the laundromat.

Teacher: Well, that's just like what Lisa did in the story. Try to think about something you might be reluctant to do that is not like Lisa.

Child 2: I would be reluctant to leave my teddy bear in the supermarket.

Teacher: Okay, that's a little different than what Lisa was reluctant to do, but try to think of something that you would be reluctant to do that is very different than what Lisa was reluctant to do.

Child 3: I would be reluctant to leave my drums at my friend's house.

Teacher: That's pretty different from what Lisa was reluctant to do, but can we think of something that you would be reluctant to do that isn't about leaving something somewhere?

Child 3: I would be reluctant to change a baby's diaper!

Two of us were present when that exchange occurred, and we both agreed that because of the diaper example, most of the children in that class would remember the meaning of reluctant with ease!
Student Friendly Definitions
Below we provide some examples of target words we chose from trade books and the kind of language we used to develop student-friendly definitions for young children:

- If something is *dazzling*, that means that it’s so bright that you can hardly look at it. After lots of long, gloomy winter days, sunshine on a sunny day might seem dazzling.
- *Strange* describes something different from what you are used to seeing or hearing.
- *Exhausted* means feeling so tired that you can hardly move.
- When people are *amusing*, they are usually funny or they make you happy to watch them. A clown at a circus is amusing.
- When someone is a nuisance, he or she is bothering you.

Note that some of the definitions have an example embedded in them. For some words it is particularly hard to describe their meaning in general terms to young children given the limited vocabulary they have. That is, it can be hard to make new words clearly differentiated through words that are understandable to young children. Hence, folding an example into the definition can help to clarify and pinpoint the word's meaning.

Uses of the Word Beyond the Story Context
Besides sometimes folding examples into an initial definition, it is very important to provide examples of the word's use in contexts beyond its use in the story. Creating examples is not always easy. We get started by thinking about places young children are familiar with (e.g., school, home, park, street, playground); things they do (e.g., eat, sleep, play, go to school, watch TV); things they like and are interested in (e.g., animals, food, clothing, toys, books, nature). Consider the examples we developed for the words defined above:

- For *dazzling*: a big diamond ring; teeth after getting them cleaned at the dentist.
- For *strange*: a dog that meows; a fish that barks.
- For *exhausted*: how someone probably feels after running a long, long race, or after cleaning the house all day.
- For *amusing*: watching animals play at the zoo; seeing someone perform magic tricks.
- For *nuisance*: a baby brother or sister making a mess; someone who keeps interrupting you when you are talking.

About the authors
Isabel L. Beck is professor of education in the Department of Instruction and Learning at the University of Pittsburgh and senior scientist at the university's Learning Research and Development Center, where Margaret G. McKeown is a research scientist. Linda Kucan is assistant professor in the Department of Language, Reading and Exceptionalities at Appalachian State University.

The article is excerpted with permission from *Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction*, by Isabel Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, and Linda Kucan, the Guilford Press, New York, © 2002.

Source: https://www.readingrockets.org/article/taking-delight-words-using-oral-language-build-young-childrens-vocabulary
Language skills and literacy achievement are highly correlated. “The Report of the National Early Literacy Panel” (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008) found that oral language – the ability to produce or comprehend spoken language, including vocabulary and grammar – is correlated with later literacy achievement. The more children know about language, the better equipped they are to succeed in reading and writing.

Furthermore, the language children are exposed to at home and in school influences the development of their language comprehension. This, in turn, influences their ability to develop reading and writing skills. Language development in the preschool years is relevant to the later teaching of reading and writing, especially in the primary grades.

The level of language proficiency children bring to kindergarten is varied and depends on how much exposure to oral language they have had prior to entering school. Seminal research conducted by Hart and Risley (1995) and replicated by others, Fernald, Marchman & Weisleder (2013) determined that there are large discrepancies in oral language development and the gap between language-advanced and language-delayed children grows throughout the elementary years (Biemiller, 2001). All students, but especially those with limited language exposure, benefit from classroom instruction that is designed to accelerate language learning and growth in the use of academic language.

Academic language includes academic vocabulary (more formal words typically associated with content learned in school) and syntactic awareness (the ability to recognize and use the correct arrangement of words in sentences typically found in the formal text used in school). If primary grade teachers are planful and purposeful about incorporating language development activities, they can play an important role in closing the language gap before students move beyond grade 3.

Teach Listening Skills

It is important to teach students about receptive language. Specifically, they need to understand that the goal of using receptive language is not just “hearing” what someone is saying, but also “listening and thinking” about what they are saying. Consider using the visuals below to illustrate the difference for students.
Here are some suggestions for teaching speaking and listening skills:

- Explicitly teach students how to be good listeners, including role-playing
- Encourage students to make eye contact with the speaker when listening
- Teach students to be aware of non-verbal communication while listening
- Teach students to take turns and not interrupt while listening
- Teach students to ask questions to clarify understanding
- Model good listening skills by genuinely listening to your students
- Promote active listening to solve conflicts
- Provide conversation centers in the classroom that encourage conversation and attentive listening
- Conduct games in which you call out directions and instructions for students to follow such as Follow the Leader and Simon Says
- Play the Whisper Chain game: whisper an action message to the first student, then each student passes the message around a circle; the last student performs the action
- Provide access to audiobooks

The Listening Ladder is a helpful tool for reminding students how to be a good listener (see below).

![Listening Ladder](image)

**Model Challenging Academic Language**

How teachers talk with children is important! To help students develop strong oral language skills, it is important for teachers to be sure that their language interactions give practice with the following:

- Hearing and using rich and abstract vocabulary
- Hearing and using increasingly complex sentences
- Using words to express ideas and to ask questions about things they don’t understand

Academic language is:

- The language used in the classroom;
- The language of text;
- The language of assessments; and
- The language of academic success.
As models of academic language for young students, teachers should speak with *precision and correctness*. Teachers must be conscious of their own language in the classroom, being careful not to “dumb down” the way they speak by purposely using basic vocabulary and simple sentences. Likewise, teachers should encourage students to use precise and extended language.

Here are some suggestions for modeling and encouraging use of academic language:

- Set high expectations for language use for yourself and students, including use of challenging vocabulary and sentence structure
- Use sophisticated words when talking with students to expand their vocabularies
- Expand and recast students’ utterances
- Draw students’ attention to fluctuations in speech rate and words that are stressed depending on the situation (e.g., giving directions, being funny, being upset about something)
- Emphasize intonation and model appropriate stress patterns when speaking
- Emphasize punctuation use when reading aloud
- Ask students to restate or paraphrase what others have said
- Model for students how to extend answers to questions and ask them to do the same

Ask yourself these questions to help make sure you are supporting academic language:

- Is my curriculum and classroom environment rich in print, literature and language?
- Do I provide time for children to look, listen and talk about books?
- Do I integrate writing, speaking, listening and reading into all content areas?
- Do I encourage students to talk and write about personal experiences and ideas?

This blog entry is excerpted from the book “Keys to Early Writing” by Joan Sedita. To order the book or take the related online training course, visit the [Keys to Literacy website](https://keystoliteracy.com/blog/fostering-academic-language-development-in-primary-grades/).

References:


Joan Sedita

Joan Sedita is the founder of Keys to Literacy and author of the Keys to Literacy professional development programs. She is an experienced educator, nationally recognized speaker and teacher trainer. She has worked for over 35 years in the literacy education field and has presented to thousands of teachers and related professionals at schools, colleges, clinics and professional conferences.

Overview: Dialogic reading involves an adult and child having a dialogue around the text they are reading aloud together. Learn how to use this strategy effectively to help kids build vocabulary and verbal fluency skills and understand story structure and meaning. Downloadable handouts to help guide parents in using dialogic reading are available in English and 14 other languages.

Parents and teachers alike nearly universally accept the importance of reading to children. Even pediatricians and hospitals encourage it. However, reading aloud can have greater educational value than serving as a filler activity before bedtime or lunch.

It is easy to simply take a book off the shelf, read it and maybe ask a few questions at the end of the story without giving much thought to the selection of the book or the purpose of reading the story. Maybe it is the child’s favorite, or it is just the right length for the time allotted. Maybe it fits with the class theme of the week. However, these are all adult-directed examples. The adult selects the book, reads the story and asks the questions or leads the discussion.

A more engaging and productive alternative is interactive reading or dialogic reading. Dialogic reading involves an adult and child having a dialogue around the text they are reading. Their conversation includes defining new vocabulary, improving verbal fluency, introducing story components and developing narrative skills.

When parents and teachers properly plan and execute dialogic reading, research suggests it can be particularly effective at improving skills such as print awareness, oral language and comprehension. Most importantly, it helps model how good readers think about the text as they are reading it. The benefits of dialogic reading are not just for young children. Although the concept originated with picture book reading for preschoolers (Whitehurst et al., 1988), a wide body of research has extended its use to other ages and populations including students with disabilities (What Works Clearinghouse, 2010), struggling readers (Swanson et al., 2011) and English language learners (Brannon & Dauksas, 2014).

Different levels of questions in dialogic reading

A traditional implementation of dialogic reading involves repeatedly reading the same book and interacting around three levels of questions (Flynn, 2011).

- **Level 1** questions are basic “wh” type questions focused on what can immediately be seen (or read) in the text. Level 1 also includes introducing new vocabulary. For example, while pointing to a picture, the adult reader may ask, “What type of feet does this animal have?” Here the adult is looking for a specific, correct response to expand the child’s oral vocabulary.
Level 2 questions are open-ended and are used to solicit the child’s feedback. For example, the adult reader might ask, “What is happening in this part of the story?” Here the adult is trying to encourage the child to share what he or she is thinking about and make meaning from the text.

Level 3 questions are more advanced and introduce concepts like text features and story components. For example, the adult reader might ask, “Who was the main character and how did he feel?” This also may include questions that distance the student from the text and connect the story to their own life (e.g., “How would you feel if that happened to you?”).

Correct and incorrect ways to use dialogic reading

Dialogic reading:
- Is not "teacher reads, students listen"
- Is not teacher led
- Is not limited to narrative text with questions and discussions at the end
- Is not only for very young children

Although several strategies exist to facilitate the three tiers of questions in dialogic reading, the two most popular are known by the acronyms CROWD and PEER. Both have been covered in previous Iowa Reading Research Center blog posts, and this post will expand on the two strategies and provide another resource to help with planning a dialogic reading activity.

Covering question tiers with CROWD
CROWD is used to remember the types of questions to ask: completion, recall, open-ended, “wh” questions, and distancing. An extension of CROWD is CROWD-HS, which is used to encourage distancing prompts related to home and school (HS). Here is an example of CROWD-HS questions for the well-known story of The Three Little Pigs.

Completion question: “I’ll Huff, and I’ll Puff, and I’ll ..........................................................”

Answer: Blow your house down.

Recall question: Which house couldn’t the Big Bad Wolf blow down?

Answer: The one made of bricks.

Open-ended question: Why do you think the first pig built his house out of straw? Answer: It was the easiest to build. He was lazy.

“Wh” question: What kind of animal was after the pigs?

Answer: Wolf.

Distancing: How do you think the pigs felt when the wolf tried to get them?

Answer: (Answers will vary.) Scared, angry, sad.
Home question: If you had to build a playhouse at home, what kind would you build?

Answer: (Answers will vary.) Tree house, tent, fort.

School question: The wolf was a bully. He was mean to the three little pigs. What should you do if someone is bullying you at school?

Answer: (Answers will vary.) Tell a teacher. Tell them to stop. Ignore them.

Prompting more dialogue with PEER+PA

CROWD-HS is helpful for remembering the types of questions to ask, but remember that the point is to foster a dialogue about the text, not prompt one-word answers. The PEER (prompt, evaluate, expand, and repeat) strategy can be used to help the adult encourage deeper responses. An extension of PEER is PEER+PA, which is used to remind the adult to praise the child for engaging in conversation and help the child apply the response so it is meaningful. These components are applied throughout the dialogue with the child. Here is an example of using PEER+PA with one of the above CROWD-HS questions:

- Prompt the child to say something about the book.
  Adult: What kind of animal was after the three little pigs?
  
  Child: Wolf.

- Evaluate the child’s response.
  Adult thinks to self, “Yes, it was a wolf, but we can add more to that response.”

- Expand the child’s response.
  Adult: Yes, it was a big, bad wolf!

- Repeat the prompt.
  Adult: What kind of animal was after the three little pigs?
  Child: A big, bad wolf!

- Praise and Apply the child’s response.
  Adult: That’s right! The big bad wolf was after the three little pigs. Good job remembering the story! How would you feel if you saw a big bad wolf?
  
  Child: (Answers will vary.) I’d be scared and run away.

Teaching vocabulary through dialogic reading

Recall that an important goal of dialogic reading is to expand the oral language skills of students, particularly vocabulary. One way to do this is to engage in pre-reading activities to teach key vocabulary. Just as there are levels of questions to facilitate dialogue about the text, it is easy to think about vocabulary words in three tiers:

- **Tier 1** words are basic vocabulary words that should be in the child’s receptive and expressive vocabularies. Tier 1 words in the story of The Three Little Pigs would include: house, pig, wolf.
• **Tier 2** words occur with high frequency in texts for mature language users. These words should be taught to help expand the receptive and expressive vocabularies of the child. A Tier 2 word in the story of The Three Little Pigs might be eldest (some versions of the story characterize the first pig as the eldest of the three).

• **Tier 3** words are domain specific and best learned when needed in a content area or in a specific context. These words are less likely to occur in a story like The Three Little Pigs. However, a more sophisticated version of the story might include the Tier 3 word for the bricklaying tool the third pig used: trowel.

Although some words can be introduced during dialogic reading, it is important to carefully identify and pre-teach any words that might otherwise interfere with a student’s comprehension of the book. The adult reader can identify Tier 2 words that will be helpful for understanding the current text and that the child is likely to use or read in other settings.

Now that we are swimming in levels, tiers, and alphabet soup, how do we keep our heads above water, bring it all together, and actually engage in dialogic reading? The most important thing is to adequately prepare! This includes selecting appropriate text that encourages dialogue, identifying vocabulary to pre-teach, thinking of CROWD-HS questions, and anticipating child responses with which you can use PEER+PA to expand the dialogue.

The **Interactive Reading Guide** below can be put in every book to help you plan the vocabulary and questions you will include. The questions should be asked throughout the text, not just at the end, so do not forget to record a page number for each! This will make it easier for you or someone else to locate the targets for the conversation starters while implementing dialogic reading.

**About the author**

Jessica Sidler Folsom, Ph.D., is an assistant research scientist for the Iowa Reading Research Center at the University of Iowa. She earned her Ph.D. in Special Education and graduate certificate in Education Measurement and Statistics from Florida State University. She has experience as a quantitative methodologist and special educator.

**Source:** [https://www.readingrockets.org/article/dialogic-reading-having-conversation-about-books](https://www.readingrockets.org/article/dialogic-reading-having-conversation-about-books)
| Article #1 Oral language  
| “Taking Delight in Words: Using Oral Language to Build Young Children’s Vocabularies” |
| Article #2 Academic Vocabulary  
| “Fostering Academic Language Development in Primary Grades-Keys to Literacy” |
| Article #3 Dialogic Reading  
| “Dialogic Reading: Having a Conversation about Books” |
### Levels of Instruction

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<th>Example</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Incidental exposure</td>
<td>I don't know what I would have done. <em>Curiosity</em> might have gotten the better of me.</td>
<td>Teacher infuses a Tier 2 word into a discussion during the read aloud.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedded instruction</td>
<td>And he's using a stick-an oar-to help move the raft [pointing to illustration].</td>
<td>Teacher provides a synonym before the target term oar, pointing to the illustration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused instruction</td>
<td>Let's get set means let's get ready [elicit examples of things students get ready for].</td>
<td>Teacher leads a discussion on what it means to get set, including getting set for school and Christmas.</td>
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### “Corduroy”

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<th>Level of Instruction</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incidental exposure</td>
<td>I notice that Corduroy is <em>searching</em> right below the shelf he was on. Good place to start looking, right?</td>
<td>Teacher infuses a Tier 2 word into a think aloud prompt during read aloud.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embedded instruction</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Focused instruction</td>
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Create at least two prompts for each category for your book that you can use to prompt and build upon children’s language during dialogic reading. Include the page number that corresponds to the appropriate opportunity to use each prompt.

**Completion:** The reader creates an incomplete sentence to prompt the children to come up with the appropriate response (i.e., fill-in-the-blank). (e.g., Lily’s purse is ______ and she brings it ______)

**Recall:** The reader asks a question designed to help children remember key elements of the story. (e.g., What happened when Jose went back to school? What was missing from Corduroy’s overalls? How did Stephanie wear her hair?)

**Open-ended:** The reader asks a question or makes a statement that requires children to describe part of the story in their own words beyond just a “yes” or “no” response. (e.g., Tell me what you think is happening in this picture. How is Josie going to carry all of those apples?)

**Wh-questions:** The reader asks a question about the story that begins with what, where, who or why. (e.g., What do you think shy means? What does it mean to be embarrassed?)

**Distancing:** The reader helps children make connections between events that happen in the story to those that occur in their own lives. (e.g., Tell me about a time when you felt lost or you lost something. How did you feel when your friend moved away?)