

Lessons for Fostering
Collaborative Discussions

Discussion Connections



CCSS K-8
Speaking &
Listening
Standards

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Discussion Connections

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Discussion Connections is a set of lessons for teaching students how to link their ideas to others in a discussion. Being able to connect your ideas to what others are saying is a complex social skill that takes time and practice to develop. It requires students to actively listen to others, think about what’s been said, and then clearly state their own ideas. The strategies in this Mini Pack are specifically designed for text-based discussions, but they can be used in any type of class or group discussion. The number of lessons you use will depend on your grade level; you’ll find specific grade level suggestions on the next page.

Common Core Alignment (K–12)

The Common Core Speaking and Listening Standards use the term “collaborative discussions” to refer to any discussion, including one-on-one, group discussions, and teacher-led discussions. This Mini Pack addresses the first anchor standard, “Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.” The exact wording varies at each grade level, but students at almost every grade level are expected to develop these skills:



- Follow agreed-upon rules including listening to others, taking turns, gaining the floor in respectful ways, staying on topic, etc.
- Build on others’ talk and elaborate on points by linking your comments to others
- Come to the discussion prepared, having read required material
- Support your responses with details from the text
- Pose and respond to questions to clarify or follow up on information presented by other speakers

How to Foster Effective Collaborative Discussions

Fostering effective discussions begins with providing plenty of opportunities for students to talk and share ideas, but it certainly doesn’t end there. Asking students to “talk it over with your group” doesn’t always result in all students being engaged. Some students take over the discussion while others have nothing to say. Sometimes all students participate, but they are simply taking turns sharing their own viewpoint without listening to others. From all outward appearances, they appear to be having a discussion, but it’s not really much



of a discussion at all. In a true discussion, participants listen to each other and respond appropriately, building on each other's talk and elaborating points with their own views.

Lessons for Teaching Discussion Skills

In this Mini Pack, you'll find five Common Core aligned lessons for teaching students how to have effective discussions. The first two are mini lessons that lead up to the full discussion connections lessons. I've included teaching suggestions and thumbnails of the printables that go with each lesson. I also included black and white versions of the color task cards. Print only what you need for your class.



These lessons can be adapted for a wide range of grade levels; you know best which activities your students need so modify the lessons as needed. Primary students will benefit from the first few lessons, but would be frustrated by the complexity of the last two. I've written the suggested grade levels for each lesson next to its title. Feel free to try the others with your class, but be aware that the lessons may be more challenging than you would imagine!

Suggested Lesson Sequence and Grade Levels

Mini Lessons to Introduce Discussion

1. What Makes a Great Discussion? (K-8)
2. Establishing Discussion Guidelines (K-8)

Complete Discussion Connection Lessons

3. Kid Connections (K-5)
4. Paper Chain Connections (2-5)
5. Discussion Webs (4-8)



Mini Lessons to Introduce Discussion

1. What Makes a Great Discussion?

Even though discussions can take place in whole class settings, the term "discussion" in this lesson refers to small group discussions. Before doing this activity, you may want to engage your students in an activity that involves a small group discussion. This will give them a frame of reference for the mini lesson.

Teaching Suggestions

1. Write the words "discuss" and "discussion" on the board and ask your students what they mean. They may say that a discussion is when people talk about something with someone else. Explain that today's lesson deals specifically with group discussions.
2. Display the chart on page 5, "What Makes a Great Discussion?"
3. Ask students to think about discussions they've had before. Sometimes discussions are exciting and other times they fall flat, so ask them to think what makes a discussion work. How are the group members acting? What kinds of things are they saying? How does the group look to someone who is observing? How do you feel during a great discussion?
4. If your students have individual dry erase boards, ask everyone to write one idea on their

- own board and hold it up for you to see. If not, they can simply raise their hands and you can call on them to share.
- As students share their suggestions with the class, record them on the chart. Responses might include “Everyone looking at the speaker,” “Sitting close together facing each other,” “Taking turns speaking,” “Speaking politely,” etc. See sample responses on page 6.



2. Establishing Discussion Guidelines

It’s not enough to identify the elements of a good discussion; specific guidelines and rules are needed to ensure that everyone feels safe and valued in a group. It’s best if you work with your students to develop these guidelines together. This mini lesson works well as a follow-up to the first one, but it doesn’t necessarily have to take place the same day. If it doesn’t take place that day, begin the lesson by displaying the class chart and reviewing the qualities of great discussion. On page 7, I included a set of rules as an example, but it’s really best if your class can create their own guidelines.

Teaching Suggestions

- Remind your students that participating in a group discussion can be a little scary at times because you are sharing your ideas and others might not agree with them. Tell them that it’s okay not to agree with others, but they need to disagree in a respectful way and not put each other down or criticize each other’s opinions. Suggest that you work together as a class to create a set of guidelines that everyone will agree to follow. Having these guidelines will not only lead to great discussions but will ensure everyone feels comfortable sharing.
- If your students have individual dry erase boards, ask each student to write one rule they think everyone should follow in a discussion. Ask them to write the rules in a positive manner, such as “Take turns speaking,” or “Wait your turn to speak,” instead of “Don’t interrupt.” After everyone has written a rule, ask students to hold up their boards and share them one at a time. Tell the class you want to keep the list to about 4 or 5 of the most important rules, so try to combine them and reword as needed to end up with a manageable list.
- After you’ve narrowed the list to the most important rules, have students copy them into a journal or onto one of the two Discussion Guidelines pages in this packet. Ask students to sign their names to their own copies and keep them in a safe place.
- Wrap up the lesson by providing time for small group discussions so students can practice these skills. Assign an easy topic to talk about, such as, “What’s your favorite book and why do you like it?” This will give students a chance to practice their discussion skills in a relaxed way. You will dig deeper into how to foster a really effective discussion in the next activity, but for now it’s fine to keep the topic simple to allow students to practice engaging in a discussion and following established guidelines.



What Makes a Great Discussion?



What Makes a Great Discussion?

- Seated facing each other
- Listening to each other
- Everyone participating equally
- Connecting ideas
- Taking turns
- Using each other's names
- Disagreeing in a polite way
- Leaning toward the speaker
- Making eye contact
- Heads nodding in agreement
- Everyone stays on topic



Our Discussion Guidelines

- . Take turns speaking.
- . Look at other speakers and listen to them carefully.
- . Keep the discussion focused on the question or topic.
- . Speak politely, especially when disagreeing with someone's point of view.



Our Discussion Guidelines

I agree to follow the above discussion guidelines.

Name

Date

Complete Discussion Connections Lessons

3. Kid Connections

Kid Connections is a mini lesson for teaching students how to make connections in discussions. The activity is designed to be completed in a whole group or small guided reading group where you can explicitly teach students how to connect their ideas to others who have already spoken. Depending on the age of your students, you may need to spend several days on this lesson before teaching Paper Chain Connections.



In the Kid Connections lesson, students will create a human chain of children who link arms to show connections in a class discussion. Even though most discussions involve multiple connections between ideas, you'll introduce the concept in a simple manner with one idea linking to the next in a straight chain.

Materials Needed:

- Discussion Connection Strategies page or Task Cards

Before You Begin

Select a short book, story, or nonfiction text to use for the lesson. Identify at least three “meaty” discussion questions to use during the lesson. It’s important to pose questions that have multiple interpretations and possible responses. Questions about character traits, problems and solutions, and story themes work well. See page 17 for suggestions.

Beginning the Lesson


If you have an open area of the classroom where students can gather, ask them to come sit close to you for the lesson.

1. Read aloud a short book, story, or nonfiction text.
2. Tell students that during the very best discussions, group members listen to each other carefully and try to connect their ideas to those of others. Explain that they will be taking part in some activities to learn how to connect their ideas to others in a discussion.
3. Introduce the three parts to a “connected response” as described at the top of the Discussion Strategies page. Then read the possible discussion starters at the bottom of the page.

Discussion Connection Strategies

When connecting your response to someone else's, remember to:

1. Name the person who shared the idea to which you want to connect
2. Mention a key idea or point the other person shared
3. Clearly state your own question, opinion, or idea




Example:
Mary, I agree that Goldilocks was foolish to walk through the forest alone. Another way I think she showed foolishness was entering a stranger's house and eating their food!

Possible Discussion Starters and Prompts:

- What you said about _____ made me think of
- I'm confused about what you meant by _____. Would you explain in more detail or give an example?
- I can see why you would think that _____, but I had another view. I think
- Going back to _____'s idea that _____, I think
- I like your idea about _____ and I want to share another example
- I agree with _____ about _____. Another detail from the text that supports this view is
- I understand your point that _____, but I disagree because
- What you said about _____ makes me wonder why

Linking Ideas in Discussions

1. Name the person who shared the idea to which you are connecting.
2. Mention a key idea, fact, or opinion the other person shared.
3. Clearly state your own question, opinion, or idea.



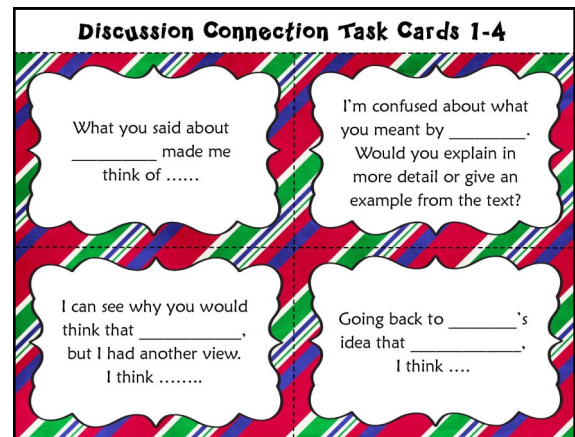
Example:
Mary, I agree that Goldilocks was foolish to walk through the forest alone. Another way I think she showed foolishness was entering a stranger's house and eating their food!

Step-by-Step Directions for Kid Connections

1. To begin, pose the first discussion question.
2. Ask students who want to respond to raise their hands, and select one person to begin the discussion.
3. After the student responds, ask him or her to come forward and stand at the front of the class.
4. Ask if anyone would like to respond by connecting his or her idea to the idea that has just been shared. Review the three parts of the response as shown on the Discussion Connections page and on the right.
5. Read some of the response prompts on page 18 or the Discussion Connections Task Cards to help students think of ways to link their ideas to what has already been said. Call on a student to respond. If the student did not include all three parts, prompt him or her to name the first speaker, restate a key idea or a little of what the speaker said, and then add a new idea.
6. Ask the second student to come forward and link arms with the first student to show that their ideas are connected.
7. Next, ask if anyone would like to connect an idea to one of the first two responses. After someone responds using the three part format, have him or her come forward and link arms with the person to whom they connected an idea.
8. Continue calling on a few more students to respond. If it's too confusing to have students joining both ends, remove that option and ask them to always connect to the last person.
9. At the end of the activity, have all students return to their seats. Repeat the activity with another discussion question, selecting new students to respond.

How to Link Responses

1. Name the person who shared the idea to which you are connecting.
2. Mention a key idea, fact, or opinion the other person shared.
3. Clearly state your own question, opinion, or idea.



4. Paper Chain Connections

This lesson builds on the concepts introduced in the Kids Connections lesson. If you are teaching these two lessons on the same day, you can eliminate some of the first steps. In this lesson, students will create paper chains to represent the connections they are making in discussions.

Materials Needed:

- Discussion Question Poster (laminated)
- Yarn or string
- Discussion Connection Strategies page or Task Cards
- Discussion Links or 1.5" x 8" paper strips (1 per person)
- Tape or stapler

Before You Begin

Select a short book, story, or nonfiction text to use for the lesson. Identify at least three "meaty" discussion questions to use during the lesson. (Note: It's important to pose questions that have multiple interpretations and possible responses. Questions about character traits, problems and solutions, and story themes work well. See page 17 for suggestions.)

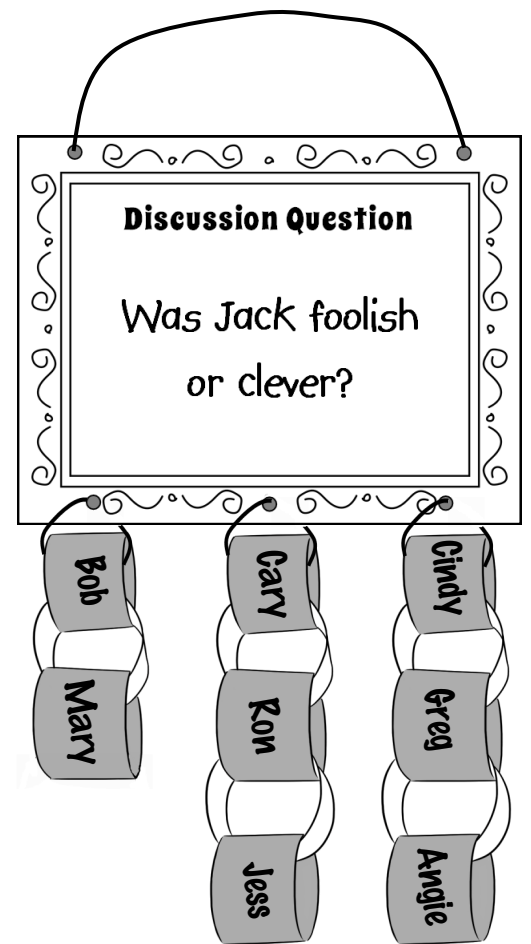
Laminate the Discussion Questions poster on page 22 if possible, or make several copies. Write your first discussion question on the poster. Punch holes at the top of the poster and use yarn to make a hanger as shown. Cut three shorter lengths of string to use when adding chains to the poster.

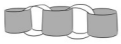
Print enough copies of the Discussion Links on page 23 so that you can cut the strips apart and each student will receive one. Or cut one strip of construction paper 8" long by 1.5" wide for each student.

Beginning the Lesson

If you have an open area of the classroom where students can gather, ask them to come sit close to you for the lesson.

1. Give out the Discussion Links paper strips and ask each person to write his or her name on one strip.
2. Read aloud a short book, story, or nonfiction text.
3. Tell students that during the very best discussions, group members listen to each other carefully and try to connect their ideas to those of others. Explain that they will be taking part in some activities to learn how to connect their ideas to others in a discussion.
4. Review the three parts to a "connected response" as described at the top of the Discussion Strategies page. Then display the possible discussion starters at the bottom of the page.



Discussion Links	
Name _____	
Name _____	
Name _____	
Name _____	
Name _____	
Name _____	

Step-by-Step Directions for Paper Chain Connections

1. Tell the class that you are going to repeat the Kid Connections activity, but this time they will create a paper chain to show how their ideas are linked.
2. Hang the first discussion question in front of the class and read it aloud.
3. Ask students who want to respond to raise their hands, and select one person to begin the discussion.
4. After the first person responds, ask him or her to bring his or her paper strip to the front of the class. Form a loop and tape or staple the ends together. Hang the loop from the bottom of the Discussion Questions poster.
5. Ask if anyone can link an idea to the first one, and call on a student to respond.
6. After the student responds, he or she brings the paper strip with his or her name on it to the front of the class and links it to the first one.
7. As students respond, prompt them to follow the three-step process for linking a response: name the person, mention a key idea, and state their own opinion,
8. After a few links are added, students may have trouble making connections with what the last person said. If this happens, ask if anyone wants to start a new discussion chain that goes back to the original question. When the person comes forward, hang his or her chain from a different spot on the poster.
9. Continue as long as students seem engaged in the lesson. Repeat the activity over several days with different questions, sometimes in a whole group and at other times in a small guided reading group.



Variations

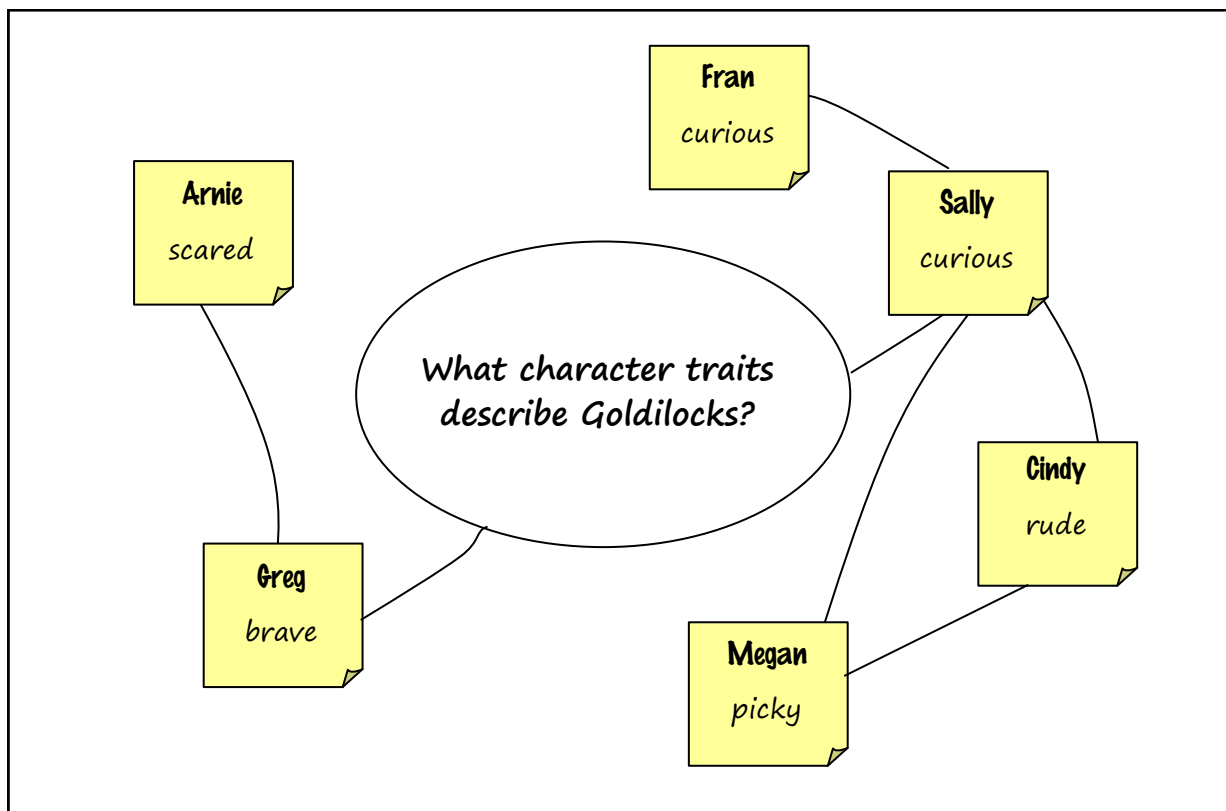
1. **Recording Ideas on Links** - After a few minutes of discussion, students may say they can't remember who said what. If that happens, you can ask students to write more than their names on their paper links. After each person speaks, have him or her write a key word or phrase on the link to summarize his or her main point. You'll need to spend some time modeling how to choose a few key words from the response. Requiring students to write complete sentences will slow things down, so it's best to encourage them write a few key words instead.
2. **Cooperative Learning Teams** - Older students may be able to complete this activity in cooperative learning teams after the steps are modeled with the whole class. As they master the skill of linking ideas, give each team a copy of the Discussion Questions Poster or a set of Tasks Cards and provide **two** paper strips per person. Having additional links will allow them to sustain the discussion for a much longer time.



4. Discussion Webs Lesson

Creating a Discussion Web is the most complex of the discussion connections activities. In the previous two lessons, students were primarily linking ideas in a linear fashion. However, most discussions include multiple connections as participants link to many different ideas. This strategy will take several days to teach and will require multiple opportunities for students to practice, first in a whole group and later in small groups.

In this lesson, students will place sticky notes on chart paper to represent their ideas as they respond to the discussion question. After each sticky note is placed on the chart, the student will connect the idea to what others have said by drawing lines. Here's what a team discussion web may look like after several students have responded.



Referencing the Text in Responses

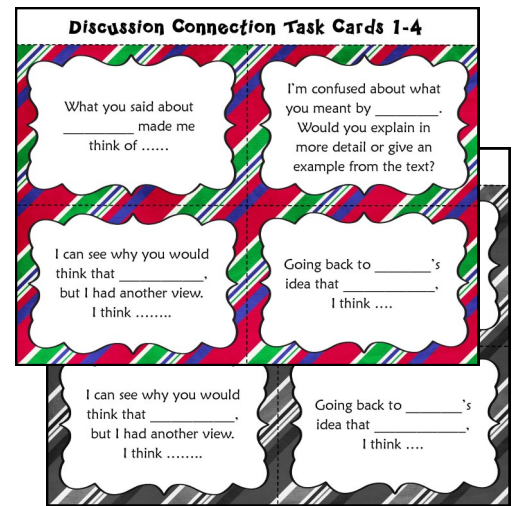
In the two previous Discussion Link Up activities, the main focus was on teaching students how to construct oral responses to make connections. If they referenced the text in their responses, so much the better! However, if they were not referencing the text in the previous lessons, this is the time to introduce the skill. Not only do students need to learn to connect their ideas to what others have said, they need to learn to support their answers with details from the text. You can begin with literary texts because they are easier to discuss, but you should begin including informational texts from time to time. These strategies can be applied to discussions in all subject areas, especially science, health, and social studies.



Before teaching this lesson, introduce the basic discussion connections concepts in one of the other lessons.

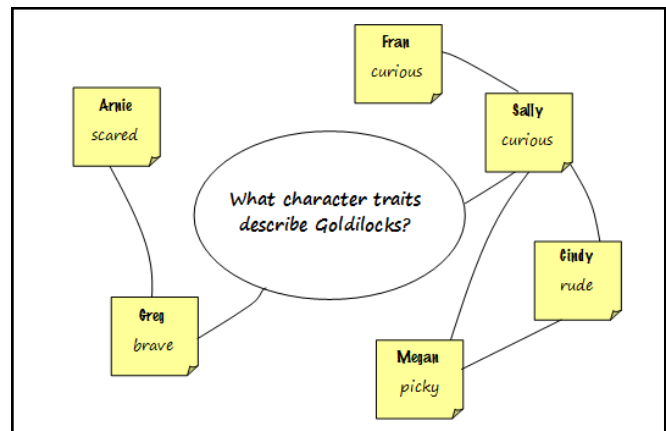
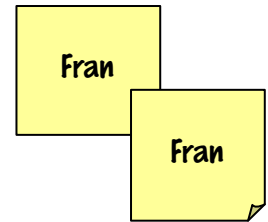
Materials Needed:

- Small sticky notes (1 or 2 per person)
- Discussion Connection Strategies page or Task Cards
- Large sheet of chart paper and markers OR interactive whiteboard



Whole Class Introduction:

1. If you have an open area of the classroom where students can gather, ask them to come sit close to you for the lesson. Place a sheet of chart paper in the middle of the group or on an easel where everyone can see it. You could also do the lesson in front of the class using an interactive whiteboard. Explain that today you'll be continuing the previous discussion connections lesson by creating a Discussion Web.
2. Read aloud a short book, story, or nonfiction text.
3. Pose one "meaty" question for the focus of the discussion. Write the question in the center of the chart paper or interactive whiteboard and circle it.
4. Give everyone a sticky note and ask each person to write his or her name on it. If you are using an interactive whiteboard for the lesson, you can create a square with a text block in the center to represent a sticky note. You'll need to clone this image a few times to have plenty of virtual sticky notes ready.
5. Review the Discussion Connection Strategies page and the three-part response.
6. To start the discussion, read aloud the question written in the middle of the chart paper or whiteboard. Ask students who want to respond to raise their hands, and select one person to begin the discussion.
7. After the student responds, ask him or her to come forward and place the sticky note with his or her name on the chart paper near the question. Have him or her write a word or two on the sticky note to represent what was said. This will help others remember who said what later in the discussion.
8. The speaker draws a line from the question to the sticky note. If using an interactive whiteboard, have the student write his or her name on the virtual sticky note, move it into position, and connect it.
9. Ask if anyone would like to respond by connecting an idea to the idea that has just been shared. Call on a student to respond. If all three parts are not in the response, prompt the student to name the first speaker, restate a key idea or a little of what he or she said, and then add a new idea.



10. Next, ask if anyone would like to connect to either of the first two responses. Explain that they don't have to connect to the last person who spoke. After someone responds using the three part format, have him or her place a sticky note on the chart and draw lines connecting the idea to others that were shared.
11. After a few students respond, ask if anyone wants to connect an idea to the original question instead of to what another student said. Obviously the speaker won't be able to name someone in his or her response, but should restate part of the question to make it clear the response is connecting to the question and not another person's idea.
12. During the discussion, remind students to refer to the text when possible, supplying details to support their opinions. Continue the discussion for 10 or 15 minutes, until the chart has at least 6 or 7 sticky notes. It should look similar to the one shown above. There's no need to continue until everyone responds because this activity is designed to model the strategy for the class.
13. If your students need additional experience in a whole group setting, repeat the activity the next day with a different discussion question. Try to make sure that students who did not get to respond in the first discussion are able to respond in the next one.

Discussion Connections with Small Groups

As soon as your students are ready, begin working with them in small guided reading groups or engage them in cooperative learning team discussions. Students in groups will be able to participate more actively than students participating in a class discussion. Cooperative learning teams of four work well for this lesson.



When using the strategy with small groups, give each student **two** sticky notes which will give them more opportunities to respond. After a student uses both sticky notes, he or she must wait patiently and listen to the others until everyone has used up all sticky notes.

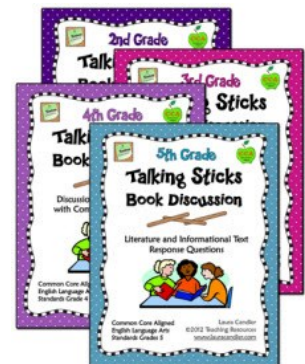
While students are working, circulate throughout the room and listen to the discussions. Remind students to use the three-part method for linking ideas in a discussion. Notice who is able to make connections to others and who seems to always connect to the question.

Repeat this activity several times until your students have mastered the art of making connections in a discussion. If you notice that some students have difficulty with this skill, provide additional help in a teacher-guided small group lesson.



Talking Sticks Discussions

After students become proficient with discussion connections, they will be ready for Talking Sticks Book Discussions. Visit my TpT store to find the Talking Sticks pack for your grade level (K-5). Each pack comes with Common Core aligned discussion cards and directions for implementing this strategy.



Sample Discussion Questions



Qualities of a Good Discussion Question

- Open-ended; many possible different responses
- Responses can be supported by details from the text
- Provides opportunities to connect responses

Sample Literature Discussion Questions:

- What are some of the important problems faced by the characters? Which one was the MOST important?
- How did each character's words and/or actions help resolve the problem in the story?
- What character traits describe _____? Support your answer with details from the story.
- What can we infer about the characters from their words and actions?
- What do you think is the moral or lesson in the story? What details support your view?

Sample Informational Text Discussion Questions:

- What important points does the author make? Which one do you think the author would feel is the most important?
- How did the invention of (or discovery of) _____ impact others or change lives?
- How might the United States be different if the South had won the Civil War?
- Do you agree with the author's conclusion? Do you think everyone who reads this would agree? Who might NOT agree?



Discussion Connection Strategies

When connecting your response to someone else's, remember to:

1. Name the person who shared the idea to which you want to connect.
2. Mention a key idea, fact, or opinion the other person shared.
3. Clearly state your own question, opinion, or idea.



Example:

Mary, I agree that Goldilocks was foolish to walk through the forest alone. Another way I think she showed foolishness was entering a stranger's house and eating their food!

Possible Discussion Starters and Prompts:

- What you said about _____ made me think of
- I'm confused about what you meant by _____. Would you explain in more detail or give an example?
- I can see why you would think that _____, but I had another view. I think
- Going back to _____'s idea that _____, I think
- I like your idea about _____, and I want to share another example
- I agree with _____ about _____. Another detail from the text that supports this view is
- I understand your point that _____, but I disagree because
- What you said about _____ makes me wonder why

Linking Ideas in Discussions

1. Name the person who shared the idea to which you are connecting.
2. Mention a key idea, fact, or opinion the other person shared.
3. Clearly state your own question, opinion, or idea.



Example:

Mary, I agree that Goldilocks was foolish to walk through the forest alone. Another way I think she showed foolishness was entering a stranger's house and eating their food!

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Example:

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Discussion Connection Starters

What you said about _____ made me think of

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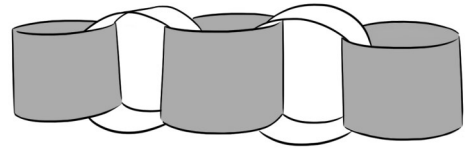
Discussion Connection Starters



Discussion Question

Discussion Question

Discussion Links



Name _____

Name _____

Name _____

Name _____

Name _____

Name _____

Discussion Connection Task Cards 1-4

What you said about _____ made me _____ think of

I'm confused about what you meant by _____.
Would you explain in more detail or give an example from the text?

I can see why you would think that _____, but I had another view.
I think

Going back to _____'s idea that _____,
I think

Discussion Connection Task Cards 5-8

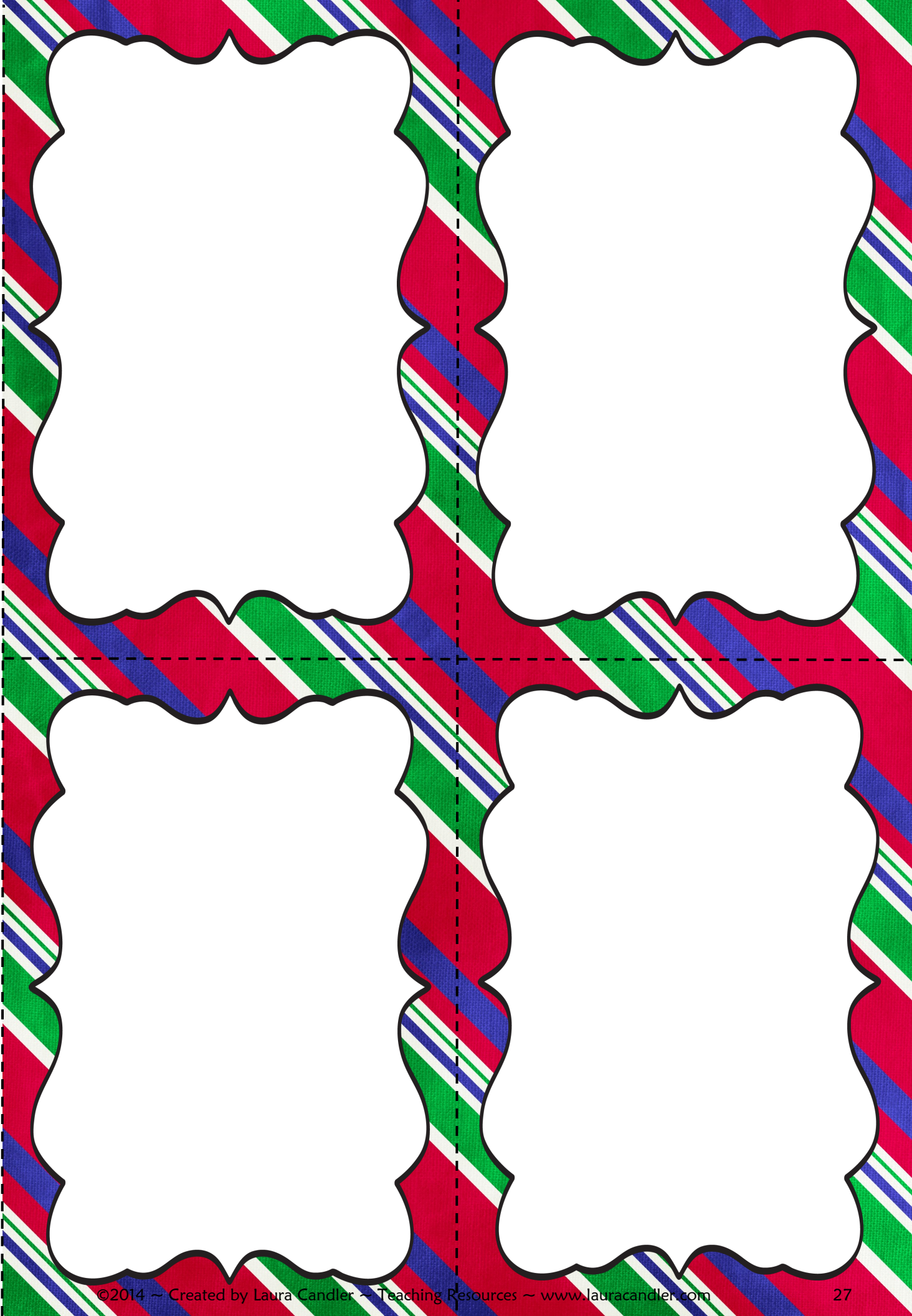
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Discussion Connection Task Cards



Discussion Connection Task Cards 1-4

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Would you explain in more detail or give an example from the text?

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I think

Going back to _____'s idea that _____,
I think

Discussion Connection Task Cards 5-8

I like your idea about _____, and I want to share another example

I agree with _____ about _____.
Another detail from the text that supports this view is

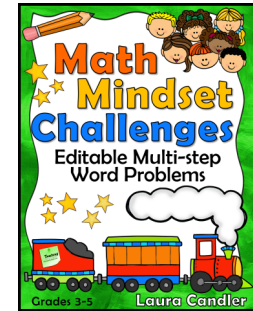
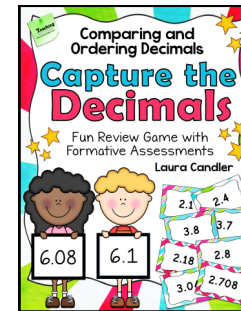
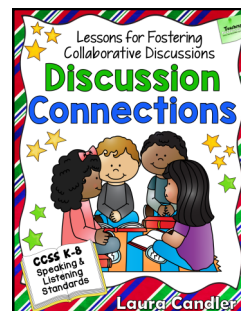
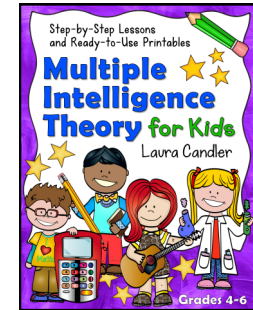
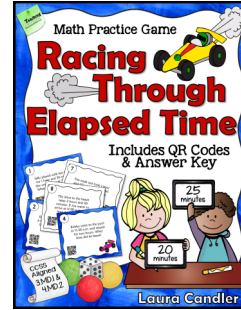
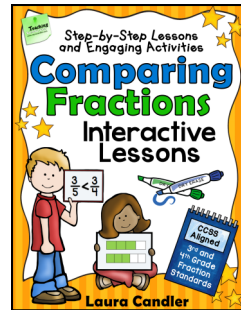
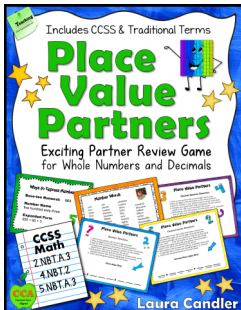
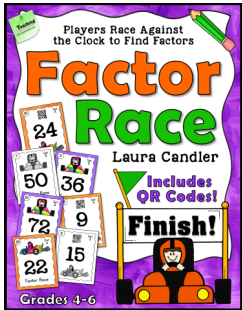
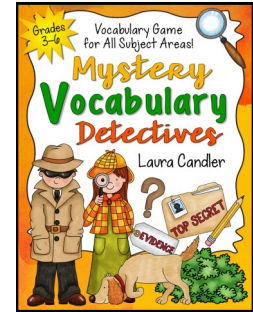
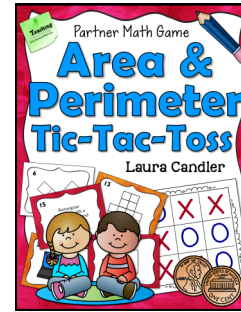
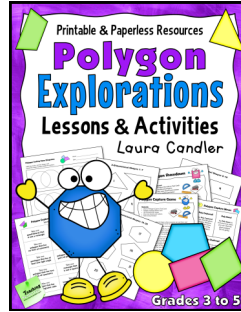
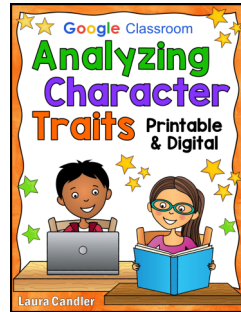
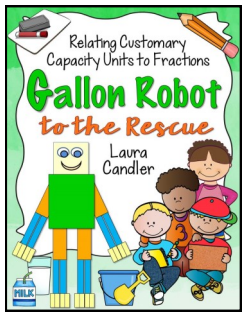
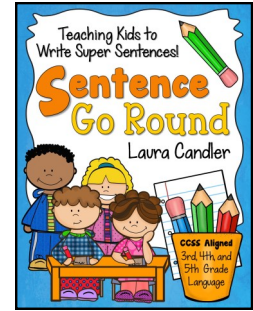
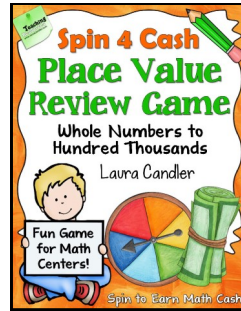
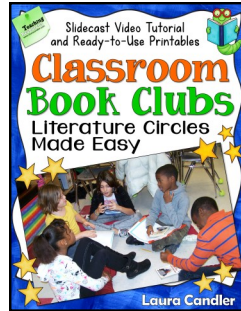
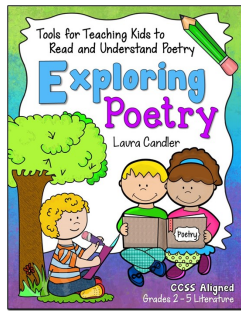
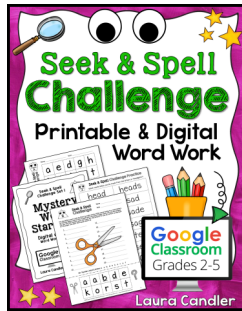
I understand your point that _____, but I disagree because

What you said about _____ makes me wonder why

Discussion Connection Task Cards



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