

# Literature Circles + Prosocial Twists

*Adapted from sources cited and prosocial twists suggested by Beth Breneman, Ph.D., Consultant (ret), California Department of Education; recommended for grades four through twelve.*

Literature Circles are small, student-led discussions of student-selected texts. Discussions can be conducted with or without assigned roles, which are often discarded once students don't need them to create high-quality conversations.

Prosocial twists are suggested to:

- Deepen emotional involvement in reading though the selection of engaging, prosocial books
- Give students the experience of observing and noting strengths in fellow discussants and receiving positive feedback from peers, and
- Foster respectful communication

## Goals

1. Ensure that students read a great deal throughout the year.

2. Give students multiple opportunities to collaborate in stimulating, intense, and productive conversations about good books as they improve their conversations over time.

3. Provide a way for students to engage in reflection and critical thinking as they read, write, and talk about books.

## Teacher Preparation

1. Make available multiple copies of four or five books at appropriate reading levels that will interest your students and generate discussions, and plan short book talks about each one.
2. Select poetry or a short story for students first literature circle experience, and if possible, obtain equipment for making audio tapes of literature circle conversations.
3. Plan follow-up assignments, mini-lessons, and/or literature circle role sheets related to each book, as needed, to help students reflect on ideas, issues, and themes and to extend students' understanding of the craft of writing. Visit the following for printable role sheets:

[http://www.ipadlitcircles.com/uploads/1/0/6/6/10664962/lit\\_circles.role\\_sheets.pdf](http://www.ipadlitcircles.com/uploads/1/0/6/6/10664962/lit_circles.role_sheets.pdf)

## Instructional Procedures

1. Assist students to identify elements of effective discussions and let them practice with poetry or a short story before beginning a novel. If possible, have students listen to and analyze audiotapes of their conversations.
2. Talk about four or five books and have students prioritize.
3. Use the information from Step 2 to create book groups. Given the finding that discussions in circles of four to six students are most effective, strive for groups of four to six students. Assign roles for the members of each circle.

Some of the roles might include the following:

- Discussion Director—makes up questions for the group to discuss
- Literary Luminary—chooses passages the group rereads & discusses for their literary merit or importance
- Word Wizard—chooses words that are important, difficult, interesting, or used in an unfamiliar way
- Connector—finds connections between the book and another story (text to text), event in his

personal life (text to reader), or the outside world (text to world)

- Summarizer—tells the main things that have happened in the assigned reading
- Illustrator—draws some kind of picture related to the reading

Many teachers report that the assigned roles can inhibit the flow of conversation and refer to them as training wheels—discarding once students don't need them for free-flowing, quality discussions.

Literature Circle roles can be revised to reflect increasingly sophisticated instructional goals. For example, to provide more scaffolding for teaching older students to go beyond their personal responses and engage in critical discussions of multicultural and political texts, researchers have suggested the following roles:

- Problem poser—identifies key problems that arise in the text for which there are no easy answers
- Perspective taker—tries on and represents the perspective of a character whose actions are problematic or confusing

- Stereotype tracker— locates and “talks back” to dominant stereotypes
- Critical lens wearer— considers the assigned reading through the lens of a relevant critical theory, e.g., feminism, Marxism (Thein, Guise & Sloan, 2011)

4. Give students blocks of time in class to read. Encourage students to experience their emotional responses fully. As students read, they write in response journals or mark discussion points with sticky notes. After their initial responses, students review their assigned roles and take notes or complete teacher-designed worksheets to prepare for their roles in the literature circle.

5. On literature circle day students meet in their reading groups, discuss their books, and share their initial written responses. At first students may have to rely on their role sheet notes as a means of extending and deepening their conversations. Roles are rotated at the end of every meeting. The teacher may join in as participant or observer.

6. As students grow in proficiency with the process,

expose them to literary elements and techniques as tools for analysis and a means of strengthening their conversations. Specific questions may be posed on these and other issues, and all members of the circle come with evidence to support their views.

7. At the end of each discussion the group briefly reflects on how the session proceeded. Then students evaluate their own and others’ contributions to the discussion.

8. To help students improve their contributions have them listen to and analyze their own on audio- or videotape or selected DVDs, such as those by Daniels (2001). Inspire students to develop a shared vision of how they might improve their own literature circles. Have students talk about the strategies they appreciated on the audiotape or video and then reflect back to their own conversations to make concrete improvements. For example, if interrupting is a problem, introduce “Speaking Into the Silence” in which students learn to watch and listen for natural openings in conversations by noticing eye contact, gestures, and intonation. They wait for a quiet moment before offering a new comment or question. If two people speak at

once, one retreats, knowing he or she will speak next. (Mills & Jennings, 2011)

9. When a group finishes a book, collect its journals and written responses, and use that information plus observational data to assign a grade for that round. To make grading more transparent, devise rubrics for response journals and literature circle meetings and utilize students' suggestions.

10. New groups are then formed around new reading choices.

## Prosocial Twists

1. Visit <http://www.reading.org/Resources/Booklists.aspx> and consider appealing and emotionally powerful books on Choices lists (selected by students, teachers, and young adults) as well as other books that:

- Are revealing in regard to plants, animals, nature, biodiversity, and environmental concerns
- Involve characters struggling with social injustice and moral dilemmas
- Portray admirable or heroic characters who display

courage, determination, compassion, and other strengths of character (e.g., Harriet Tubman, Cesar Chavez, Sacagawea, Abraham Lincoln, Amelia Earhart)

- Feature characters representing a diversity of cultures; (for examples, see Notable Books for a Global Society at [http://clrsig.org/nbgs\\_books.php](http://clrsig.org/nbgs_books.php))

2. After a newly formed literature circle concludes its first conversation, have students identify strengths in one another's performances. This might be confidence building for socially isolated and struggling students as well as English language learners, and it could help promote social cohesion within the group. Observe the results and decide whether to repeat the practice.

3. As students create a shared vision of improving their conversations, consider whether it would be productive to call to their attention any prosocial communication skills, such as the following:

- Signal when you want a turn

- Make sure everyone gets a turn
- Build on each other's ideas
- When disagreeing, speak respectfully
- Give evidence for your opinion

If need be, incorporate such skills into criteria or rubrics for self or group evaluation, and include productive ideas from students.

## Relevant Common Core State Standards

Visit:

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy> to see the K-12 English language arts standards for various grade levels which correspond by number to the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards (CCR). The CCR and grade-specific standards are complements—the former providing broad standards, the latter, additional specificity. (There are additional standards that can be addressed through the use of Literature Circles + Prosocial Twists.)

### *Anchor Standards for Reading: Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity*

R.10 Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and *proficiently*.

### *Anchor Standards for Reading:*

### *Key Ideas and Details*

R.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

R.2 Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

R.3 Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

### *Anchor Standards for Reading: Craft and Structure*

R.4 Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

R.5 Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

R.6 Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and

style of a text.

*Anchor Standards for Reading:  
Integration of Knowledge and  
Ideas*

R.9 Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

*Anchor Standards for Speaking  
and Listening: Comprehension  
and Collaboration*

SL.1 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.

## References & Further Resources

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