The background of the book cover is a marbled pattern in shades of gray and white, with a central white rectangular area containing the text.

Mini-lessons  
for  
Literature  
Circles

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**Heinemann**  
Portsmouth, NH

**Heinemann**

A division of Reed Elsevier Inc.  
361 Hanover Street  
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912  
www.heinemann.com

*Offices and agents throughout the world*

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Daniels, Harvey, 1947–

Mini-lessons for literature circles / Harvey Daniels, Nancy Steineke.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-325-00702-0 (alk. paper)

1. Group reading. 2. Book clubs (Discussion groups). 3. Literature—  
Study and teaching. 4. Children—Books and reading. I. Steineke, Nancy.  
II. Title.

LC6631.D38 2004

372.41'62—dc22

2004009666

*Editor:* Leigh Peake

*Production management:* Sarah Weaver

*Production coordination:* Abigail M. Heim

*Typesetter:* Technologies 'N Typography

*Interior design:* Joyce Weston Design

*Cover design:* Catherine Hawkes, Cat & Mouse

*Manufacturing:* Louise Richardson

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

08 07 06 05 04 RRD 1 2 3 4 5

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# Acknowledgments

Whenever you write a book about teaching, the main people you need to thank are your students. Between the two of us, we have (yikes!) sixty-two years of teaching experience, and every student we have taught is in here somewhere. Without knowing those several thousand young people, we'd never have the knowledge, the stories, the materials, the lessons, the pictures that make up this book.

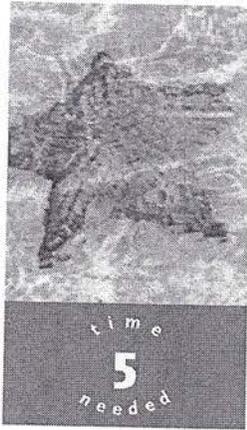
Next, we want to thank all those teachers who have welcomed us into their classrooms, talked to us at conferences, attended our summer workshops, or emailed us about their literature circle problems and breakthroughs. This book grew directly out of those colleagues' questions and suggestions. Many thanks to the four schools where many of the lessons in this book were refined: Victor J. Andrew High School in Tinley Park, IL; Best Practice High School in Chicago; Baker Demonstration School in Evanston, IL; and Federal-Hocking High School in Stewart, OH. We especially want to thank the teachers who handed over their kids for our mad-scientist experiments. Thanks for letting us cook in your kitchens.

Smokey wants to acknowledge his far-flung personal book club. Elaine, the mother of all readers, somehow manages to fit fifty books a year around her university duties, doling out her top recommendations to the rest of us. Marny is an artist in Santa Fe whose tastes run to contemporary fiction, with a special fondness for Pat Conroy. Nick, a pathologist's assistant in Minnesota, mixes business with pleasure, ranging widely across the fields of pathology, forensics, and crime investigation. Maybe the family that reads together doesn't stay *physically* together, but books bind the Daniels wherever we go.

Nancy wants to acknowledge her husband Bill. Besides designing and building a most fabulous third-floor attic office that removes her from all of the distractions the rest of the house has to offer, Bill is THE MAN when it comes to the use of a highlighter. She always lets Bill have the first crack at the *Chicago Tribune* and *Newsweek* because he highlights all the good articles. For example, did you catch the one about the guy who is digging up his farm in Minnesota searching for caves? See, if Bill were around you wouldn't have missed that one! However, Nancy's biggest debt to Bill is that he puts up with her; you'd think he'd get an award for that, but so far it's only led to two book acknowledgments and twenty-five anniversaries.

Much of this book was written longhand on cross-country plane trips, yielding an output of virtually indecipherable text. Thanks to freelance cryptographer Diane Kessler for breaking the code and magically emailing us clean copy.

Between the two of us, we have published six books with Heinemann. Hey, who wouldn't stick with an organization that's both talented and fun-loving in every department? Thanks once again to Leigh Peake, editor and horsewoman supreme; Lisa Luedeke, creator of a magnificent secondary list; Sarah Weaver, who shaped a very complex manuscript and taught us how to "track changes"; Abby Heim, whose design skills yield such attractive and readable books; Pat Carls, who really knows where to find readers; Eric Chalek, who sometimes succeeds at keeping us organized; Maura Sullivan, sage, seer, prognosticator and freelance guru; to Cherie Bartlett and Tracy Heine for handling our workshop road trips; and finally, to the redoubtable Lesa Scott, a principled leader who makes the whole thing work.



# Conversational Warm-up: Membership Grid

## Why Do It?

We've noticed that students tend to stick with their friends rather than take the risk of getting to know someone new. When a literature circle is formed around a chosen book rather than preexisting friendships, discussion may stall if students can't "break the ice." Giving groups a low-risk, nonacademic topic to discuss every time they meet, just before they start the official book work, helps students to develop friendly working relationships. The Membership Grid is a fun way for students to get to know each other using a quick interview format.

## Teaching the Lesson

### ..... Getting Started

Students begin with a blank Membership Grid (you can find one in the appendix). The date and interview topics are recorded on the left and the group members' names on the right above the columns. The less students know about each other, the more frequently groups should do this activity. In the beginning of the year, it's not a bad idea for students to discuss a grid topic every day, even though they might be having official book club meetings just once or twice a week. Groups discuss a different topic each time they use the grid. This could be a topic you assign or a topic the group negotiates on its

## Student-Suggested Grid Topics

---

- Places you've traveled
  - Plans after high school
  - Worst/favorite school subject
  - What type of music do you listen to?
  - Things you do on the weekend
  - Favorite amusement park rides
  - Favorite restaurant
  - Favorite fast food
  - Favorite car
  - Favorite cookies
  - Favorite movie
  - Favorite store at the mall
  - Favorite TV show
  - What did you do the day before?
  - Most embarrassing moment
  - Plans for spring break
  - Preference: carpet vs. wood
  - Preference: Coke vs. Pepsi
  - Favorite pizza
  - What sports do you play?
  - What sports do you watch?
  - Hobbies?
  - If you were stuck on a deserted island, what would you bring?
  - Favorite action hero
  - Best presents you've received/given
  - Celebrity you'd like to date
  - Part-time jobs
  - Favorite book
  - What do you look for when it comes to the opposite sex?
  - Favorite place to get ice cream
-

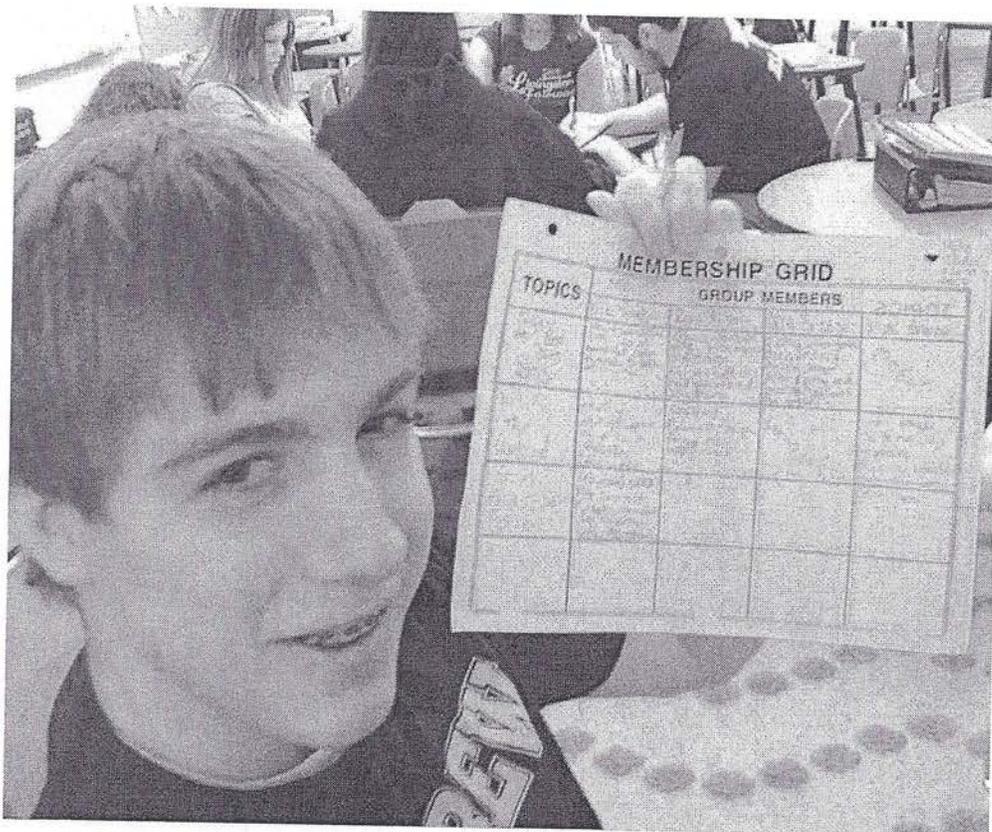
own. When groups choose their own topics, remind them that they must remain "school-appropriate." (Student-Suggested Grid Topics shows some typical choices.)

The group then takes about one minute to interview each member in turn. As the group conducts each interview, the members take notes on each person's answers. The goal is to ask the interviewee enough questions about the topic to elicit some interesting details, which members then write on their grid. In the column under their own name, students may either jot notes on what they said when they were interviewed or write some of the questions they asked when they interviewed the others. Of course, the covert goal of the Membership Grid is to have groups practice the same focusing and questioning that is necessary for an in-depth discussion about a book. Even later in the year, after students are better acquainted, it is still important

### Filled-in Membership Grid

TOPICS	MEMBERSHIP GRID <span style="float: right;">Stephanie</span>			
	GROUP MEMBERS			
	Kim	Krystie	Amanda	Mike
9-24 All time fav. movie	Pearl Harbor - Josh Hartnett - when he dies - 12 times	Grease - Jon Travolta - owns it - 2 times a day - Carnival	Walk to Remember - cute, romance - no, doesn't own	Star Ship Troopers - bloody scenes - Frank - owns movie
10-3 Halloween	be Kim - no trick or treating - candy - box of popcorn	Alan - no trick or treating - little mermaid bride - haunted house	be Amanda - Bunny rabbit - haunted house - snickers	Ninja - fav. costume was ninja - trick or treating - heath bars
10-10 weekend	Lincoln way's homecoming - with boyfriend - friends house after dance	I.S.U. - going w/ friends - Lindsey's sister - college visit	Great America - friends from Plainfield - friends driving - Raging Bull	rest - in bed - visit his dad in Romeoville
10-15 Cubbies!	Sox fan - no fav player - watched 42 secs. game	Cubs fan - Sammy Sosa - watched game - yes, win series	Sox fan - watched game - should of won - should have gotten beaten.	Sox fan - turned off game - not going to win series - Alou - favorite player

A blank version of this form can be found in the appendix.



to begin book club meetings with the Membership Grid. It is a great warm-up that helps ensure better academic discussion.

.....

### **Working the Room**

The most important thing to emphasize is not to interview classmates too quickly. Interviewers should use the full minute for each member before moving on. However, as students get to know each other better and start to enjoy the Membership Grid conversations, your monitoring goal may change. You may soon have to push students through their interviews because they will be perfectly willing to continue their ice-breaking conversations well beyond the allotted five minutes!

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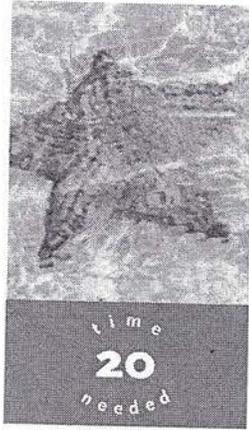
## Reflecting

The best time to debrief is after two or three interviews. Students should review their note-taking and interview skills so they can set some improvement goals. While better questions create livelier interviews, students also find that taking more-detailed notes creates better reading later; they often find that it is fun to look back on these grids and recall specific conversations.

## What Can Go Wrong?

Sometimes groups won't be very good at interviewing. Watch to see if any groups are asking too many yes/no questions. You may have to give those groups a little private coaching. If you assign a topic to the class and a group complains about it, just tell the students to think of a different "school-appropriate" topic.

The biggest problem you might face arises if you ask some members to share their grid answers with the whole class. It's almost guaranteed that the kid you call on will say something bizarre. For example, in Nancy's American Literature class one day, the juniors were having some serious discussions concerning their post-graduation plans. However, in the large-group forum, one student confidently volunteered that he was going to be a drug dealer. Okay, thank you for sharing; let's turn to our lit circle novels. Later, when Nancy looked at this kid's grid, it revealed that he had talked at length about going to the University of Illinois to study engineering. When asked why he said drug dealer instead of engineer, the young man replied, "Drug dealer seemed like a funnier answer." The moral of the story is that students often do better personal sharing in a small group than with the whole class.



## Drawing

### Why Do It?

We teachers often complain that kids today watch too much television, play too many video games, and are flooded with ready-made visual images everywhere they turn. We also notice that many of these overstimulated kids can't make pictures in their own heads while reading a book. Indeed, their inability to create vivid sensory images may be one reason that so many kids will throw down a perfectly wonderful book, saying: "This is boring." We're not sure of all the causes for this affliction, but it does seem like our young people need some remedial visualization experiences, some encouragement and practice with creating sensory images as they read.

Drawing, charting, mapping, and other forms of graphic response also serve the range of learning styles that exist in any real classroom. Too often, we confine students' literary responses to written or spoken language, even though we know that some of our own most powerful responses to a book come from a vision of the place, our image of a character, or the picture we make of a single stunning moment. Many times, a drawn or graphic response can capture those elements better than more words.

Occasionally, we'll have students use drawing or mapping as their main harvesting strategy for an article or book. But more often, we invite them to use drawing as one of several tools: as one job on a role sheet, one quadrant of a bookmark, one thing you can put on a sticky note, or another kind of journal entry.

## Teaching the Lesson

### ..... Getting Started

The secret to introducing drawing as a response tool is to not evoke everyone's art phobia. Young people, just like many of us adults, tend to feel that art is a hereditary talent unfairly distributed among the population—and which has not graced their DNA. So we introduce this lesson in this way:

*Today we're going to use a new tool for capturing our responses while we read, for recording ideas to talk over in our book clubs. Instead of jotting down words, we're going to respond graphically—meaning we're going to draw something. Now, don't worry—this is not an art lesson. We're talking about simple sketching, cartooning, even stick figure drawings. It's not about who makes the prettiest picture, but about using this form to capture something important or special about your book and your thinking.*

Modeling by the teacher is especially important for the success of this tool, and a key mini-lesson step is to do a “draw-aloud.” Have the class read a short piece of text; then draw your own graphic response on the chalkboard or an overhead transparency. Vocalize as you draw:

*When I was reading the prologue to Maniac McGee, I was really struck by the poem, that jump-rope rhyme—‘Maniac, Maniac, he's so cool’—and the part where he kissed the bull. So I'm drawing Maniac here, and now here's the bull, who I thought would be really big and angry, so I'm drawing him snorting from his nostrils . . .*

Now it's the kids' turn. Pass out a short-short story, poem, or news clipping, and say:

*After you've finished the reading, take a couple of minutes to draw a response to what you've just read. You can do any kind of drawing you like:*

- *A scene, character, moment, or event from the story*
- *An image or picture that came to mind while you were reading; it could be a memory or scene from your life*
- *A diagram, flow chart, or map of the story*
- *An abstract form that represents a thought or feeling you got from the reading—an explosion, a thunderbolt, a pattern, etc.*

*Remember, this is not an art lesson, it's not about drawing talent, and it is not for a grade. This is just another way of remembering what strikes you when you read. We're going to draw this really fast, so you won't have time to worry or hesitate.*

Give some time for individual drawing. Then place kids in groups of three or four and invite them to have a short discussion of the text, using these instructions as a guide:

*One good way to use your drawings is to take turns showing your picture to the group. Don't say anything at first—let the other kids try to guess what you were representing in the picture. When everyone has had a chance to comment, then you can tell people what your picture was about.*

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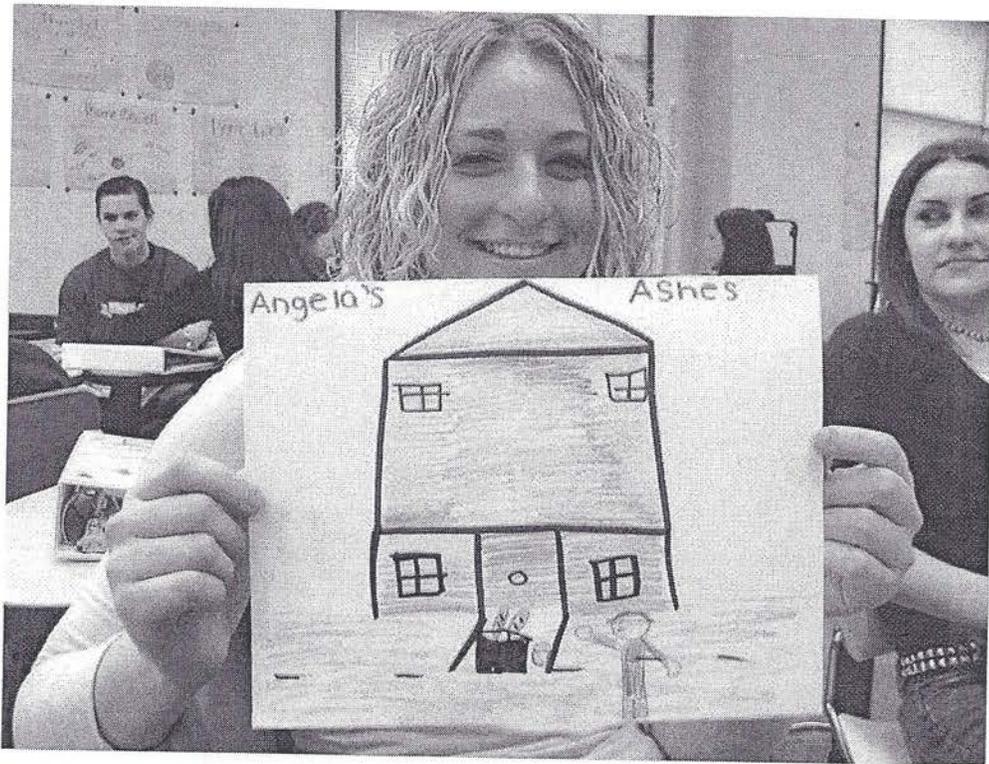
### **Working the Room**

While students are drawing, quietly walk around, helping any kids who have gone blank or are having an artistic panic attack. Usually the job is just to remind them of all the different kinds of “drawing” they might use for this assignment, or to help them pick out one thing to work with. If we run across a kid who’s genuinely struggling with the art thing, to be merciful, we’ll just assign a story event for the student to draw. If we see one of the jokesters developing a drawing that will exceed a PG rating, we quietly invoke the Mother Rule (Don’t do anything in here that wouldn’t make your mother proud).

---

## Reflecting

You can spark a great follow-up discussion with a “gallery walk.” Have kids tape their drawings to the wall at eye-level height, at three-foot intervals all around the classroom. Invite everyone to stroll through the gallery of drawn reading responses. Then have kids sit back down and ask them: “Who can tell us about a picture that started some really good conversation in your group?” Have the volunteers stand beside the picture they’re commenting on and explain specifically what good talk the picture sparked, and how. Often, it’s not the literal pictures that generated discussion, but the more high-concept models and designs. A bonus to this activity: Because drawing invokes other part of the brain, another learning style, a different set of kids often gets singled out for their good work.



## What Can Go Wrong?

Once you get past the initial anxiety or foreignness, drawing usually becomes a popular part of the reading response repertoire. Sometimes, too popular. Some kids will cleave to drawing to the exclusion of other forms of response. They may think that drawing a picture is “easier” or less onerous than writing down words, words, words. As long as students can base productive, thoughtful, small-group discussions on pictures, we choose not to see this as a problem. But some teachers we know have had to make rules: “You can’t only draw pictures about this book; you’ve got to have at least some notes every day.” Your choice.

### Juliet’s Soliloquy

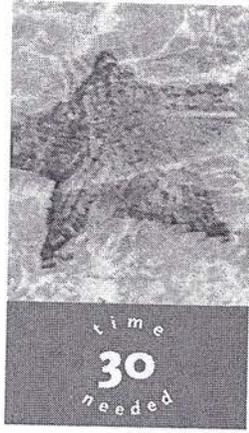
What if this mixture do not work at all?  
Shall I be married then tomorrow morning?  
No, no, this shall forbid it. Lie thou there.  
What if it be a poison that the Friar  
Subtly hath ministered to have me dead,  
Lest in this marriage he be dishonored  
Because he married me before to Romeo? . . .  
How if, when I’m laid in the tomb,  
I wake before the time that Romeo  
Come to redeem me? There’s a fearful point.  
Shall I not then be stifled in the vault . . .  
Where for this many hundred years the bones  
Of all my buried ancestors are packed; . . .  
O, if I wake, shall I not be distraught,  
Environed with all these hideous fears,  
And madly play with my forefathers’ joints,  
And pluck the mangled Tybalt from his shroud,  
And in this rage, with some great kinsman’s bone,  
As with a club dash out my des’prate brains? . . .

*William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, Act 4, Scene 3, lines 25–60.*



If you're worried that your students will be overwhelmed by the openness of the basic task, narrow it down: "Pick one line or sentence that really struck you in the reading. Do your drawing about that, and copy the words from the book right under your picture."

Illustrations often encourage students to examine the text more closely. When reading Act 4 of *Romeo and Juliet*, Walter chose to depict the apprehension Juliet expresses in the soliloquy she delivers just before taking Friar Lawrence's potion.



## Presenting Book Choices with a Book Pass

### Why Do It?

For literature circles to really soar, every student must be reading a book that is thoroughly engrossing and just right for them. But sometimes, even when you give them a few days to browse all the possible selections for the next round of book clubs, not all students do so. And even your most dynamic book talks don't earn rapt attention when you are blurbing six or eight titles, one after another. Doing a "book pass" takes a little more time but guarantees that every kid will sample each possible choice and make a truly informed selection.

The process is nothing complicated. It's just a structured way for kids to read two minutes' worth of every available book choice. When we use this activity, we often see kids choosing books they would not otherwise have read, stretching themselves into new genres and authors, and sometimes hooking up with new combinations of peers.

### Teaching the Lesson

#### ..... Getting Started

Set up "stations" (tables if you have them; pushed-together desks, if not) with four seats each. At each station, place one copy of four different titles that kids can select for their next book club cycle. (Depending on the number of

kids and choices, you might need to have three books and three kids, or five books and five kids—just so the math comes out right.) Hand out sheets like the Book Pass Review Sheet provided in the appendix, or have students make notes in their journals. Then explain how the book pass will work:

*When you sit down at a table, grab a book. Don't fight over them—everybody is going to sample each one. When I say "go," start at page 1, Chapter 1, and read as far as you can until I call "stop" in two minutes. Keep reading as fast as you can. When you stop, I'll give you thirty seconds to fill out the review sheets, so you'll remember which books you liked and why. Then pass your book to the left and repeat; read, write, and pass until you've sampled all four books. I'll be calling out the times to keep you on schedule.*

If there are only three to five choices in all, one sitting does the job. If you're able to offer kids a broader choice (six to eight titles or more), then the fun really begins. After "tasting" all the books at one table, kids move to the next station, where you have placed four different books, and the cycle repeats. Some of our veteran lit circle teachers have big classroom libraries of multiple-copy sets. In their rooms, a book pass can have four different books at three or four tables, representing twelve to sixteen choices! (Working through this many choices takes longer, of course, and stays fresher if done at two sittings.)

.....

### **Working the Room**

Your main job is to call out the two-minute intervals, keep your eye on the tables, and usher kids along. When students have sampled and rated all of the possible titles, have them write you a note listing their top three choices in order of preference. Then collect these ballots and, at your leisure, form groups built around kids' interests, factoring in your appraisal of their reading level and the need to make smooth-running, productive groups. If you think a student has picked a book that's too hard, use a private conference, note, or email to review the decision. If you and the student agree that the book is just too tough, suggest an alternative from the other choices. But also be open-minded; if a struggling reader is really fascinated with the topic, is

willing to make the effort necessary to get through the book, and will be in a supportive group of peers, let him take the risk, and provide backup (such as books on tape) where you can.

.....

### **Reflecting**

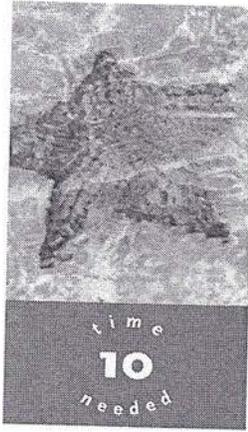
Have kids talk about what books (or, rather, book openings) they liked and why. Happily, for once, everyone will have actually read the text being discussed! Be careful to collect the kids' ballots first, before the discussion reveals that their usual posse has selected another book or someone has trashed their number-one choice.

In a more literary vein, this is an ideal time to talk about how authors start a book, how they get us hooked. The eminent literary scholar Alfred Appel says that a great writer will tell you the whole story of the book in the first paragraph if you know how to listen. If Appel is right, kids should be able to predict much about the book just from reading the first few pages.

### **What Can Go Wrong?**

This activity is so brisk that it rarely goes astray. The most common problem with book passes, a rather delicious one, is that sometimes a student will get so hooked on a book that she won't pass it along after the allotted two minutes. We've even had kids refuse to leave the table when it's time to move to the next station and try the next four books. While we do love it when kids make this sudden connection with a book, it sure can clog the smooth flow of a book pass. The crude solution to this problem is to pry the book from the offending reader's hand and forcibly pass it along. But why come between a reader and a new love? If we are really growing lifelong readers with our literature circles, we want to nurture, not quash, that magical head-over-heels experience with a book. The simple answer: Have a few extra copies of each book so you can replenish the table and avoid a logjam, and let the smitten student read on.

A rare but annoying problem is when kids who have already read one of the books either trash-talk it or give away the ending. If lots of kids have read a book choice before, you may need to warn against these sins at the outset.



## Save the Last Word for Me

### Why Do It?

In preparation for literature circle discussions, we often ask kids to pick important passages to bring to the group. Amazingly, students reliably demonstrate their ability to pick great parts. As a matter of fact, lots of times they'll pick the same passages that we would. Unfortunately, even with a wealth of material to work with, their passage discussions often follow this predictable format:

1. Member reads passage aloud.
2. Same member explains why she picked that passage.
3. The rest of group nods in agreement and it's on to the next passage.

Of course, the truly engaging moments in any discussion occur when someone in the group notices text in a different way and then explains a view that no one else had even thought of.

The strategy *Save the Last Word for Me* (Short, Harste, and Burke 1995) encourages kids to gather ideas from all group members before the person who chose the passage explains his or her interpretations. A good way to introduce this strategy is to say:

*Observing your groups the other day, I noticed that the person who reads a passage immediately explains it without encouraging others to share first. Getting more ideas out on the floor is a way to make discussion more interesting, and using *Save the Last Word for Me* is a way to accomplish this.*

## Teaching the Lesson

### Getting Started

Choose two passages of text that do not require extensive introductions before they are read aloud. Good choices include short newspaper articles or the opening paragraphs of novels. Make sure students have copies so that they can read along. Model the first passage the way the kids do: Read it aloud and then immediately explain in detail why you chose it. The following passage is from the first two paragraphs of *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee.

When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow. When it healed, and Jem's fears of never being able to play football were assuaged, he was seldom self-conscious about his injury. . . .

When enough years had gone by to enable us to look back on them, we sometimes discussed the events leading to his accident. I maintain that the Ewells started it all, but Jem, who was four years my senior, said it started long before that. He said it began the summer Dill came to us, when Dill first gave us the idea of making Boo Radley come out.

*Teacher's Explanation: I chose this passage because it makes me ask a lot of questions. How did Jem's arm get broken? Why are they still talking about it years later? What does Jem's arm have to do with Boo Radley? What does it mean that Dill made him come out? Why was he hiding? Why did they even care about him? Who are the Ewells? It sounds like the narrator blames them for Jem's broken arm. Considering that Jem's big concern was playing football, it seems like it's the narrator who can't stop thinking about this incident rather than Jem. He seems okay with it. That word "assuaged" is interesting. I wonder what it means.*

Then you might say, "Okay, that's what I think. Let's get some ideas from some other readers," and call on a few kids at random. After that passage

explanation, you can bet there won't be any other ideas because the kids already heard an extended version of "the right" answer. Their thinking has been shut down. When this happens, mention that you've noticed the same thing happening during their literature circle meetings.

Before reading the second passage aloud, have students review the reading/thinking strategies that they brainstormed during the Think-Aloud modeling done earlier. Now say, "As I read this second passage aloud, I want you to follow along and notice what the passage makes you think about. After hearing the passage, everyone should be ready to have something to say about it."

After reading the second passage, explain the new strategy: "Now we're going to Save the Last Word for Me. Before I say anything about this passage, I want to hear what some of you have to say. Tell the rest of us why you think the passage was important, how that passage relates to something else in the story, or just what you noticed and thought about as that passage was read." Then call on three or four kids at random before you explain why you chose it.

Students should notice that it's easier to think of a response before the reader explains anything and that their ideas are often different from the reader's.

Now the groups have their marching orders. Whenever someone reads a passage aloud, the only thing the reader can say at first is "Save the Last Word for Me." Not until everyone else has contributed an opinion can the person who chose the passage explain his thoughts.

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### **Working the Room**

Though this strategy seems deceptively simple, it is not. Primed by reading the passage aloud, many students immediately want to share their thoughts. As you observe the literature circles in action, you'll need to gently prod and remind the kids to "Save the Last Word" because it's guaranteed that some will forget.

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## Reflecting

A good way for students to reflect on what they talked about is to have them pick out the most interesting passage of the day and then jot down the different ideas that came out of its discussion. Also, if you notice that most of the groups are forgetting to Save the Last Word, the members need to develop a specific plan for improving the use of this strategy. Here are some ideas former students have suggested:

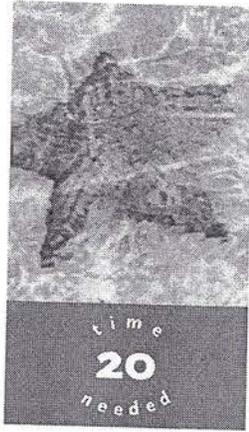
- Assign one person to enforce the Save the Last Word rule.
- Write STLW (Save the Last Word) in big letters on each sticky note that marks a passage.
- Make Save the Last Word bookmarks as a reminder.
- Turn Save the Last Word into a friendly competition. Once a passage is read, members try to see who can blurt out “Save the Last Word for Me!” first.

## What Can Go Wrong?

Groups can fall into a predictable response pattern when using Save the Last Word. Someone reads a passage, and Chatty Cathy always takes the first swing. By the time it's Silent Sam's turn at the plate, all of the good ideas have been hit out of the park, and he ends up just repeating Cathy's ideas or agreeing with what was already said. When this problem arises, you'll need to directly intervene because a group seldom fixes this problem on its own. Why? Because the group likes the arrangement! The members who have lots to say get to say it, and the ones who are quiet get to comfortably fade away. However, the person who talks the most about a subject usually learns the most as well, so it's important that groups recognize the need to let their quieter members take their best shots first. Besides, even after Silent Sam has his say, Chatty Cathy will have plenty of ideas left to keep the conversation rolling!

## **Variations**

Save the Last Word is also an excellent strategy to use with student drawings, one of the response tools discussed in Chapter 3. Before the artist can explain anything about her picture, everyone else has to speculate about it. Students should be encouraged to focus on not just what is in the picture, but also what happened in the story before and after that scene, as well as what else was going on but was not directly described in the text.



## Dealing with Slackers and Unprepared Members

### **Why Do It?**

No matter how great the books are in your literature circles and no matter how well you've trained your students for peer-led group discussion, some members will still come unprepared. Rather than meting out consequences yourself, we've found it much more beneficial to let the groups deal with this problem. Though we're certainly not economists, we sometimes think of well-prepared students as "assets" to book clubs, and unprepared slackers as "liabilities." Once poor preparation rears its ugly head, it's time for student groups to determine their own "liability policies" for handling members who don't do the reading or prepare any discussion notes.

### **Teaching the Lesson**

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#### **Getting Started**

We introduce the lesson this way:

*We've noticed that unprepared members have been bogging down the discussions lately. It's easy to recognize unprepared members because*

*they're not looking at the book, they haven't brought any notes, and their conversations tend to be on topics other than the text. To solve this problem, your literature circle groups need to brainstorm ways to productively deal with members who come unprepared.*

Tell groups to work together for about five minutes; then regroup to create a whole-class master list, which, as usual, gets recorded in the journals. The list on the next page shows the ways Nancy's American Studies class thought unprepared members might participate—or not.

Since liabilities are a problem the groups must handle, we cross out any items that shift responsibility back to the teacher: All solutions require that the group own the problem. Once students have a variety of choices in front of them, they decide what will work best for their book club and commit to that decision.

Besides determining the initial rules, we also ask each group to come up with two corollaries. First, will the liability policy change if the same member repeatedly comes unprepared? Some groups establish tougher consequences for repeat offenders; other groups stick with a one-level policy. Second, what unobtrusive visual symbol will show the teacher that a student is a liability today? After all, you may want to observe the discussion and even award points for participation without having to ask, "Okay, who doesn't have their reading and notes done?" Most groups decide that a liability member must label himself by wearing a sticky note on the shoulder or straddling his chair so that the back faces the group. Ouch, sounds like a tough stigma, but it's no worse than the teacher coming around with a clipboard and making the slackers confess out loud, one at a time.

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### **Working the Room**

Be sure that each group gives you a copy of its liability policy and visual signal, written on an index card. That way, as you observe you can see if the kids' policy is working. The index cards are also a handy place for you to make notes on the group's skills and interactions.

### Students' Suggestions for Ways Unprepared Members Can Participate in Group Meetings

- Listen but not talk.
  - Listen carefully and take notes on the discussion.
  - Does not participate in discussion but looks for information/reads passages we are discussing.
  - Apologize to the group and explain why they are a liability. Can only participate in discussion by asking questions.
  - Work as an observer, listening carefully and writing down the starter and follow-up questions the group members ask. Go over questions after finishing the reading assignment.
  - Listen carefully to discussion but not participate. The liability is in charge of collecting papers and turning them in.
  - Liabilities can write on the board "I want to be in the discussion group" a hundred times. Then they can discuss with the teacher why they didn't do their homework.
  - Liabilities can listen to discussion and act as timekeeper and also make sure everyone stays on task. They can also help put the chairs away.
  - Liabilities should be punished, have to do the assignment but still get a zero.
  - Listen silently and then make comments/ask questions during the last few minutes of the discussion. Group can help explain story to them based on questions.
  - Liabilities form new groups for the day and talk about the book they're reading and discuss the assignment however best they can.
  - Sit separate, finish the reading/work, join group if discussion is not over.
  - Listen silently but carefully observe and record the conversation skills the group is using.
  - Contribute on parts of reading that they covered but sit silently and listen to the discussion on the parts they didn't finish.
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## Reflecting

After each discussion, groups should review and possibly revise their reading schedule if an unrealistic calendar is producing the liabilities. Indeed, anytime members fall into liability status, the group needs to find out why they were unprepared and help them come up with a plan for better performance the next time.

On a day when all of the members in all of the groups have come prepared, have a class celebration after the discussions are over. Structure your debriefing that day so that students can testify how great discussions are when all members are full participants.

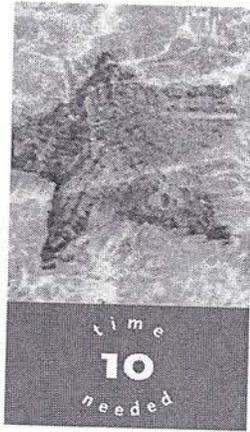
## What Can Go Wrong?

First, students sometimes will come up with goofy choices for the visual liability symbol. One group of boys decided to place their sticky notes on their crotches rather than their shoulders. They had to rethink that decision—fast! Another group decided that any liabilities would have to sing “The Barney Song” while dancing. Since Nancy thought that might be amusing to witness, she said nothing. Later, when she saw a guilty student wearing the customary sticky note, she asked about the song and dance. As it turned out, one member slipped the song idea under the wire unbeknownst to the rest of the group.

Second, though turning the problem back to the group helps increase the chances that students will feel more obligated to their peers and come prepared, it will never eliminate the problem entirely. When the kids get lazy, collecting everyone’s notes for the latest discussion and grading them is a good old-fashioned way to increase preparation compliance. However, that’s a lot of work, so we recommend it as a last resort. Try first to watch for the repeat offenders and have a private chat to see what’s going on.

Third, sometimes groups forget about their policies. If that’s the case, build a “liability check” into the meeting agenda and have members declare their particular status and their personal plans for that day’s contributions.

Surprisingly, we seldom see fellow members covering up for slackers. When kids have put in the time to read and prepare for a good discussion, they tend to be annoyed by unreliable members who aren’t pulling their weight.



## Savoring Powerful Language

### Why Do It?

What hooks readers on books for a lifetime? Characters we care about, plots and places we can believe in, ideas that matter to us as human beings. All these are crucial parts of the formula. But what comes first, for many of us, is *language*: We need vivid words, a unique voice, images we can see, taste, feel, smell. We want language that picks us up and puts us down in a whole other place.

We have been struck by what Tim O'Brien has said since being deluged with praise for his magnificent novel *The Things They Carried*. Though many gushing critics (and the Cliff's Notes) relentlessly inventory his gritty Vietnam war details, O'Brien patiently keeps telling people that the book is mostly about "language and words."

If you reflect on your own internal responses to books you really love, you may share our sense that distinctive "language and words" is a nonnegotiable component of excellence in literature. One of the forms of literary response that we rarely mention might be called "savoring"—when we simply marinate ourselves in, wonder at, and reread amazing feats of language. We also notice this hunger for great language in the negative: For those of us who have been avid readers for many years, encountering a book with lackluster language constitutes a *prima facie* case for abandonment. Life is too short to read books with no voice.

## Teaching the Lesson

### Getting Started

This lesson is pure simplicity—and pure delight. You just find a passage, maybe a page or two, with great language, and read it aloud to your class. For example, we like to read the poetic and hilarious prologue to Jerry Spinelli's *Maniac McGee*:

They say Maniac McGee was born in a dump. They say his stomach was a cereal box and his heart a sofa spring. They say he kept an eight-inch cockroach on a leash and that rats stood guard over him while he slept. They say if he was coming and you sprinkled salt on the ground and he ran over it, within two or three blocks he would be as slow as everybody else. They say. What's true? What's myth? It's hard to know. . . . But that's OK. Because the history of a kid is one part fact, two parts legend and three parts snowball. And if you want to know what it was like back when Maniac McGee roamed these parts, well, just run your hand under your movie seat and be very, very careful not to let the facts get mixed up with the truth.

The conversation right after the read-aloud should be natural, informal, and brief. “How did that language strike you?” is as good a prompt as any. We mainly want to send kids into their literature circle discussions with great language ringing in their ears. After kids have commented on the passage for a few minutes, send them off to their regular meetings with this instruction:

*Start your meeting today by looking for some passages of great language in your book. Each member find one section and read it aloud to the group. Talk a little bit about each section. What makes this language special, beautiful, or powerful? When you're done, pick one passage to share with the whole class at debriefing time, and select someone to read it.*

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### **Working the Room**

The groups have a multistep task here (select, read, comment, take turns), and some will probably benefit from your guidance. You may also have to be a roving volume control, helping kids to adjust their read-aloud level for the group, not the whole classroom.

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### **Reflecting**

When you call the kids back from their book club meetings, you can create a bookend to the opening read-aloud. Simply ask the designated student from each group to read the chosen passage aloud. The students will have to focus carefully on the speaker, since most won't have copies of the book to follow along. After each reading, allow for a minute of sink-in time, and then invite comments from listeners. "What did you think? Did that work for you? What made that language special? Did it remind you of any other authors and their style or voice?"

### **What Can Go Wrong?**

Reading aloud to your class is a small performance, and a flat or ill-prepared delivery can send the wrong message to your "audience." You can't just pick a passage and "wing it." You need to practice beforehand, reading the chosen passage out loud several times, and infusing your reading with whatever appropriate dramatic touches you can manage. If this is not something in your normal repertoire, keep this in mind: Teenagers (like most humans) really enjoy being read to. This kind of story-sharing is a universal, primitive rite that goes back to prehistoric campfires and stone circles. You don't need to be a trained thespian to pull this off—just being a book-lover will suffice. You may find yourself falling in love with reading aloud, too.

It's important to have quiet attention for this kind of sensitive performance so that kids can focus completely on your reading. Moreover, you are modeling for them how to read aloud in their own groups. So, don't launch into the read-aloud until your audience is ready.

# Membership Grid

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Hour \_\_\_\_\_

Topics	Group Members				

# Book Pass Review Sheet

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Title:

Interest Rating:	Great 5	4	OK 3	2	Yuck 1
Difficulty:	Really Hard 5	4	3	2	Really Easy 1

Comments:

Title:

Interest Rating:	Great 5	4	OK 3	2	Yuck 1
Difficulty:	Really Hard 5	4	3	2	Really Easy 1

Comments:

Title:

Interest Rating:	Great 5	4	OK 3	2	Yuck 1
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Comments: