

## Having Meaningful Discussions Using **THICK** Questions

Wondering how to get your students to engage in deeper discussion after listening to a Walking Classroom podcast or a class read-aloud? The key is to help them ask better questions and actively listen in order to build on their peers' thoughts.

If students are given the opportunity and encouraged to discuss the content with their peers, they will retain the information much better. Their new learning will be anchored in meaningful conversations, and it will help extend their thinking and understanding beyond the time spent listening to the material.



### Why does it matter?

As evidenced by the Common Core Speaking and Listening Standards, being able to carry on a conversation that is text-based and builds on the ideas of others is a vital skill students must be taught. This will not come naturally to students, but should be modeled and practiced as it will take time to develop. Once students start to develop the skills, the depth of their thinking and conversations will truly astound you.

### Thick vs. Thin Questions

At The Walking Classroom, we talk about asking “Thick Questions” instead of “Thin Questions” to support good discussion.

**Thin Questions:** Thin questions are those questions whose answers can be found in the text or podcast and can be answered with a few words or short sentences. Another way to think about it is to say that the answers are “right there.” They are easier to answer, often answered with a “yes” or “no”, and usually have just one possible response.

#### Examples of Thin Questions:

- When...?
- Where...?
- Who...?
- How many...?

**Thick Questions:** Thick questions are inferential questions that ask us to think more deeply since the answers are not “right there.” Answers to thick questions are open to argument; they should still be supported by the text, but one’s own reasoning is a part of the response. Thick questions make

you “think and search.” They are harder to answer, often requiring background knowledge or evidence in support, and there are often many possible responses.

**Examples of Thick Questions:**

- What if...?
- How did...?
- Why did...?
- What caused...?
- What would happen if...?
- How would you feel if...?
- What do you think...?

**Informal Assessment:** An easy way to see if your students understand the difference is to offer some questions and ask students to identify them as “thick” or “thin.” Need a visual? Sort the questions on a T-chart!

**Some possible questions to sort:**

- What time does school start? (Thin)
- How many students are absent today? (Thin)
- When do we eat lunch? (Thin)
- Are there more boys or girls in our class? (Thin)
- Why is exercise important? (Thick)
- How would you feel if the school year was one month longer? (Thick)
- What do you think about soda being sold in the school cafeteria? (Thick)
- What if homework was banned? (Thick)

## Putting it into Practice

Once your students have an understanding of Thick vs. Thin questions, assign students a discussion partner or partners. Encourage them to have a discussion using Thick questions. Afterward, ask students how the discussion went and have them share some of their Thick questions. As a class, reflect on how the discussion might have been different than previous discussions and what they could do to have even better discussions next time. It’s often easier to have a better discussion the second time around.

## Accountability

You can’t be everywhere and there are always those students who will wander off topic or simply choose to discuss something else if the teacher is not right beside them. Listening journals are a great way to hold students accountable for listening and participating in discussions. After they complete the day’s prompt, have students write an additional sentence or two about how they felt their discussion went, rating themselves and their partner(s) from 1-5 for how they did with asking thick questions, staying on topic, etc. Once you know students are having on-topic, meaningful discussions, you can just have them rate themselves every once in a while.

**Example: Discussion Rating Chart**

(1 – poor, 3 – good, 5 – excellent)

My partner(s) and I stayed on topic during our discussion.	1 2 3 4 5
My partner(s) and I asked thick questions.	1 2 3 4 5
Our discussion helped me better understand...	
Next time I think we should...	

## Taking it a Step Further – Conversational Moves

Later in the year, once students know how to ask questions, consider introducing them to conversational moves to ensure they are actively listening to their peers when discussing and that they are learning to build on what someone else thinks.

**Some examples:**

- I agree with you because...
- I respectfully disagree with you because...
- Why do you think that?
- So, what you’re saying is...
- To add on to...
- Can you explain what you mean...