

# Using Informational and Narrative Picture Walks to Promote Student-Generated Questions

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**Abstract** The purpose of this article is to explore the use of picture walks in narrative and informational text as a method to encourage question generation. This article overviews the instructional benefits of having students generate their own questions before, during, and after reading. Featured are two classrooms where students pose questions through narrative and informational text features.

**Keywords** Inquiry-based instruction · Questioning · Comprehension

Why doesn't your hair hurt when you cut it?  
How do the bubbles get into soda and seltzer water?  
How do glasses work? How do they make my eyes see better?  
Is the heart inside of my body really the shape of a Valentine's heart?

These questions come from a second-grade classroom bulletin board, titled “Questions We Have”. Anyone who has worked with young children is familiar with the rapid-fire questions that young children generate. Research demonstrates that students are naturally curious; on an average day, mothers are asked an average of 288 questions a day by their children aged two to ten (Frazier et al. 2009). According to Chouinard et al. (2007), children ask between four hundred and twelve hundred questions each week.

Though children come to school with natural curiosity, these questions taper off as instruction today provides little

room for student-generated questions (Dillon 1988; Graesser and Person 1994; Van der Meij 1988). It is likely that students don't ask more questions because of teacher-dominated classroom discourse (Cazden 2001), limited time of classroom instruction, and even an unfriendly atmosphere in the classroom (Chu et al. 2007; Pedrosa de Jesus et al. 2003). Children don't suddenly cease to have questions about their expanding world. Instead there is a shift in who generates the questions; the majority of questions are generated by the teacher, rather than coming directly from students. The typical school child answers an “interminable number of low-level literal questions” (Allington, 2014, p. 18), with teachers posing between 300 and 400 questions each day (Leven and Long 1981). Thus, a paradox exists between the natural curiosity of young children and today's classrooms, where children ask fewer questions.

The purpose of this article is to showcase literacy instruction driven by student questions. I present *picture walks* as meaningful instructional strategy that encourages question generation with young readers. I showcase how two teachers—both former students from my literacy methods university coursework—use picture walks in narrative and informational text. The result of their instruction is inquisitive readers who are engaged with the text before, during, and after reading.

## The Power of Student-Generated Questions

The power of student-generated questions is indisputable. The National Reading Panel (2000) defined question generation as a type of instruction where readers ask themselves questions about various aspects of the text. In their meta-analysis of question generation, Therrien and Hughes

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(2008) reported 13 studies highlighting significant gains in reading comprehension scores with the use of question generation. As they pose questions, students become focused readers with stronger understanding of the written text (Chin et al. 2002). Question generation benefits children in cognitive and motivational capacities across content areas. More recent research from various disciplines shows that question generation improves students' retention of math content (Teodoro et al. 2011), explanations of their thinking processes (Gillies et al. 2014), engagement in science (Hung et al. 2014), and oral and written responses to literature (Peterson and Taylor 2012). A research team from University of California Davis (Singh 2014) monitored brain activity to measure how engaged learners were in reading questions and their answers. When learners' curiosity is piqued by questions and their answers, the parts of the brain associated with pleasure, reward, and creation of memory underwent an increase in activity.

Student-generated questions are at the heart of inquiry-based classrooms, which are student-centered and teacher-guided (Wilhelm 2007). Here, students' questions and curiosities drive learning, rather than a teacher-directed curriculum. In inquiry-based classrooms, students hold more ownership and control of their learning, engage in collaborative learning (Beach and Myers 2001), develop their metacognitive skills (Wells 1999), and are more motivated and engaged in learning tasks (Wilhelm 2007).

Furthermore, the ability to generate questions is a high priority in today's classrooms. In the classrooms where these questions emerged, the teachers emphasized question generation as an instructional priority, much like the Common Core State Standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative 2010). As readers rise in grade level, the questions that they are expected to ask become increasingly complex. Second graders are expected to ask journalistic-type questions (who, what, where, when, why, and how) about explicit information in a text. By the end of fourth grade, students are expected to ask both closed-ended and open-ended questions, requiring both inference skills and critical thinking. When teachers of young children carve instructional time for student-generated questions, children become motivated readers who approach text for purposeful reasons (Ness 2015).

## Looking Inside Classrooms

In my work as a teacher educator, I often have the privilege of visiting former students in their transition from preservice teachers to full-time classroom teachers. In my literacy methods classes, we discussed the power of student-generated questions and inquiry-based classrooms (Ness 2015). After graduating and earning their teaching license,

two former students emailed me and were eager to showcase the role of questions in their classrooms. Mrs. Reist, now a Kindergarten teacher, wrote to tell me the following:

As an educator, I see that somehow the questions begin to fade away in the confines of a structured educational environment. I believe young children are taught not to ask these free-flowing questions and encouraged instead to focus on a predetermined curriculum.

Thus, as an early career teacher, she set the goal of creating time to honor her students' innate curiosity and carve out instructional space to encourage question generation in her English Language Arts instruction. In his third year of teaching, Mr. Clayborn incorporates informational text into his guided reading groups. Prior to observing him, he explained the following:

I want my students to see that questions can come from so many places. I want them to ask questions about a book simply from its structure. If they can generate questions about the pictures, the charts, the text features, they will be more purposeful in the during-reading phase.

The following vignettes show how these teachers used narrative and informational text to generate questions using picture and text feature walks.

## Using Picture Walks to Generate Questions

As a prereading strategy, Mrs. Reist showed text images in order for students to generate relevant questions. Her approach is based on the instructional strategy of *picture walks*. As defined by Stahl (2008), a picture walk is a pre-reading conversation meant to effectively introduce a book to novice readers (Clay 1991). In a picture walk, a proficient reader leads the child in previewing each page or few pages of an unfamiliar text. The conversations assist readers in making predictions about the nature of the story and introducing unfamiliar vocabulary words. Picture walks help children to connect with the visual images in the story so they can connect the pictures with their own experiences and activate any relevant background knowledge. In one of the only studies measuring the effectiveness of picture walks, Stahl (2008) called picture walks "meaning-propelled instructional techniques that creates a synergy of fluency and comprehension for novice readers" (p. 381). In the traditional model of a picture walk, the adult is responsible for generating questions to ask to children. As such, the adult facilitates the majority of the conversation, rendering the child responsive to the adult's prompts. With a simple shift, this dynamic can change to one where children generate questions about the images in the text.

Mrs. Reist selects the children's picture book, *My Friend Rabbit* by Rohmann (2007). Much of the story is told through the illustrations, offering a perfect opportunity to use a picture walk to generate questions. Written for beginning readers, the book tells the story of mischievous Rabbit, who gets Mouse's brand new airplane stuck in a tree. In an effort to dislodge the airplane, Rabbit tugs, drags, carries, and cajoles a wide variety of animals to stand one on top of another under the offending tree. Mouse just reaches the wing of his plane when the entire group crashes to the ground.

The cover depicts a cartoonish rabbit holding a toy airplane against a bright blue sky. A small mouse is nestled in the cockpit of the airplane. Mrs. Reist explains, "This story is about a mouse and a rabbit, who are friends. Somehow this rabbit always gets into trouble. Before we even read the book, you get the chance to ask any question you'd like." She points to sentence strips in a pocket chart, displaying the question prompts "How? Who? Why? What? Where? When?" She continues, "Remember that good questions start with these words. I'm going to give you a silent minute to think of some questions, and then I'd like you to turn and talk to your neighbor to share some of the questions that you'd like to ask just by looking at the picture on the cover." She calls on students to share their questions.

As students are quite familiar with making predictions, they initially resort to their comfort zone and offer predictions based on the cover art. She coaches one student on how to convert her statement of "I think that the mouse is driving the plane" to the question "Who is driving the plane?" When a boy states, "I think the bunny is the main character because he's much bigger than the mouse," the teacher poses, "How could we rewrite that prediction into a question that we hope the text answers for us?" She models her thinking, and reports, "What I hear you asking is, 'Who is the main character?' The following questions were generated from the cover alone:

- Who is driving the plane?
- Who is the main character?
- What is the name of the bunny?
- What is the name of the mouse?
- What is going to happen in the story?
- What happens in the beginning, middle, and end?
- What is the setting of the story?
- Where is the plane going?
- Is this story nonfiction or fiction?
- How is the bunny feeling in the picture?
- Why is the mouse sitting in the plane?

For the most part, questions are generated in order of the who, what, where, when, and why prompts. The list above demonstrates that students were most comfortable in generating questions with the *who* and the *what* stems.

For the remainder of the book, students generate questions as they naturally emerge in the page-by-page preview. As to ensure that every student generates a question, the teacher has students think-pair-share to build their comfort in speaking with a partner before sharing out to the large group. Mrs. Reist pauses midway through the book and says, "We've seen a lot of pictures now and I'm sure you have a lot of questions. I'd like you to turn and share a question with a partner next to you." From a picture depicting the rabbit holding up an airplane, a student asks, "How much does an airplane weigh?" Another picture shows a rabbit lifting an alligator, a goose, and a bear, prompting a student to ask, "Are rabbits really strong?" When the illustration's orientation changes—forcing the reader to change the book from horizontal to vertical—a student poses, "Why did they draw the picture like that?"

Table 1 shows the remaining questions generated in the picture walk. Having generated these questions, students begin the book eager to search for the answers. Mrs. Reist

**Table 1** Questions generated from *My Friend Rabbit*

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Are all rabbits white?
How tall do rabbits grow?
Why is the rabbit throwing the mouse?
Why is the mouse covering his eyes?
How do the rabbit and mouse feel when their airplane gets stuck in a tree?
How are they going to get the plane out of the tree?
Are rabbits and mice usually friends in nature?
Why is the mouse looking up? How does he feel in this picture?
Where is the rabbit running?
What is that airplane made out of?
How do airplanes fly?
Who is flying that airplane?
What is the gold sticker on the cover of the book for?
It looks like the airplane was a gift. Who gave the gift? Who was the gift for? Was it a birthday gift?
Whose tail is the rabbit pulling on? Why is he pulling?
Why is there an elephant?
Aren't elephants afraid of mice?
Where is rabbit running this time?
Why is the rabbit pushing a rhinoceros?
Where did that hippo come from?
How is the rabbit so strong to lift all of those animals?
Is that animal a moose or a reindeer? Is that an alligator or a crocodile?
What is rabbit going to do with all of those animals?
How did all of those animals feel piled up on top of each other?
Do the animals get hurt when they fall down?
Is rabbit going to keep flying that airplane again?

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directs students to put a thumb in the air when they hear a possible answer to a question they generated. For instance, the text reveals that this is a toy airplane launched by Rabbit. One student reports, “We asked who is driving the plane. No one is driving—it’s kind of like a paper airplane that you throw. Rabbit is throwing the toy airplane.” When they encounter the vertical illustration, the young readers engage in conversations about the author’s purpose:

*Mrs. Reist:* You asked ‘Why did they draw the picture like that?’. The book does not answer this question for us, but maybe we could guess about the author’s purpose here.

*Joe:* I think they drew it like that to show how tall up the animals are stacked to get the airplane out of the tree.

*Amanda:* Yeah, it’s like the picture is showing us how tall they need to be. Instead of the picture going across, it goes up to the sky. The author is giving a clue about how high up the plane is.

In looking at the quality of the questions generated prior to reading, it is evident that multiple reading comprehension strategies are necessary to answer or address them. For instance, in asking, “Why is the mouse covering his eyes?”, students make inferences to discuss that perhaps he’s afraid and cannot look to see what is happening. In discussing the question, “Are all rabbits white?”, students activate background knowledge to report that they’ve seen rabbits of other colors both at pet stores and in nature.

Mrs. Reist places a checkmark next to each question that is answered by the text, leaving a small list of questions that go beyond the scope of the text. She points out, “You’ve asked some great questions, that our book doesn’t answer. For instance, our book doesn’t tell us how tall rabbits grow, if elephants are afraid of mice, or how airplanes fly. Are there any ideas on how we could find out the answers to some of our other questions?” Students brainstorm a list of possible approaches; to address their questions about rabbits, they suggest looking up things on the Internet, calling the local nature center, asking a veterinarian, or consulting nonfiction text. One student, whose father is a pilot, promises that he will be responsible for finding out how airplanes fly and reporting back to the class.

This transformed picture walk has encouraged student to generate questions prior to reading, to purposefully search for possible answers during reading, and to engage in rich conversations where they present theories, ideas, and possibilities to answer their own questions. As they build their academic language for question generation, they also understand the need to consult other texts and resources in search of answers to their questions.

## Using Text Feature Walks to Facilitate Student-Generated Questions

While *picture walks* are useful to generate questions from narrative texts, this strategy can be easily adapted for informational text. As defined first by Duke (2000) and reiterated by Maloch and Boner (2013a, b), informational text conveys information about the natural and social world. Though picture walks are commonplace in fiction, this practice is rarely used with informational text. A *text feature walk* is a modified picture walk aiming to show students how the informational text features support comprehension (Kelley and Clausen-Grace 2008). Just as the pictures help a reader while navigating fiction texts, the charts, diagrams, titles and subtitles, and typography support readers in making sense of informational text.

For his guided reading session with six students, second-grade teacher Mr. Clayborn selects *Butterflies of the Sea* (Swartz 2009), which provides information about sea slugs. He purposefully chooses an unfamiliar topic; their limited background information on sea slugs allows them to generate more questions than a topic with which they were quite familiar. He distributes copies of the book to each student, and asks them to look at the cover. He reads the title and prompts his students:

Our job is to look through this book and ask questions from its special features. We will look at the pictures, the titles, the different colors and charts. The author and illustrator have used these features for a specific reason, so before we read, I will lead you in asking questions from the different parts of the book. Watch how I use the title to ask a question. I told you that this book is all about sea slugs, but the title is *Butterflies of the Sea*. That brings a question to my mind: Why are sea slugs called ‘butterflies of the sea?’ Do you think there are butterflies in the sea? As we walk through the text, I will point out its special features and we will use them to ask as many questions as we can.

Beginning with the table of contents, he reminds the students:

The Table of Contents gives us an overview of what the parts of this book will be. It is a road map of what we will find in the book. It gives us hints about things we will read in the book, and it is also a great way to ask questions about what we might learn in the book. Let me show you how I use the table of contents to ask questions.

The table of contents outlines these categories:

- About Sea Slugs
- How They Swim

- Their Mollusk Family
- Small Wonders
- Where They Live
- How They Hide
- How They Feel
- How They Breathe
- The Spanish Dancer
- Butterflies of the Sea

From the page titled “Their Mollusk Family”, he models how to generate two questions: (1) What is a mollusk? and (2) Who is in a sea slug’s family? Next, he focuses on how headings both relay information and can be a source of questions. With the heading, “How They Swim”, he explains, “I want to know this: How do slugs swim? Do they have wings?” He follows a similar protocol with the typography in the informational text.

These words in dark bold type tell me important things about sea slugs. The author wants me to know what these words mean, so he puts them in the glossary at the end of the book. I have questions about these words. The first bold word I see is *flap*. What is a flap? Why does a sea slug have flaps? Where do I find a flap on a sea slug?

He points out how the pictures in this informational text both convey information and can be a source of questions.

In informational texts, we have these glossy color photographs that show me real life pictures of the book’s topic. Since I’ve never seen a sea slug in real life, I’m curious about what they look like. What does a sea slug look like? The small print under the picture is called the caption, and I can look at the caption for both questions and answers. On page four, this caption tells me that this is called a yellow-skirted slug. I have questions about them. Since there are yellow-skirted ones, are there sea slugs of every color? Where are the slug’s eyes? What about its mouth?

He distributes individual copies of the text to each reader, as well as question booklet—a simple stapled book of lined paper where students can record their individual questions. He directs students to generate at least three questions about the pictures, the headings, and any other text features. When they are ready to share out their questions, he acts as their scribe and records the questions that they have generated (Table 2).

After asking these questions, students peruse the text in search of answers. They find the majority of answers to these questions: that sea slugs come in almost every color, that their antennae help their smell, and that they are squishy because they lack a shell. Their question, “Why do they hide?” is not answered directly in the text, leading students to the following conversation which is rich in inferences.

**Table 2** Questions generated from informational text features

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Why do sea slugs have different patterns, and colors?
Why do they call them <i>butterflies</i> of the sea?
Why don’t sea slugs have shells?
Why are sea slugs squishy?
What would happen if sea slugs went on land?
Why are some orange?
Why are some purple and yellow?
Are sea slugs yummy when you eat them?
How can sea slugs swim?
What do sea slugs eat?
How are sea slugs small wonders?
How are sea slugs soft?
Why do sea slugs lay a lot of eggs?
Do sea slugs swim slowly?
How do sea slugs feel?
How do they see?
Why do they hide?
Are they slimy?
Why are they small?

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*JuanCarlos:* The book tells us that sea slugs don’t move a lot and that they are brightly colored. That means that they’re pretty would be able to see them easily.

*Ruth:* Yeah, so if their prey can see them then they’d have to hide to stay safe.

*Benji:* So, they hide to keep away from predators – especially since they don’t really have many ways to protect themselves.

At the conclusion of this activity, the teacher prompts students to jot down their new knowledge from this text. He provides them with the sentence starter, “From this book, I learned.” Their responses are far more detailed than their often bland and non-descriptive responses. “I learned about sea slugs” is replaced by “Sea slugs stay very still on rocks” and “I learned that crabs and lobsters eat sea slugs.” In this classroom, a text feature walk has helped students tap into their inquisitive natures and to increase their retention of this informational text.

### Key Ideas About the Strategy

Opportunities to use pictures to generate questions with young children abound. Picture walks become particularly engaging when early child educators incorporate technology into instruction. For example, a Kindergarten class reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* might use Google Images to search for real life photos of cocoons, chrysalis, and caterpillars. (Note: This popular book incorrectly refers to the butterfly’s cocoon. Actually moths make cocoons and

butterflies make a chrysalis.) First-graders approaching *The Watcher*, a biography of Jane Goodall, might use a website like [www.animals.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.animals.nationalgeographic.com) to search for photographs of chimpanzees. Before reading *Otis*, a charming picture book about a special tractor who works on a farm, young children might jumpstart questions about the various roles and jobs of tractors by visiting the John Deere website ([www.deere.com](http://www.deere.com)). To begin a unit about the solar system, a first-grade teacher might visit the website of the Hubble Space Telescope, the National Air and Space Museum, or the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to project key images. In a longer time frame, teacher might use the images from online videos to probe for build background knowledge and to generate questions. For example, a second grade class might watch a brief Brain Pop video about tornadoes to generate prereading questions.

When using these resources, the following tips may be useful for early childhood teacher educators:

- Allow ample time to show the image. It may be useful to also provide thick, rich description of the image before turning to questions. This teacher-generated language will provide support to students with limited oral vocabularies. For instance, to begin a unit looking at animal habitats, a teacher might display a photo of a savannah and explain, “This photo shows long dry grasses that grow high and thick. There are a few dry green shrubs and the clear sky shows lots of bright sun. What questions might we generate from this photo?”
- Use sentence starters to jumpstart student-generated questions. The *How? Who? Why? What? Where? When?* prompts should be clearly visible to students. Recognize that some prompts are easier for students to use; it is often easier to generate a *what* or *when* question than to generate a *how* question.
- Provide coaching to model turning observations into questions. When students report things like, “I think the bear is going to eat the sandwich”, rephrase it with statements like, “I hear a question behind that. I hear you asking ‘Is the bear going to eat the sandwich?’ Help young children recognize the questions that underpin their statements and wonderings.
- Give students the chance to generate questions silently by themselves, in small groups or partners, and then as a whole class. The think-pair-share format is particularly useful, as question beget more questions.

## Concluding Thoughts

Elementary school students are at a pivotal time; their abilities to generate, address, and explain the answers to questions are developed between the ages of 3 and 9

(Chouinard et al., 2007; Loukusa et al. 2008). Logically, instruction must focus on meaningful ways to encourage children to generate questions. Using picture walks and text feature walks are not new classroom practices; they have held an important role in helping students to comprehend the structure and content of texts. What is innovative about the work in Mrs. Reist’s and Mr. Clayborn’s classrooms is the application of these practices as a means to foster student-generated questions. With careful modeling and support from teachers, students can generate questions from short portions of text: the cover and illustrations in *picture walks* and the table of contents, headings, typography, and visual features in *informational text walks*. By generating these questions, students are better prepared to comprehend the text. These questions serve to focus readers, activate their background knowledge, set a purpose for reading, and engage in rich conversations about possible answers to their questions – both within and beyond the text. In these classrooms, the teacher’s job “becomes one of facilitating the skill of questioning for each student” (Williams 2010, p. 281).

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