How to actively engage students through creative approaches to reading in lessons

Drama activities

For example, hot-seating, role-play, freeze frames, to investigate layers of meaning, character, plot, language and writers’ purposes OR to engage/hook pupils in to the text.

- **Freeze frames**: Give one or two lines to groups (different ones) and they freeze frame it (i.e. create a tableau). Take photographs of this and then students annotate, identifying the character’s name, expression, gesture, action/pose and ‘why’ these have been used

- **Pre-reading character ‘meet and greet’**: Give students a character (from the text they are about to study) with a synopsis describing personality, status and relationship to others. They walk around the classroom responding to other ‘characters’ they meet in an appropriate way

- **Character speed dating**: This is a variation of the activity above. Students sit in rows facing each other like in speed dating and complete as a pre-reading task. They receive a character synopsis and introduce themselves to the other characters. They have to decide if they would get along, who they like, who they are most compatible with. They then vote. This serves as a prediction exercise.

Different ways of reading the text out loud in class

Vary the way students read around the class and invite them to be the decision-making process. This can ease students into a discussion and undo blocks.

- **Reading around the room game**: Tell pupils they will be reading around the class and they will have the choice to read as little or much as they want. Everyone has to read, but they are in charge about how much. The reading snakes around the room. When they stop to complete an activity, the students remember which table/student finished last. It becomes a motivator as they decide who should be reading. It gives them ownership of the class text. Eventually, it becomes a competition as they try to read more than the last

- **Echoing**: Give students a short text (poem or extract from a play or novel), read to the class and students echo it. Then ask them to pick their favourite word or one they think is powerful or interesting. Ask them which word they chose and ‘why’. This opens up the discussion and gives pupils a way into the text. It's a method I used with my Year 11 class when they struggled with poetry. If they said they didn't know why they chose a word or phrase, I scaffolded questions to lead them to find the answers (e.g. Is it a positive or negative word?). The students annotated the poem during the discussion.

- **Oral reading with active reading strategy**: While either the teacher or a student is reading, the others in the class become active listeners, either drawing what they hear (if they can’t draw I give them pictures to sequence in order) OR they note key words OR questions. Sometimes they complete this in groups with each member deciding which strategy they would prefer to use while listening to the text being read aloud. This could lead on to:
o **Story-boarding for visual learners** in order to understand structure and plot, after teacher modelling

o **Students generating their own questions of the text**, after teacher modelling, with a particular AF in mind, e.g. “Why did the character react in that way?” (AF2) or “I wonder why the writer has chosen to use a dash in that sentence?” (AF5). The answer is reached in collaboration with other students.

o **Text restructuring**: remodelling the information in another format, e.g. flow charts, diagrams, grids, maps, concept maps, tables, lists.

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### Linking with what they know/popular culture/media

This is a key strategy for supporting pupils’ comprehension and understanding.

- **Linking with what they know**: When reading a text, ask pupils if this reminds them of anything they’ve seen or experienced before, e.g. while reading chapter 3 in ‘Of Mice and Men’ when Candy’s dog is shot, ask them to write about/think about losing something special to them when they were a child. They then consider how they were comforted, so they can relate to the text and empathise with how George is comforting Lennie (and Candy).

- **Linking with popular culture/media**: In learning about a character through what they say in a text (their dialogue), e.g. in the adapted play of Frankenstein, use characters that they’re familiar with like the characters from ‘The Simpsons’. Ask what common phrases characters like Bart and Lisa say and what it shows about them (e.g., “Eat my shorts” shows Bart is naughty and cheeky, Lisa talks about school so she’s a ‘goody goody’ and intelligent, Homer says “doh” so you could infer he is a fool). Then when they read Frankenstein, they can apply the same technique to say what they learnt about Victor and Henry, i.e. one is realistic and the other idealistic.

- **Linking with social media - Facebook**: Students can create Facebook pages for characters in a novel, e.g. Stone Cold. Give students a Facebook page template and ask them to complete a profile for a character such as Links. Then create a wall for the characters and ask which other characters would write on it. This makes students think about character relationships in an accessible way. E.g., Links’ mum could write, “Come home my son! Where are you? We miss you!”

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### Higher order thinking in collaborative activities and games

Designing kinaesthetic activities that use collaborative group work will ensure pupils talk and use higher order thinking skills. They also put students in charge of their own learning. It’s important that these types of activity are tightly organised and that students are clear on classroom rules, and that you’ve thought about how the groups will feed back about their learning (e.g. market stall, snowballing, jigsawing, presentations, etc).

- **Scavenger hunt**: Place items/information around the room (in a cupboard, under tables, under chairs). Ask students to go around in pairs and collect information on an A3 sheet, which gives them questions in a table (DART activity). For example, with ‘Of Mice and Men’, they would be collecting information about race (How were African Americans treated in the 1930s), education, the economy/the Great Depression. Then they feedback ideas in groups and collect as much information as possible. It must be competitive and have a prize.
• **Promenade:** This is a similar activity to a Scavenger Hunt with pictures/stations placed around the room on different walls. Pupils, in pairs or fours, have to move around from station to station collecting information or completing the task. For example, if studying Macbeth, the stations may include different images related to the metaphors that are used to describe Macbeth in the text they are about to read. They look at the images and then write what their connotations are so when they read about the character, they associate those traits.

• **Mysteries/Spy Day:** This involves solving a mystery and encourages students to deal with ambiguity and to make links between unconnected pieces of information. For example, this type of activity could be used as a pre-reading activity for a class starting to study ‘An Inspector Calls’. In groups of four, students become Inspectors and receive information about characters in an envelope and items in a bag (evidence collected at the scene of the crime, like disinfectant, an engagement ring). They must link together the information and try to work out what happened. While doing this, they must create/complete a spider diagram in the same way police create one on the wall of a police station. As the activity goes on, feed them extra information and clues. This might be a quote or something that a witness overheard them say, like Edna the maid. They discuss the possibilities as a whole class afterwards. Different groups may have been given slightly different clues so they listen to the feedback more closely.

• **What’s the link?/Odd one out:** These types of tasks use a series of pictures or words where pupils either select one of the pictures or words which is the ‘odd-one-out’ or ‘find the link’ between the pictures or words, justifying their choice. This is an open-ended task where there is no right answer or there are multiples of answers. Students must use their higher order thinking skills to think of as many different scenarios as possible so it is best to use ambiguous sets of words/pictures to ensure that there may be more than one answer.

• **Maps from Memory:** Organise students in groups of 3 or 4. Group members take turns to visit the teacher’s desk to observe a map, picture or diagram for 10 seconds, with no pencil or paper for recording. They return to their group and draw or write what they can remember, adding to what previous group members have seen. Give groups time to plan their strategies before starting and give them further time to review their strategies as the activity progresses. The picture, map or diagram represents something the students have read. It could be a summary of what they have learnt the previous lesson.

• **Tension/mood graphs:** Chart a character’s mood or fortune throughout a text so that students can understand how the structure of a text contributes to meaning. To create this type of graph, firstly ask students how a character feels at a particular point in the text, ask how they know by identifying a key word/quote, then plot onto the graph and choose next point in the text, asking them to identify how the character’s feelings have changed. Sometimes you may need to scaffold the task by providing a bank of feelings. As they read, they are looking for changes in a character’s feelings.

• **Continuum lines:** They can be used to evaluate themes or characters. E.g., Give each student a character from the text they are studying and ask the class to organise/rank themselves according to the lesson’s given focus. In ‘Of Mice and Men’ is could be according to, ‘Who has the biggest dream?’ ‘Who has the most power?’ ‘Who is the most to least lonely? OR in poetry, place Clarke and Heaney’s poems on a line from most to least personal, or angry, or political. This activity can be converted into a kinaesthetic activity like a card sort or a human continuum line.

• **Socratic seminars:** Students discuss in detail the language, plot and themes of a text. See Cat Davies interview and example lesson for talk for writing.
Developing pupils’ vocabulary and written responses about what they have read

- **Points win prizes/Darts board**: Ask students to tell the story of the novel or play using key terms you have given them. The obvious words (E.g. in Romeo and Juliet ‘love’ and ‘hate’) earn fewer points than the words or phrases that require a more complex explanation of the plot (E.g. in Romeo and Juliet ‘fate’ or ‘male authority’). The key words can be placed on a DART board so that when students use a key word worth more points, their partner records it. We have provided you with an example DART board and templates that you can add your own key words to (this includes an image of a real dart board to use if you wish). Students could also write on their own key words and challenge each other. Download at [http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0001/5795/Vocabulary_DARTS_board_final.doc](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0001/5795/Vocabulary_DARTS_board_final.doc)

- **Text matching**: Students match pictures and headlines or words to recreate a new story/text.

- **Encouraging empathetic responses**: Students to complete writing diaries, scripts (of missing scenes), or descriptive responses.

- **Fridge poetry**: Students write poems using key words taken from the poem they are about to study, which allows them to explore language, tone, possible content and writer’s choice before reading the poem.