

Using Open-Ended Questions When Reading with Kids

Asking kids a few open-ended questions while you read books together helps them build language and comprehension skills -- and it's fun!

Open-Ended Questions: What Are They?

- Open-ended questions are questions that don't have just one "right" answer. They require more thought than a yes/no or "it's green" answer and encourage children to use more complex language.
- It can take time to answer an open-ended question thoughtfully -- be patient! It can take children many seconds to hear and process a question, and form and speak an answer. Try counting to 10 (silently) to give them time.
- If the question is too broad, you might narrow it down a little to help your child answer. For example, if "Who was your favorite character?" is too broad, you could narrow it down to a choice, followed by an open-ended prompt, like this: "Did you like the alligator or the hippo the best? What did you like about them?"
- You can invite a child to expand on a short or simple answer with an open-ended follow-up question. For example: Child says, "It looks mad." Adult responds: "Hm, you're seeing that the bird looks mad. What do you see that makes you say that?"
- Remember, the whole idea is to get kids talking! Open-ended questions are a way to help kids develop language, and express ideas with others. The conversation doesn't need to be a back-and-forth Ping Pong game between a child and an adult; it's the thinking and talking that matters. If you have a group, you can propose some questions and encourage kids to chat with each other.
- Open-ended questions work with nonfiction (true information) books as well as with stories!

The Three Open-Ended Questions of VTS (Visual Thinking Strategies)

The research-based strategies of VTS help readers of all reading levels in developing verbal literacy through visual literacy. The three questions of VTS are simple but powerful tools to help anyone interact with illustrations (and other works of art) in ways that stimulate critical thinking, communication skills, and visual literacy. The three questions are:

1. What's going on in this picture?
 2. What do you see that makes you say that?
 3. What else can you find?
- Use and repeat!

Some Ways to Start an Open-Ended Question

- What if...?
- How did...?



- Why did...?
- What would happen if...?
- What caused...?
- What might...?
- How would you feel...?
- What character traits describe...?
- Why do you think...?
- Why is...?
- What clues did you use...?
- What (or who) does [this] remind you of?
- Who do you know...?
- What do you already know about...?
- Where have you been that was like... [setting]?

Some Open-Ended Questions to Try BEFORE Reading Together

- What do you think this book is about? What do you see that makes you say that? What else do you see?
- What kind of book do you think this is: funny, scary, exciting, etc.? What do you see that makes you say that? What else do you see?
- The title of this book is [title]. What does that make you think the book might be about?
- What do you already know about_____? (Good for nonfiction books!)
- What are you curious to learn about_____? (Good for nonfiction books!)
- What does this picture/book/idea make you think of? How does it connect to things you already know?
- Some Open-Ended Questions to Try WHILE Reading Together
- How do you think the character feels on this page/in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What else do you see?
- What do you think might happen next? What do you see that makes you say that? What else do you see?
- What are you thinking about right now?
- What questions or wonderings are popping into your head right now?
- What would you do if you were [the character] on this page/in this situation? Why do you think you would do that?
- Why do you think the character is doing that? What do you see that makes you say that? What else do you see?
- Does this [character, story, setting, situation, etc.] remind you of anything?

- What kind of character is [character's name]? What words would you use to describe how they are? What do you notice that makes you say that?
- What are you seeing in your mind's eye (or in your imagination) right now?
- What have you learned so far? (Good for nonfiction books!)
- What are you still wondering about _____? (Good for nonfiction books!)

Some Open-Ended Questions to Try AFTER Reading Together

- What was your favorite part of the story? What did you like about it?
- Was there anything you didn't like about this story?
- Who was your favorite character in the story? What did you like about them? Was there a character you didn't like? Why didn't you like them?
- Can you tell me what happened to [character] in the story?
- What will you remember about this story tomorrow?
- If you could make up a new ending to this story, what would it be?
- Who do you think might like this story? Why?
- Did [character] do anything in the story that you want to try to do? What do you want to try?
- Did [character] do anything in the story that you do NOT want to do? What was that?
- What does this story remind you of in your own life?
- What did you learn that is particularly interesting to you?
- Did you find anything in this book confusing? What questions do you have about it?
- In this story, what do you think the author might wish us to learn or think about?
- What was the most surprising thing you learned? (Good for nonfiction books!)
- Is there anything you are still wondering about? (Good for nonfiction books!)

Remember, Story Flow is Important Too!

While it is valuable to ask and discuss open-ended questions when sharing a book, it is also important to allow children simply to enjoy the reading and feel immersed in the experience. Try for a balance between reading and discussing. No need to overdo it! Asking too many questions might interrupt the flow of the story. So, trust your gut! When it feels like a good place to pause and discuss things, try it out. Let the text -- and the children -- be your guide.