newsela Threads & Themes

ELA Routines Guide

A Teacher's Reference for Instructional Routines, Differentiation, and Foundational Skills Fidelity, Grades 6–8

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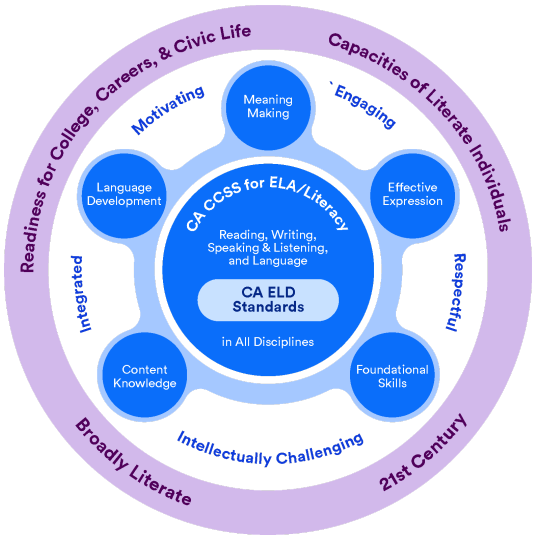
About This Guide

This guide describes the instructional routines and foundational skills fidelity checklists that appear throughout the Newsela *Threads & Themes* program. Its purpose is to give you, the teacher, enough background on each routine that you can implement it with confidence the first time it appears in a lesson — and refine your facilitation as the year progresses. For the multisensory foundational skills routines in the Literacy Lab (Introduce New Words Using Syllables and Introduce New Words Using Morphology) and the Fluency Practice Routine used across Core Reading lessons, the guide also includes fidelity checklists that teachers can use to ensure the routines are delivered as designed.

Routines are the architecture of this program. When students know what a routine looks and sounds like, they spend less mental energy managing the process and more on the intellectual work: reading closely, reasoning about evidence, articulating ideas, and building knowledge across texts. Consistency is what makes routines powerful — the goal is for students to internalize these structures so completely that the routine itself disappears into the background of their thinking.

The Framework These Routines Serve

Every routine in this guide is designed to support the five themes of California's *ELA/ELD Framework*: **Meaning Making, Language Development, Effective Expression, Content Knowledge, and Foundational Skills.** The *Framework's* Circles of Implementation graphic[1] shows how the CA Common Core State Standards for ELA and the CA ELD Standards sit at the center of instruction, wrapped by the five themes and by the context in which learning occurs (motivating, engaging, respectful, intellectually challenging, integrated), all oriented toward the overarching goals of readiness for college, careers, and civic life.



The routines in this guide are the practical moves that operationalize each theme inside a daily lesson. The Academic Discussion Routines (Section 4) build Effective Expression and Language Development; the Core Reading and Meaning-Making Routines (Section 3) build Meaning Making and Content Knowledge; the Writing and Performance Task Preparation routines (Section 5) consolidate Effective Expression; and the Literacy Lab routines (Section 8) — including the multisensory foundational-skills routines — build Foundational Skills and Language Development.

[1] California Department of Education, *English Language Arts/English Language Development Framework for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve*, Chapter 2, Figure 2.1 (Sacramento: California Department of Education, 2015). Reproduced for instructional reference.

A note on gradual release

Most routines in this program follow an I Do → We Do → You Do → Reflect structure. The first time a routine appears in a unit, plan to model it explicitly — narrate your thinking, demonstrate the steps, and name what students should notice. In subsequent lessons, shift toward co-facilitation and then release to students. By the end of the year, students should be able to launch most routines independently with minimal teacher direction. This release is intentional and tracked across units; the lesson materials will cue you when a routine is appearing for the first time versus when students should be driving it themselves. A useful benchmark: the same routine that required ten minutes of setup in September should be nearly hands off for the teacher by spring because the structure has been internalized. Plan your scaffolding to fade rather than persist.

A note on ELD integration and linguistic diversity

Many of these routines — particularly oral rehearsal, partner exchange, and structured discussion routines — do double duty in ELD contexts. They create low-stakes, high-repetition opportunities for students to practice academic language before being asked to perform it independently. When working with Multilingual Learners, pay particular attention to the sentence frames and language supports embedded in each routine, and plan for additional rehearsal time before students share publicly.

The routines are designed to support the California English Language Development (CA ELD) Standards alongside the CA Common Core State Standards for ELA. Differentiation suggestions in each entry reference specific strategies — cognate leverage, translanguaging, home-language drafting, and graduated sentence frames — that help students transfer linguistic knowledge from their primary language to academic English while progressing across the Emerging, Expanding, and Bridging proficiency levels.

The same routines also support students who use variations of English (including African American English and other dialects of English) and students whose home phonology differs from that of standard academic English. The multisensory Literacy Lab routines in Section 8 — which explicitly link phonology, orthography, and morphology — help all students build the phonological awareness and sound–spelling mapping needed for decoding, spelling, and reading fluency in standard academic English, while treating students' linguistic backgrounds as assets to be leveraged rather than barriers to be overcome.

A note on grouping and MTSS

The routines in this guide are designed to operate flexibly across whole-group, small-group, and individual instructional settings. At the whole-group level, every routine supports standards-aligned Tier 1 core instruction. At the small-group level, the same routines — especially the Literacy Lab foundational-skills routines in Section 8 — can be used during Flex Day Huddles and small-group intervention time to provide targeted Tier 2 practice for students who are not yet meeting benchmarks. At the individual level, the Differentiation Suggestions in each entry describe scaffolds and accommodations that allow students with IEPs, students with characteristics of dyslexia, and other students receiving Tier 3 support to participate fully in the routine alongside peers. Progress monitoring through Checks for Understanding, Pulse Checks, and the Confidence Continuum Reflections (Section 6) informs movement between tiers.

How this guide is organized

The sections below follow the arc of instruction: from unit launch, to daily lesson opening, through core reading and discussion, toward writing, and finally to lesson closing. A section on quick, recurring classroom routines follows. The guide concludes with the Literacy Lab routines that anchor foundational-skills instruction — including the multisensory routines whose fidelity checklists support

consistent, high-leverage implementation. Routines appear in the order you are likely to encounter them — beginning with what launches a unit, and ending with the daily Literacy Lab work that supports word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, and syntax development.

How each routine entry is organized

Most routines in this guide are organized under the same set of subheadings, so you can quickly find what you need. Very brief, high-frequency routines (such as Turn and Talk or Academic Talk Stems) may omit the Step-by-Step section where a procedural list would be redundant, but they follow the same overall structure:

1. **Why This Routine Matters** — the pedagogical rationale and what makes this routine worth using
2. **Best Used When** — the moments in a lesson or unit where this routine fits most naturally
3. **How to Introduce It / How to Set It Up** — guidance for the first time you use the routine, including physical setup where relevant
4. **Step-by-Step** — the procedural steps for running the routine
5. **Facilitation Tips** — ongoing implementation advice, common pitfalls, and what to watch for
6. **Differentiation Suggestions** — specific adjustments for Multilingual Learners and students who need additional support (included where the routine has meaningful differentiation considerations)

Within **Facilitation Tips** and **Differentiation Suggestions**, many entries use an "if/then" pattern to help you diagnose what is getting in a student's way — e.g., *if students write vague summaries rather than genuine interpretations, then prompt for specificity using a sentence frame*. Use these diagnostic cues to identify the underlying reason a student is struggling with a routine, and match the remedy to the specific cause.

How to spot a Multisensory Routine

Many of the routines in this guide are structured, explicit, multisensory routines designed to build foundational reading and language skills by engaging visual, auditory, and kinesthetic–tactile processing channels simultaneously. Each is flagged with a shaded **Multisensory Routine** badge immediately below its heading, along with a short note about the specific modalities the routine engages, and each includes a dedicated Fidelity Checklist. Scan for the badge when planning foundational-skills instruction, instructional coaching cycles, or classroom observations.

Section 1: Spark Lesson Routines

Spark routines launch a new unit — building curiosity, surfacing prior knowledge, and creating the intellectual investment that makes subsequent reading feel purposeful. Unlike routines that structure daily lessons, Spark routines are typically used once at the beginning of a unit arc. A well-designed Spark experience makes students want to know more before the first text is introduced.

Spark Routine Materials

Because Spark routines precede close reading, they work best with low-barrier, high-interest materials: images, provocative data, short video clips, primary sources, or brief text excerpts. The goal is to activate thinking and raise questions — not to teach content in advance.

1.1 Gallery Walk

Multisensory Routine

Builds inquiry and shared meaning-making through visual (posted images, primary sources, short texts, and data), auditory (small-group discussion at stations and whole-class debrief), kinesthetic (rotating between stations), and tactile (writing responses at each station) practice.

Students examine posted materials — images, primary sources, short texts, data — and leave written responses at each station before reconvening for whole-class discussion.

Why This Routine Matters

A well-designed Gallery Walk introduces a theme through multiple entry points simultaneously, allowing students with different background knowledge to find a foothold. It externalizes thinking in a shared physical space, creates a common set of questions before reading begins, and distributes participation — students who might not contribute verbally in discussion often produce their strongest thinking in writing at a station.

Best Used When

Launching a new unit before any anchor text has been introduced; when the theme or topic benefits from multiple perspectives at once; when you want to surface students' prior knowledge and assumptions before shaping them with a text.

How to Set It Up

Post 4–6 materials around the room. Choose items that are visually engaging and represent different angles on the unit's central theme. Include at least one item likely to provoke disagreement or surprise. Post a simple, consistent prompt at every station: What do you notice? What questions does this raise? Assign groups of 3–4 students to starting stations and set a timer for 3–5 minutes per rotation. Signal transitions clearly.

Step-by-Step

1. Students circulate in small groups, pausing at each station to observe and discuss briefly before writing.
2. Each student adds at least one written contribution at every station — a response, a question, or a reaction to what a previous group wrote.
3. Groups complete all rotations, then return to a designated meeting point.
4. Whole-class debrief: highlight patterns, disagreements, or questions that surfaced across multiple stations. Record the most generative questions — these become anchors for the unit.

Facilitation Tips

Resist the urge to explain the unit theme before the Gallery Walk begins. Ambiguity is productive here — students who are not sure what the unit is about will look more carefully at the materials. The questions they generate from genuine uncertainty are often more interesting than questions that confirm what they already know.

Differentiation Suggestions

Pair Multilingual Learners with supportive peers for the discussion within stations. Include visual materials alongside text-based ones so all students have an accessible entry point. Provide a sentence frame at each station — 'I notice ___, which makes me wonder ___' — to support written responses. Allow students to annotate in their home language and translate key ideas before sharing.

A Note on Classroom Variants

The original Spark framing assumes the teacher posts materials in advance and groups rotate on a timer. Lessons sometimes use Gallery Walk mid-unit with students producing the materials themselves (note cards summarizing their thinking) and circulating to give peer feedback. Both are legitimate uses; the structural integrity to preserve is (1) physical movement between stations, (2) every student writes at every station, and (3) a whole-class debrief that highlights patterns rather than summaries.

Gallery Walk Routine Fidelity Checklist

The Gallery Walk Routine builds inquiry and shared meaning-making by engaging visual processing (posted images, primary sources, short texts, and data displayed at stations), auditory processing (small-group discussion at each station and whole-class debrief), kinesthetic processing (rotating between stations on a timer), and tactile processing (writing responses at each station). Use this checklist when planning or observing the routine to confirm that each component is delivered as designed.

Setup

- Teacher posts 4–6 visually engaging materials at stations around the room, representing different angles on the unit's central theme.
- At least one item is likely to provoke disagreement or surprise.
- A simple, consistent prompt is posted at every station (for example, "What do you notice? What questions does this raise?").
- Groups of 3–4 students are assigned to starting stations.
- A timer for 3–5 minutes per rotation is set, and transition signals are clear.

Launch

- The teacher does not explain the unit theme before students begin; ambiguity is preserved as a productive condition.
- The teacher names the expectation that every student writes at every station.

Rotations

- Students circulate in their small groups, pausing at each station to observe and discuss briefly before writing.
- Each student adds at least one written contribution at every station — a response, a question, or a reaction to what a previous group wrote.
- Groups complete all rotations and return to a designated meeting point.

Debrief

- The teacher highlights patterns, disagreements, or questions that surfaced across multiple stations rather than summarizing each chart.
- The teacher records the most generative questions to anchor subsequent unit lessons.

1.2 Information Gap

Students each hold a different piece of information needed to solve a shared problem — and must communicate purposefully with peers to fill the gap.

Why This Routine Matters

Information Gap creates authentic communication: students talk because they genuinely need something the other person has. This is a fundamentally different dynamic than most classroom discussion, where students share information they could technically keep to themselves. The routine mirrors the real intellectual experience of collaborative inquiry and sets up the stakes of the unit's reading — the idea that meaning requires assembling partial perspectives.

Best Used When

Launching a unit when the theme has multiple contributing perspectives or data points; before a complex multi-part text; when you want to establish early that the unit's central question requires more than one viewpoint to answer.

How to Set It Up

The key design principle is real information asymmetry — each student or pair must hold something the others genuinely need to complete the task. If students can fill the gap without communicating, the routine loses its purpose. Select or design materials accordingly: different data points, excerpts from different sources on the same topic, or pieces of a larger puzzle that only become meaningful when combined.

Step-by-Step

1. Each student or pair receives a different card, excerpt, or data set containing one piece of the puzzle.
2. Students circulate and share their information orally — they may describe or summarize their source but may not show or hand it over.
3. Groups collaborate to synthesize the information and solve the problem or answer the guiding question.
4. Debrief: What did you learn? What questions do you still have? What would help you understand this topic more fully?

Facilitation Tips

Capture the questions students arrive at through Information Gap — they are often stronger than teacher-generated questions because they arise from genuine curiosity. Post them and return to them

throughout the unit. The goal is not a tidy answer at the end of this routine, but an appetite for the reading ahead.

Differentiation Suggestions

Pair Multilingual Learners with bilingual peers or assign them materials that have strong visual support. Provide sentence frames for sharing: 'My information says ___, which means ___.' Allow students to process their card in their home language before sharing in English. Adjust the complexity of individual cards to meet students where they are without changing the social structure of the task.

Section 2: Lesson Launch Routines

These routines open class by activating prior knowledge, checking comprehension, or building vocabulary — creating the cognitive readiness students need before new instruction begins. They should be brief (5–10 minutes) and purposeful. A strong lesson launch signals that class has started and that intellectual engagement begins immediately.

Establishing Routines

Establish launch routines during the first two weeks of school and keep them consistent. Predictability is a feature, not a limitation: when students know what the first few minutes of class look like, they arrive ready to engage rather than waiting to be told what to do.

2.1 Retell and Paraphrase Partner Check

Student A summarizes a previously read text or lesson concept; Student B paraphrases the summary back in their own words; together they refine the explanation.

Why This Routine Matters

Retelling requires students to reconstruct meaning, not just recognize it. The paraphrase step adds a second layer of active processing and creates mutual accountability: both partners must listen carefully, because both will be asked to do something with what they heard. This routine surfaces gaps in comprehension in a low-stakes, peer-based format before whole-class instruction builds on the prior lesson.

Best Used When

At the start of class after an assigned reading or the previous day's lesson; before a discussion that depends on prior content; as a quick comprehension check that does not require written assessment.

How to Introduce It

Model both roles yourself before asking students to try it. Read a short passage aloud, retell it, then demonstrate what paraphrasing sounds like — contrasting it explicitly with repetition: 'Paraphrasing is putting the idea into your own words, not playing it back like a recording.' Show students what a surface-level retell sounds like versus a substantive one.

Step-by-Step

1. Student A summarizes a text, passage, or concept from the previous lesson in 3–5 sentences.
2. Student B paraphrases the summary back in their own words — not a repetition, but a re-expression.
3. Together, partners identify any gaps or inaccuracies and refine the explanation.
4. Optional: one pair shares their refined summary with the class as a calibration point.

Facilitation Tips

Students often summarize at the surface level: 'The text was about climate change.' Prompt for specificity: 'What was the most important thing the author wanted you to understand? What evidence supported that?' If time allows, ask partners to identify one thing the other person included that they had not thought of — this reinforces the value of the exchange.

Differentiation Suggestions

Provide a retelling sentence frame: 'The text explained ___, and the most important idea was ___.' Allow Multilingual Learners to retell in their home language with a bilingual partner first, then translate the key ideas. For students with IEPs or language supports, reduce the retell to a single central idea before building to longer summaries.

2.2 Quick Write

Students respond briefly and continuously to an open-ended prompt for 2–5 minutes without stopping to edit.

Why This Routine Matters

Quick Write lowers the activation energy of thinking. The 'keep writing' norm is important — it prevents over-editing and produces more honest, generative responses. Students who hesitate to contribute in discussion often put ideas on paper that surprise them. As a launch routine, Quick Write creates a thinking baseline that makes subsequent discussion richer because every student has already committed something to the page.

Best Used When

Before reading, to activate background knowledge; before discussion, to ensure all students have something to contribute; to generate raw material for a writing task; when you want to know where students' thinking is before teaching, not after.

How to Introduce It

Frame Quick Write explicitly as thinking-on-paper, not a formal assignment. Students should not feel they are being assessed. Demonstrate the norm yourself: 'I'm going to write without stopping. Watch — even when I am not sure what to say, I keep my pen moving.' Show students your own messy, unfiltered Quick Write. This removes the performance pressure that shuts down genuine thinking.

Step-by-Step

1. The teacher presents a prompt. Prompts should be accessible enough that every student has something to say, but open enough that responses vary. Avoid yes/no questions.
2. Students write continuously for 2–5 minutes, keeping their pen or cursor moving even if they are uncertain — uncertainty is legitimate content.
3. Optional: Two or three students share a line or phrase — not their whole response — as a quick, low-stakes class discussion.

Facilitation Tips

The sharing step works best when framed as 'share one line that surprised you' or 'share a question your writing raised.' This lowers the stakes further and tends to produce more interesting contributions than 'share your main idea.' Collect Quick Writes periodically — not to grade, but to track how student thinking is developing across the unit.

Differentiation Suggestions

Provide a sentence starter for students who struggle to begin: 'When I think about ___, I notice ___.' Allow Multilingual Learners to write in their home language and underline any words they can translate. Accept drawing as a form of Quick Write for students who need visual processing support. Shorten the time window to 1–2 minutes for students who experience writing as particularly effortful.

2.3 Annotation Spot Check

Students share and explain a specific annotation from their reading, articulating why they marked what they marked.

Why This Routine Matters

Annotation Spot Check reinforces the habit of purposeful annotation — marking because you are thinking, not just to show you read. It creates accountability for independent reading without the formality of a quiz, surfaces insights that might otherwise go unshared, and models the expectation that annotations are the beginning of analytical thinking, not a record of what happened in the text.

Best Used When

After any independent or homework reading; when you want to check comprehension before building on it in class; when you want to reinforce specific annotation skills (questioning, noticing craft moves, tracking evidence).

How to Introduce It

Before the first Annotation Spot Check, model the difference between two types of annotation: one that restates the text ('this says the character is angry') and one that responds to it ('this makes me think the author is building to a conflict, because...'). Show annotated student samples — with permission — to establish a concrete picture of what strong annotation looks like in practice.

Step-by-Step

1. Students annotate a passage independently, then circle or star one annotation they want to discuss.
2. The teacher calls on 2–4 students to share their annotation and explain their reasoning: 'What made you mark that? What does it tell you about the text?'
3. Class briefly discusses patterns: 'Several people marked that same moment — why do we think that is significant?'

Facilitation Tips

Watch for annotations that simply restate the text rather than respond to it. When you hear a restatement, ask a follow-up: 'That is what happened — what do you make of it? What does that detail do in the text?' Over time, this redirecting question should become one students ask themselves before sharing.

Differentiation Suggestions

Provide an annotation code system for students who need structure (Q = question, E = evidence, C = connection, S = surprising). Allow annotations in the home language — the thinking matters more than the language. For students who struggle with open-ended annotation, assign a specific annotation lens: 'As you read, mark any moment where you notice a character making a decision.'

Section 3: Core Reading and Meaning-Making Routines

These routines appear during reading lessons to support comprehension, paired engagement, and text analysis. They are the workhorses of daily instruction — some will appear multiple times per week. Because they recur so frequently, early investment in modeling pays off significantly.

Setting Expectations with Routines

Before launching any reading routine, ensure students have a clear anchor: a specific section of text, a guiding question, or a defined purpose for reading. Routines work best when students know what they are looking for before they begin.

3.1 Give One, Get One

Multisensory Routine

Builds independent thinking and peer exchange through visual (reading the text), tactile (writing one's own idea and recording the partner's), auditory (structured oral exchange), and kinesthetic (circulating to exchange ideas) practice.

Students record one idea from a text, then partner with a classmate to exchange ideas — contributing one insight and receiving one in return.

Why This Routine Matters

Reading is often experienced as solitary, but meaning-making is social. Give One, Get One creates a structured reason for students to commit to an interpretation before hearing from others — developing independent thinking while still leveraging peer learning. The 'give before you get' structure is intentional: it prevents students from simply absorbing someone else's interpretation without first generating their own.

Best Used When

After a first read, when you want a wide range of student responses on the table before class discussion narrows the conversation; when students are generating initial interpretations; after a section of a complex text where multiple entry points are possible.

How to Introduce It

Model the full cycle yourself first. Write an idea on the board, walk to a student, exchange ideas aloud, and record the new idea you received. Name what you did: 'I gave my idea first, then I listened carefully to get a new one — I did not just wait for someone to tell me what to think.' Distinguish between a genuine exchange and a polite nodding agreement.

Step-by-Step

1. After reading a passage, students write one insight, question, or interpretation in their own words. Allow 2–3 minutes of quiet writing before anyone moves.

2. Students circulate (or turn to a neighbor) and exchange ideas in a brief, structured conversation.
3. Each student records the idea they 'got' — not a copy of their partner's words, but their own paraphrase of the new thinking.
4. Debrief: ask a few students what idea they received and how it changed or extended their own thinking.

Facilitation Tips

Watch for students who write vague or summary-level responses rather than genuine interpretations. Prompt for specificity: 'What do you think the author wants you to understand? What in the text made you think that?' If exchanges feel shallow, add a sentence frame before the circulation begins: 'My idea is ___ because the text says ___.'

Differentiation Suggestions

Provide the sentence frame 'My idea is ___ because ___' on a visible anchor chart. Allow Multilingual Learners to write their idea in their home language first, then prepare an English phrase before circulating. In partner variations (rather than whole-class circulation), pair strategically so Multilingual Learners have supportive conversational partners.

Give One, Get One Routine Fidelity Checklist

The Give One, Get One Routine builds independent thinking and peer exchange by engaging visual processing (reading the source text), tactile processing (writing one's own idea and recording the partner's), auditory processing (structured oral exchange), and kinesthetic processing (circulating to exchange ideas with multiple partners). Use this checklist when planning or observing the routine to confirm that each component is delivered as designed.

Introduction

- The teacher models the full cycle: writes an idea on the board, walks to a student, exchanges ideas aloud, and records the new idea received.
- The teacher names the difference between a genuine exchange and polite agreement: students must "give" before they "get."

Independent Writing

- After reading a passage, students write one insight, question, or interpretation in their own words.
- 2–3 minutes of quiet writing time is provided before any student moves.

Exchange

- Students circulate (or turn to a neighbor) and exchange ideas in a brief, structured conversation.
- Each student records the idea they received in their own paraphrase, not a copy of their partner's words.
- The teacher monitors for genuine exchange, prompting for specificity when ideas are vague (for example, "What do you think the author wants you to understand? What in the text made you think that?").
- Sentence frames are visible if needed (for example, "My idea is ___ because the text says ___.").

Debrief

- The teacher invites a few students to share an idea they received and how it changed or extended their own thinking.
- The teacher names the connection between exchange and revised thinking.

3.2 Graffiti / Table Talk

Multisensory Routine

Builds collective meaning-making through visual (posted prompts and accumulated chart contributions), auditory (small-group discussion and whole-class debrief), kinesthetic (rotating between stations), and tactile (adding written contributions to each chart) practice.

Students collaboratively respond to prompts posted around the room (or on a shared digital board), moving in small groups and adding ideas, questions, or evidence to each station.

Why This Routine Matters

Graffiti externalizes thinking in a way that makes it visible to the whole class at once. It distributes participation — quieter students often write things in this format that they would not say aloud — and creates a shared artifact the class can return to throughout a lesson or unit. The rotation structure also exposes students to multiple angles on a text before discussion begins, giving everyone a richer starting point.

Best Used When

Launching text analysis before close reading; synthesizing ideas across multiple sections of a text; surfacing prior knowledge at the start of a new thread or theme; when you want every student's thinking represented before whole-class discussion.

How to Set It Up

Post 3–5 prompts on chart paper, slides, or a shared digital document. Prompts should be open-ended and text-dependent — 'What is the author assuming about the reader?' works better than 'What is the main idea?' Assign groups of 3–4 students to starting stations, set a timer for 3–5 minutes per rotation, and signal transitions clearly.

Step-by-Step

1. Students read the prompt at their station and discuss briefly as a group before writing.
2. Each student adds at least one written contribution — a response, question, piece of evidence, or reaction to what a previous group wrote.
3. Groups rotate until they have visited all stations. On the final rotation, students respond to what others wrote rather than adding new ideas.
4. Whole-class debrief: highlight patterns, disagreements, or surprising ideas that emerged across charts.

Facilitation Tips

Resist the temptation to correct or redirect during rotations. The value of Graffiti is in the unfiltered collective thinking it produces — messy is fine. During the debrief, rather than summarizing what the charts say, ask students to identify a pattern they notice or a disagreement they want to explore. The charts themselves should do most of the talking.

Differentiation Suggestions

Provide a sentence frame at each station: 'The text suggests ___ because ___.' or 'I notice ___, which makes me think ___.' Include visual prompts alongside text-based ones for stations where visual thinking is accessible. Pair Multilingual Learners with supportive peers for the group discussion, and allow written contributions in the home language on an individual sticky note before transferring key ideas to the chart.

3.3 Fluency Practice

Multisensory Routine

Builds reading accuracy, rate, and prosody through visual (following the text), auditory (modeling, echo, and choral reading), and kinesthetic (finger-tracking and partner reading) practice.

Students read text aloud to build accuracy, rate, and prosody (phrasing, stress, and expression) — typically through teacher modeling followed by echo, choral, partner, and independent rereading.

Why This Routine Matters

Reading fluency is not just a decoding skill — it directly supports comprehension. When students read haltingly, cognitive resources are consumed by word recognition rather than meaning-making. Regular fluency practice with complex, content-rich texts helps students access those texts more fully. Fluency practice is a comprehension intervention, not just a mechanics exercise — use it accordingly.

Best Used When

Before close reading of a particularly complex or syntactically dense passage; when comprehension checks reveal that students are struggling to process text at the sentence level; when a text requires expressive reading to understand tone or voice.

How to Introduce It

Make the cognitive purpose explicit: 'When reading feels automatic, your brain has more space to think about meaning. We are going to practice reading this passage until it feels easy, so that your thinking can go deeper.' Model fluent reading with visible intentionality — pause at punctuation, slow down for complex syntax, vary expression. Name what you are doing as you do it.

Step-by-Step

1. The teacher reads a passage aloud, modeling fluent word recognition, accurate rate, and appropriate prosody (phrasing, stress, and expression), narrating choices: 'Notice I paused at the comma and slowed down for this complicated phrase — my voice rose here because it is a question.'
2. Students echo-read, chorally read, or partner-read the same passage, matching the teacher's pacing, phrasing, and expression.
3. Students reread a selected section independently, focusing on a specific fluency goal: word recognition accuracy, rate (pacing), or prosody (expression).

Facilitation Tips

Fluency practice works best with short, high-leverage passages — a paragraph or two, not a full page. The goal is multiple passes, not coverage. When using partner reading, assign clear roles (Reader A reads first, Reader B provides feedback on one fluency element) rather than leaving the structure undefined.

Differentiation Suggestions

For students with significant decoding challenges, pre-teach key vocabulary and complex words before fluency practice begins. Use echo reading (teacher reads one phrase, student repeats it) as a scaffold before choral or partner reading. Allow recording and playback — students who can hear themselves often self-correct more effectively than when receiving feedback from peers. For advanced readers, extend the expression goal to interpretive choices: 'Why did you emphasize that word? What does that tell us about meaning?'

Fluency Practice Routine Fidelity Checklist

Use this checklist when planning or observing a Fluency Practice lesson to confirm that each component is delivered as designed. The routine's multisensory structure — teacher modeling, then echo reading, choral reading or partner reading, and finally independent rereading — strengthens automatic word recognition and prosodic reading, freeing cognitive resources for sentence-level processing and text comprehension.

Introduction

- Teacher selects a short, high-leverage passage (1–2 paragraphs).
- Teacher explains that fluency practice builds automatic reading to support comprehension.
- If needed, teacher pre-teaches key vocabulary and complex words.

Teacher Modeling

- The teacher reads the passage aloud, modeling appropriate pacing and expression.
- The teacher thinks aloud to highlight reading decisions.

Depending on the type of student reading that follows, apply the guidance below.

Echo Reading

- The teacher reads a sentence; students repeat, matching pacing and expression.
- The teacher monitors accuracy and provides immediate corrective feedback as needed.

Choral Reading

- Teacher and students read the passage aloud together, maintaining consistent pacing and phrasing.
- Students track the text with their fingers and read smoothly.
- The teacher monitors fluency and provides immediate corrective feedback as needed.

Partner Reading

- Students take turns as Reader and Listener.
- Reader reads aloud while Listener follows and provides feedback on one fluency element (accuracy, pacing, or expression).
- Students switch roles.

Independent Rereading

- Students reread the passage independently, focusing on a specific fluency goal (accuracy, pacing, or expression).
- The teacher monitors fluency and provides immediate corrective feedback as needed.

3.4 Iterative Conversation

Students revisit the same discussion question across multiple readings, revising and deepening their thinking as they gather new evidence.

Why This Routine Matters

Most discussion questions get one pass — students respond, the class moves on. Iterative Conversation is built on a different premise: understanding develops over time and through re-engagement. Students who know they will return to a question read differently the second and third time, actively looking for evidence that sharpens or complicates their earlier thinking. The routine also models intellectual humility — changing your mind in light of new evidence is the goal, not consistency.

Best Used When

Multi-text units where understanding accumulates across readings; when preparing students for Socratic Seminar; when a text is complex enough that a first-read discussion will be incomplete; any time you want thinking to visibly evolve across a lesson or unit.

How to Introduce It

Tell students explicitly upfront that they will return to the question: 'We are going to discuss this now, and then come back to it after more reading. Your job is not to find the right answer today — it is to notice how your answer changes.' This framing invites productive uncertainty and prevents students from locking into a position too early.

Step-by-Step

1. Pose an open, text-dependent question before or during the first reading. Students discuss initial thinking — exploratory, not definitive.
2. After additional reading or a second text, return to the exact same question: 'Now that we have read further, what do you think? Has your answer changed? What pushed your thinking?'
3. Students revise their earlier responses in writing, noting specifically what new evidence led to any shift in thinking.

Facilitation Tips

Keep the first pass short — 5 minutes at most. The value of this routine is in the return, not the first discussion. Students should feel a little unsettled after the initial exchange, not resolved. If the first discussion produces consensus too quickly, the question may not be genuinely open — consider revising it.

Differentiation Suggestions

Provide a written response option before the oral discussion — Multilingual Learners and students who need processing time benefit from composing their thinking before speaking. For the revision step, offer a sentence frame: 'My thinking changed because the text says ___, which made me realize ___.' Allow students to record their thinking verbally if written revision is a barrier.

3.5 Group Accountability Share

After a collaborative task, one group member shares the group's collective thinking with the class — while other members are prepared to add evidence or clarification.

Why This Routine Matters

Without accountability structures, group work can default to one student doing the thinking while others wait. Group Accountability Share signals from the beginning of a task that every member is responsible for the group's ideas and must be prepared to represent them publicly. It also creates a more equitable discussion structure — quieter students who contributed meaningfully in the group have a pathway into whole-class conversation.

Best Used When

After any group reading, discussion, or analysis task; when you want to surface collective thinking rather than individual responses; when ensuring equitable participation across groups is a priority.

How to Introduce It

Announce the accountability norm before the group task begins — students should know from the start that anyone may be called to share, not just the most vocal member. Frame this as a collective responsibility: 'You are responsible for understanding what your whole group thinks, not just your own ideas.'

Step-by-Step

1. Groups complete a reading, discussion, or analysis task together.
2. One student presents the group's thinking — not just their own opinion, but the consensus or key ideas the group developed.
3. Other group members actively add evidence, nuance, or clarification as needed.

Facilitation Tips

Vary which students share across different lessons. Calling on the same strong speaker repeatedly undermines the accountability structure. When a student shares something incomplete or unclear, prompt the group rather than the individual: 'Can someone from this group add to that or give an example from the text?' This keeps the accountability collective.

Differentiation Suggestions

Allow students who will share to take a brief preparation note before presenting — this is especially helpful for Multilingual Learners who need a moment to compose their ideas. If a student is not yet ready to share independently, allow a 'co-present' option where two group members share together. Provide the sentence frame 'Our group thinks ___ because the text says ___' as a launching point.

Section 4: Academic Discussion Routines

These routines structure extended, text-based conversations where students develop and defend interpretations, evaluate competing claims, and build on each other's thinking. Unlike the shorter discussion moves in the previous section, these routines typically anchor a full lesson or a major portion of one. The quality of discussion will be a direct reflection of the quality of preparation — do not launch a Socratic Seminar on a text students have read only once, or an Academic Debate Routine without time to develop claims and evidence.

Preparation Before Starting Academic Discussion Routines

Before starting, check that students have annotated the text, identified relevant evidence, and ideally completed a Structured Oral Rehearsal. Underprepared students default to general impressions rather than textual reasoning, which weakens the discussion for everyone.

4.1 Fishbowl Conversation

An inner circle of students discusses a question while an outer circle observes, analyzes discussion moves, and tracks the quality of reasoning.

Why This Routine Matters

Fishbowl creates a space where academic discussion is both practiced and studied. The outer circle is not passive — they are analyzing how good discussion works, which is itself a high-level metacognitive skill. Students in the outer circle often report that watching Fishbowl is more instructive than being told what effective discussion looks like. The format also gives teachers a window into student thinking that is harder to see in whole-class discussion.

Best Used When

When students are learning what productive academic discussion looks and sounds like; as preparation for Socratic Seminar; when you want to model specific discussion moves (building on ideas, citing evidence, inviting others in) in a context where they can be observed and analyzed.

How to Set It Up

Arrange seating in two concentric circles before class. Select 4–6 students for the inner circle based on readiness and confidence. Provide both circles with the discussion question and allow time for both to review notes and evidence. Give the outer circle a structured observation tool that focuses their attention on specific discussion moves.

Step-by-Step

1. The inner circle discusses the question for 10–15 minutes. Ground rule: no raising hands — students must monitor the conversation and find appropriate entry points.
2. Outer circle observes using a structured tracking tool: noting who builds on whose ideas, who uses textual evidence, who introduces new claims, and who invites others into the conversation.
3. Circles switch roles.

4. Whole-class debrief focused on discussion quality: What made the conversation productive? What discussion moves were most effective? What would strengthen the next conversation?

Facilitation Tips

Resist the urge to intervene in the inner circle discussion. Your job during Fishbowl is to observe, not redirect. Students learn more from navigating discussion independently — including navigating awkward silences — than from being prompted constantly. If the conversation stalls completely, use a pre-planned re-entry question rather than filling the space yourself.

Differentiation Suggestions

Provide a discussion moves card for inner circle participants: a visible list of sentence frames for building on ideas, introducing evidence, and inviting others in. Give outer circle students a structured observation sheet with specific categories to track rather than open-ended note-taking. Consider placing a highly proficient English speaker as a model in the first inner circle so Multilingual Learners in the outer circle have strong language input before they participate.

4.2 Socratic Seminar

Students engage in a structured, student-led discussion grounded in textual evidence, with both inner and outer circle roles.

Why This Routine Matters

Socratic Seminar is the culminating discussion format in the program — it asks students to hold and develop complex ideas across an extended conversation, listen carefully to peers, revise thinking in real time, and build shared meaning from a text. When it works well, students are genuinely teaching each other. When it does not, it is usually a preparation problem, not a student problem.

Best Used When

After at least two readings of a complex text; when students are ready to drive a discussion independently; as an end-of-unit synthesis; when the central question is genuinely open and worth sustained exploration.

How to Set It Up

Collect preparation materials before the seminar — annotations, a written claim, identified evidence. Use these to assess readiness and identify students who may need additional support entering the conversation. Arrange seating in concentric circles. Create observation tools for the outer circle that focus on the quality of reasoning, not just participation.

Step-by-Step

1. Students submit preparation materials before the seminar begins. Teacher reviews for readiness.
2. The inner circle conducts the seminar for 15–25 minutes. Outer circle uses observation tools to track discussion quality.
3. Pause midway for the outer circle to offer brief feedback to their inner circle partner.
4. After the seminar, students complete a written reflection: What was your strongest contribution? What idea from another student changed or deepened your thinking? What question is still unresolved?

Facilitation Tips

The written reflection is not optional — it is where the learning from the seminar consolidates. Students who do not reflect tend not to carry insights from the conversation into their writing. The 'what changed your thinking' prompt is particularly important: it reinforces that productive discussion is supposed to move understanding, not just confirm it.

Differentiation Suggestions

Allow extended preparation time for Multilingual Learners, and consider a pre-seminar conference where they rehearse their claim and evidence with you or a peer. Provide discussion starters on index cards that students can reference during the seminar without it feeling like reading from a script. Accept a written participation option for students who are not yet ready for oral contribution — they can pass notes during the seminar and share their written thinking in the debrief.

4.3 Academic Debate (Debate Protocol)

Students construct and formally defend arguments using evidence, with structured time for rebuttal and response.

Why This Routine Matters

Debate requires students to do something intellectually demanding: hold their own claim firmly enough to defend it while genuinely understanding the strongest version of the opposing argument. This dual demand — defend and understand — builds the kind of disciplined reasoning that complex argumentative writing requires. Students who have debated a claim are far better prepared to write about it.

Best Used When

Argumentative writing units; when the text raises a genuine question with defensible competing claims; when students need to develop their capacity to anticipate and address counterarguments.

How to Set It Up

Assign or allow students to choose positions with enough lead time for genuine preparation — at least one class period. Provide research or text resources for both sides. Arrange seating so opposing sides face each other. Set clear time limits for each phase and post them visibly.

Step-by-Step

1. Students develop a primary claim, at least two pieces of evidence, and anticipated counterarguments.
2. Each side presents opening arguments (2–3 minutes per side).
3. Structured rebuttal round: each side responds directly to the other's claims, using evidence.
4. Closing statements. Class reflects: Which arguments were most persuasive? What evidence was most compelling? What would have made each side stronger?

Facilitation Tips

After the debate, resist the 'who won' framing and instead ask: 'Did engaging with the opposing argument shift your thinking at all? Why or why not?' This positions the debate as a thinking exercise, not a competition, and makes students more likely to genuinely engage with the opposing argument rather than just waiting for their turn to speak.

Differentiation Suggestions

Provide argument frames for claim development: 'I argue ___ because ___. This is supported by ___ in the text.' Pair Multilingual Learners with a partner for claim and evidence development before the formal debate begins. Allow visual evidence presentations (annotated quotes, charts) as an alternative to purely oral arguments. Consider assigning roles within teams — claim presenter, evidence presenter, rebuttal lead — so the cognitive load is distributed.

4.4 Four Corners Debate

Multisensory Routine

Builds claim development and textual reasoning through visual (position labels and text evidence), auditory (group huddle and corner presentations), and kinesthetic (silently moving to the corner that represents one's view, with the option to move again as thinking changes) practice.

Students physically move to corners of the room representing different positions on a claim, then defend their stance with textual evidence.

Why This Routine Matters

The physical movement creates a visible map of class thinking and makes ambivalence a legitimate position — students can move to the middle if they genuinely see merit in multiple views. Four Corners also creates a low-stakes entry point for students who might not volunteer in whole-class discussion — moving to a corner is less exposed than raising a hand, and the group huddle provides collaborative support before individual students have to speak.

Best Used When

When evaluating claims that have multiple defensible positions; as a lower-stakes alternative to formal debate; when you want physical engagement and visible opinion distribution; when preparing students to write an argument by making their own position concrete.

How to Set It Up

Post the four position labels in clearly visible corners — Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree — or, for more nuanced claims, four distinct interpretations. Select a claim that is genuinely debatable and text-dependent. Ensure enough space for students to move and for corner groups to huddle.

Step-by-Step

- The teacher reads the claim aloud. Students move silently to the corner representing their view — without looking at where peers go first.
- Each corner group huddles briefly to develop a shared explanation using text evidence.
- Groups take turns presenting their stance. Other corners may respond.
- After hearing from all corners, students may move if their thinking has changed — and must explain why.

Facilitation Tips

The silent first movement is important — if students wait to see where their friends go, the physical distribution loses its value. Enforce the silence clearly the first few times. The option to move at the end is where the most powerful learning often happens: a student who switches corners and can articulate why has done the cognitive work you are after.

Differentiation Suggestions

Allow Multilingual Learners to process the claim in their home language before moving. Provide position sentence frames for the group huddle: 'We chose this corner because ___. The text supports this because ___.' For students who need additional processing time, allow a written justification before the oral group presentation. Accept a 'middle ground' position explicitly if the claim warrants genuine ambivalence.

Four Corners Debate Routine Fidelity Checklist

The Four Corners Debate Routine builds claim development and textual reasoning by engaging visual processing (position labels and text evidence), auditory processing (group huddle and corner presentations), and kinesthetic processing (silently moving to the corner that represents one's view, with the option to move again as thinking changes). Use this checklist when planning or observing the routine to confirm that each component is delivered as designed.

Setup

- The teacher posts four position labels in clearly visible corners (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree — or four distinct interpretations).
- The claim selected is genuinely debatable and text-dependent.
- The room provides enough space for students to move and for corner groups to huddle.

Initial Movement

- The teacher reads the claim aloud.
- Students move silently to the corner that represents their view.
- Silence is enforced so students do not follow peers; the physical distribution reflects independent thinking.

Group Huddle

- Each corner group huddles briefly to develop a shared explanation using text evidence.
- Sentence frames are available for groups that need them (for example, "We chose this corner because ___. The text supports this because ___.").
- Multilingual Learners and students who need processing time may prepare a written justification before the oral presentation.

Corner Presentations

- Each corner group presents its stance using textual evidence.
- Other corners may respond.
- The teacher monitors the use of text evidence, redirecting positions that rest on opinion alone.

Final Movement and Reflection

- After hearing from all corners, students may move if their thinking has changed.
- Students who move articulate why their thinking shifted.
- The teacher names this metacognitive shift as a primary learning outcome of the routine.

Section 5: Writing and Performance Task Preparation

These routines scaffold the thinking and planning that precede extended writing or presentation. They are not substitutes for the writing process itself, but they make the writing significantly stronger by ensuring students have developed, tested, and organized ideas before they begin drafting. A student who has talked through their argument and heard pushback from a peer will write a more grounded, evidence-based response than one who drafts in isolation.

Use these routines across the full arc of a writing task or performance project — from evaluating sources and organizing evidence across multiple texts, through drafting and rehearsing, to sharing with an audience. They work equally well for argumentative essays, research reports, multimedia presentations, and creative culminating projects.

5.1 Collaborative Idea Board

Multisensory Routine

Builds idea generation and organization through visual (the shared board of clustered ideas), tactile (writing on sticky notes or cards), kinesthetic (physically posting and clustering ideas), and auditory (discussing patterns, gaps, and tensions in the assembled board) practice.

Students collectively generate and organize ideas for an upcoming writing task on a shared physical or digital board.

Why This Routine Matters

Writing tasks often stall at the ideation stage — students do not know what they think until they have had a chance to think out loud with others. The Collaborative Idea Board externalizes thinking, surfaces connections between ideas, and gives every student a richer starting point than they would have developed alone. Seeing the full range of ideas that emerged from a group also helps students make more intentional choices about what to pursue in their own writing.

Best Used When

Before any extended writing task, particularly analytical or argumentative writing; after multiple text readings when ideas need to be organized before drafting; when students seem stuck or uninspired at the start of a writing task.

How to Set It Up

Provide sticky notes, index cards, or a shared digital document. Establish a clear individual writing time before any posting or sharing begins — this ensures every student generates their own ideas before being influenced by others. Prepare a few category labels (claims, evidence, questions, connections) to organize the board after ideas are posted.

Step-by-Step

1. Each student independently writes 2–3 ideas, claims, or pieces of evidence — no self-editing at this stage.
2. Ideas are posted and clustered by theme or relationship. The class or small groups identify patterns, gaps, and tensions.

3. Students select the ideas they will pursue in their own writing, informed by having seen the full collective range.

Facilitation Tips

Name the distinction between brainstorming and planning explicitly — at the Collaborative Idea Board stage, no idea is wrong and nothing is edited. The evaluation comes in the next step, when students select what to take into their own writing. Collapsing these two steps (brainstorming and evaluating at the same time) produces weaker and less original ideas.

Differentiation Suggestions

Allow Multilingual Learners to write ideas in their home language, then transfer key ideas to English with support. Provide idea starters: 'One argument is ___,' 'Evidence that supports this is ___,' 'A question I have is ___.' For students who need additional structure, offer a graphic organizer instead of open posting — same thinking, more scaffolded format.

Collaborative Idea Board Routine Fidelity Checklist

The Collaborative Idea Board Routine builds idea generation and organization for writing by engaging visual processing (the shared board of clustered ideas), tactile processing (writing on sticky notes or cards), kinesthetic processing (physically posting and clustering ideas), and auditory processing (discussing patterns, gaps, and tensions in the assembled board). Use this checklist when planning or observing the routine to confirm that each component is delivered as designed.

Setup

- The teacher provides sticky notes, index cards, or a shared digital document.
- Category labels are prepared in advance to organize the board (for example, claims, evidence, questions, connections).
- The teacher establishes that individual writing time precedes any posting or sharing.

Independent Generation

- Each student independently writes 2–3 ideas, claims, or pieces of evidence in their own words.
- No self-editing or peer influence occurs at this stage.
- Sentence starters are visible for students who need them (for example, "One argument is ___," "Evidence that supports this is ___," "A question I have is ___.").

Posting and Clustering

- Ideas are posted to the shared board.
- The class or small groups cluster ideas by theme or relationship using the prepared category labels.
- Patterns, gaps, and tensions are surfaced through discussion.

Teacher Stance

- The teacher explicitly names the distinction between brainstorming and planning.
- No idea is corrected or edited at the brainstorming stage.
- The teacher resists evaluating during posting; evaluation comes only in the selection step.

Selection for Writing

- Each student selects the ideas they will pursue in their own writing, informed by having seen the full collective range.
- The teacher supports students whose initial ideas have shifted in light of the board, naming this as productive cognitive work.

5.2 Reflect and Respond Dialogue

Students discuss how a text connects to a broader theme or idea, developing and testing their interpretive thinking before writing.

Why This Routine Matters

The gap between reading and writing is often where student thinking stalls. Reflect and Response Dialogue creates a structured bridge: students articulate what they think, hear a different perspective, and revise before they write. The revision step is where the learning consolidates — students who update their written reflection after the dialogue are doing the metacognitive work that produces stronger writers over time.

Best Used When

After reading and before writing; when building thematic connections across texts; when students need to move from text-level thinking to argument-level thinking; before any performance task that asks students to synthesize multiple ideas.

How to Introduce It

Model the probing partner role explicitly. Show students what the difference looks and sounds like between a polite exchange ('That is interesting') and a genuine dialogue ('What made you say that? Is there evidence in the text? What would someone who disagreed say?'). Students need to practice being a challenging partner, not just a supportive one.

Step-by-Step

1. Students independently reflect on a prompt for 3–5 minutes in writing.
2. Partners exchange ideas in a structured conversation — probing, not just agreeing.
3. Students revise their written reflection based on the dialogue, noting specifically what shifted in their thinking.

Facilitation Tips

The revision step is not optional — it is the most valuable part of this routine. Students who skip the revision step are having a pleasant conversation, but they are not doing the thinking that transfers to writing. Build in explicit time and a prompt: 'Add at least one sentence to your reflection that shows how your thinking changed or got more specific because of the dialogue.'

Differentiation Suggestions

Provide sentence frames for the reflection: 'After reading ___, I think ___ because ___.' Provide dialogue frames for the partner conversation: 'What made you say that? Where do you see that in the text? What would someone who disagreed say?' Allow Multilingual Learners to write the initial reflection in their home language. For students who need more time, allow the written reflection to be a drawing or a graphic organizer rather than full sentences.

5.3 Rehearse and Refine (Presentations)

Students practice presentations with a partner or small group, receive structured feedback, and revise before presenting to a larger audience.

Why This Routine Matters

Presentations often receive feedback after the fact — when the student cannot do anything with it. Rehearse and Refine inverts this by building revision into the preparation process. Students who have practiced with a real audience, heard specific feedback, and incorporated changes before presenting have done the preparation that most improves speaking clarity, confidence, and quality.

Best Used When

Before any formal presentation or performance task; after a writing draft is complete and students are preparing to present it orally; when building speaking and listening skills over time.

How to Introduce It

Invest time upfront in teaching what useful feedback looks and sounds like. Show students the difference between evaluative feedback ('That was great') and actionable feedback ('Your strongest point was ___ because ___. One thing that would strengthen it is ___'). A 10-minute whole-class model of how to give and receive feedback will pay dividends across the year.

Step-by-Step

1. Students deliver their presentation to a partner or small group. Listeners use a structured feedback routine focused on clarity, evidence, and delivery.
2. Feedback is given using sentence frames: 'Your strongest point was ___ because ___. One thing that would strengthen it is ___.'
3. Students incorporate feedback and present again, noting specifically what they changed and why.

Facilitation Tips

Peer feedback defaults to politeness without a concrete frame. Monitor feedback exchanges during this routine and prompt for specificity when you hear vague responses: 'What specifically was the strongest point? What exactly would you suggest they change?' The more specific the feedback, the more useful the revision.

Differentiation Suggestions

Provide feedback sentence frames in writing at the listener's station so both the giver and receiver have visible scaffolds. Allow extended rehearsal time for Multilingual Learners — two rounds of practice before the formal presentation is reasonable. Pair strategically so Multilingual Learners are rehearsing with peers who can model strong academic language. For students with significant language or anxiety barriers, allow a recorded self-presentation as an alternative to live rehearsal.

Section 6: Lesson Look Back Routines

Look Back routines help students consolidate, synthesize, and reflect on their learning before leaving class. They also generate real-time formative data without the overhead of formal assessment. A consistent closing routine signals that thinking does not stop when the bell approaches — the final few minutes of class are where learning gets locked in.

Closing Prompt

Write the closing prompt at the start of class, not the end. Having it visible throughout the lesson keeps instruction focused on the intended learning goal and allows students to gather their thinking incrementally rather than scrambling in the last few minutes.

6.1 3-2-1 Summary

Students respond to three structured prompts that scaffold close reading and text-level synthesis.

Why This Routine Matters

The 3-2-1 structure builds comprehension from the ground up: students first attend to the author's language choices (the 3 important words or phrases), then identify what those details add up to (2 key ideas), and finally synthesize everything into a single statement of their initial understanding of the text's central meaning. This sequence mirrors how skilled readers actually process text — noticing language before drawing conclusions. Synthesizing an initial understanding of the central idea is often the most demanding step, requiring students to subordinate details to a main point rather than simply listing what happened.

Best Used When

At the end of any lesson; after a discussion, reading, or viewing experience; at the midpoint or end of a unit to track how understanding is developing.

How to Introduce It

Model your own 3-2-1 for the first text you use it with, showing students the difference between a vague central idea statement ('The text is about climate') and a precise one ('The author distinguishes between weather and climate to argue that dismissing climate change as "just weather" misreads the science'). Also model word and phrase selection — show why a repeated or emphasized word is worth flagging, not just any word that appears.

Step-by-Step

1. Display the three prompts: 3 important words or phrases (look for emphasis, repetition, and strong language), 2 key details or ideas, 1 sentence explaining what the text is mostly about.
2. Students read (or re-read) the text and respond independently for 4–6 minutes.
3. Optional: students share their central idea sentences and the class compares — where do they agree or differ on what the text is mostly about?
4.

Facilitation Tips

Vary the prompts to match the lesson goal — the structure is fixed, but the specific language is flexible. In a discussion-heavy lesson, try: 3 ideas I heard from classmates, 2 I want to explore further, 1 I disagreed with. Collect 3-2-1s periodically and use the 'question I still have' column to plan the next lesson. Recurring questions across multiple students signal where instruction needs to go next.

Differentiation Suggestions

Provide response frames: 'An important word/phrase is ___ because the author uses it to ___.' For the central idea sentence, offer a starter: 'This text is mostly about ___ because ___.' Allow students to circle words directly in the text before transferring them to their 3-2-1. Accept home language responses and offer translation support before sharing.

6.2 Reflection (Confidence Continuum)

Students rate their understanding or confidence on a visible scale, then briefly explain their rating in writing.

Why This Routine Matters

Reflection develops metacognition — the habit of monitoring one's own understanding — and gives the teacher immediate, low-prep formative data about where students are before the next class. Unlike exit tickets, which assess a specific skill, the reflection asks students to evaluate their own understanding holistically, which is itself a skill worth developing.

Best Used When

At the end of a lesson where new and complex content was introduced; before moving to a new topic or unit; after a difficult text or task when you want to gauge readiness before building further.

How to Introduce It

Be explicit that there is no wrong answer on the scale. Model your own rating for something you are learning: 'If I were rating my understanding of this today, I would give myself a 2 — I understand the main concept but I am not sure how to apply it yet.' This models intellectual honesty and removes the pressure to rate high regardless of actual understanding.

Step-by-Step

1. Display the scale (1–5, or a drawn continuum). Students mark where they are and write one sentence explaining their rating.
2. Optional: Students share their rating and explanation with a partner before the class closes.
3. The teacher reviews ratings before the next class and uses them to group students or adjust instruction.

Facilitation Tips

The explanation matters as much as the number. A student who rates themselves a 2 and writes 'I understand the main idea but I am not sure how the evidence connects' gives you far more actionable information than a student who writes a 2 with no elaboration. Build the expectation that ratings always come with a reason — and hold to it.

Differentiation Suggestions

Provide a visual scale with icons or descriptors at each level rather than numbers alone — this helps students who need more concrete anchors to calibrate their self-assessment. Provide a sentence frame for the explanation: 'I gave myself a ___ because I understand ___, but I am not sure about ___.' For students with high anxiety, emphasize privately and publicly that lower ratings are just as valid and useful as higher ones.

Section 7: Consistent Classroom Routines

These brief, high-frequency routines are used across all phases of instruction — at lesson launch, during reading and discussion, and in closing. Because they appear so often, invest heavily in establishing them during the first weeks of school. Once students know these structures, they become instant, reliable on-ramps to thinking that require no explanation.

7.1 Turn and Talk

Students briefly discuss an idea with a partner for 1–3 minutes.

Why This Routine Matters

Turn and Talk ensures that every student processes an idea before a small number of voices speak for the whole class. It is the most flexible and frequently used routine in the program — a 90-second Turn and Talk can transform a flat whole-class discussion by giving every student something to say before anyone is called on.

Best Used When

Any time before a whole-class discussion where you want all students engaged, not just the ready responders; after introducing a new concept; during reading to check comprehension before moving forward.

How to Introduce It

Establish the Turn and Talk prompt norm from the first day: students always receive a specific question, not an open-ended 'discuss.' Demonstrate the difference between a vague prompt ('talk about the text') and a focused one ('tell your partner one thing the author does to make this argument convincing'). Assign partners early in the year so transitions are automatic.

Facilitation Tips

Circulate during Turn and Talk — do not use this time to take attendance or check your notes. Listening to partnerships gives you real-time formative data and language for the debrief: 'I heard someone say ___ — can you share that with the class?'

Differentiation Suggestions

Pair strategically — Multilingual Learners benefit from partners with strong academic language, but rotation is important to avoid the same burden falling repeatedly on one student. Provide the Talk prompt in writing for students who need processing time. Allow students to take a written note before speaking.

7.2 Think-Pair-Share

Students think individually (often in writing), discuss with a partner, then share with the class.

Why This Routine Matters

The individual think step is what makes Think-Pair-Share more powerful than a Turn and Talk alone. It ensures every student has committed to an idea before the social pressure of partnership shapes their thinking. Skipping it consistently means you hear most reliably from students who think quickly under pressure — not necessarily those with the most considered responses.

Best Used When

When the question is complex enough that students benefit from solo processing time; before a whole-class discussion where you want students to arrive with a formed idea; after reading when you want differentiated thinking, not group consensus.

How to Introduce It

Name each phase explicitly the first several times you use it: 'Think — write something down, even if you are unsure.' 'Pair — share what you wrote, and add to each other's thinking.' 'Share — we will hear from a few pairs.' Students who understand the structure invest more in each phase.

Facilitation Tips

Enforce the think time — do not let students immediately turn and talk. Even 60 seconds of individual writing produces qualitatively different pair conversations than jumping straight to discussion.

Differentiation Suggestions

For Multilingual Learners, allow the think step in the home language. Provide a sentence starter for both the think and share steps. Allow think time to be a drawing or a graphic organizer for students who need visual processing.

7.3 Think-Pair-Write-Share

This routine is a variation of Think-Pair-Share that adds a writing step after pair discussion, before sharing with the class.

Why This Routine Matters

The additional writing step between pair discussion and whole-class share produces stronger, more precise contributions. When students write their refined idea before sharing publicly, they articulate more complex thinking and are less likely to default to summary or repetition. This version is most useful when the sharing task is a claim, argument, or analytical observation.

Best Used When

Before a writing task to generate and refine ideas; when the sharing task is high-stakes enough that precision matters; as a scaffold toward analytical writing.

How to Introduce It

Frame the write step as a chance to 'lock in' what the pair discussion produced: 'You have just refined your thinking in conversation — now write down the best version of your idea before you share it with the class.'

Facilitation Tips

The write step should be brief — 2 minutes at most. Its purpose is to crystallize the pair discussion, not to produce a polished paragraph. Make sure students understand the difference.
Additionally, you may vary the order of the Write and Pair step depending on your students' needs. Have students write before pairing up so they can test their initial thinking versus coming to consensus before writing.

Differentiation Suggestions

For students who struggle with the transition from conversation to writing, provide a sentence frame that mirrors the pair discussion frame. Allow Multilingual Learners to write in their home language first and translate the key phrase.

7.4 Jigsaw Reading

Students become experts on one section of a text, then teach what they learned to a group that has read other sections.

Why This Routine Matters

The accountability of having to teach something produces more careful reading than simply reading for oneself. Jigsaw also creates genuine interdependence — students need each other's expertise to understand the full text. Done well, it mirrors the real collaborative experience of scholarly inquiry: each person brings a piece, and understanding only becomes complete through exchange.

Best Used When

Longer or multi-part texts where full independent reading is not feasible; when different sections represent different perspectives that need to be synthesized; when you want students to develop the experience of teaching as a form of deep learning.

How to Set It Up

Divide the text into 3–4 sections of roughly equal complexity. Assign expert groups. Allow enough time in expert groups for genuine comprehension — not just a skim. Students cannot teach what they do not understand, so the expert-group reading time is not a place to cut corners.

Facilitation Tips

During the jigsaw debrief, circulate to check that 'teaching' is substantive and not just reading aloud from notes. Prompt with questions: 'What does your partner need to understand about your section in order to answer the big question?'

Differentiation Suggestions

Assign sections strategically — give Multilingual Learners sections with more visual support or shorter, more accessible syntax. Provide a graphic organizer for the expert-group notes that becomes the teaching tool in the jigsaw debrief. Allow expert groups to prepare a visual (diagram, timeline, chart) to support their teaching.

7.5 Academic Talk Stems

Sentence starters posted visibly in the room and referenced explicitly during discussion to support academic language production.

Why This Routine Matters

Academic language does not develop through osmosis — it requires repeated, supported practice in genuine communication contexts. Academic Talk Stems give students the grammatical and rhetorical scaffolds they need to participate in academic discourse before they have fully internalized those patterns. Over time, the external scaffold becomes internal: students begin using these structures spontaneously without looking at the chart.

Best Used When

During any discussion routine; when students are practicing academic discourse for the first time; when discussion defaults to informal or imprecise language and you want to lift the register.

How to Introduce It

Post stems before the first discussion and walk through each one: what it means, when you would use it, and what it sounds like. Model using several in sequence during a discussion you lead. Point to specific stems during early discussions when students are reaching for language: 'Try the stem on the board — Building on what she said...'

Step-by-Step

Post the stems visibly at the front of the room. Reference them at the start of each discussion: 'Remember to use the stems on the board.' Gradually fade the prompting as students internalize the patterns. By mid-year, students should be selecting stems independently.

Facilitation Tips

Add new stems over time as students' discussion demands increase. Remove stems that have been fully internalized to keep the chart fresh and relevant. Consider asking students to propose new stems based on discussion moves they have noticed and found useful.

Differentiation Suggestions

Provide a personal laminated copy for Multilingual Learners that they can keep at their desk and reference without having to look across the room. Group stems by function (agreeing, building on, disagreeing, citing evidence) so students can find what they need quickly. Allow Multilingual Learners to write a home-language gloss next to each stem until the English patterns are secure.

Common Academic Talk Stems

Common stems include: 'According to the text...' / 'I agree with ___ because...' / 'Building on what ___ said...' / 'I see it differently because...' / 'Another example is...' / 'The author seems to be arguing that...' / 'This makes me wonder...' / 'A counterargument might be...'

Section 8: Literacy Lab Routines

These routines support the Literacy Lab — the targeted 10-minute instructional block embedded in core lessons. Their purpose is to build the foundational vocabulary, morphological awareness, and language skills students need to engage with complex grade-level texts. Unlike the lesson-level routines in earlier sections, Literacy Lab routines are brief, teacher-led, and heavily scaffolded. They work best when varied across a lesson sequence — matching the routine to the specific word or language demand of the day, rather than applying the same structure to every vocabulary word.

Introducing New Routines

Introduce new routines one at a time and repeat them across multiple lessons before adding variety. Students who know the routine can focus on the language learning it is designed to produce. A routine that students have to figure out is a routine that is not working.

Foundational Skills: An Evidence-Based, Multisensory Foundation

The Literacy Lab routines in this section build middle school students' advanced word recognition, fluency, and vocabulary through structured, multisensory instruction. Each routine intentionally combines visual (seeing letters and words), auditory (hearing and saying sounds and words), and kinesthetic–tactile activities (writing and physically manipulating letters, words, and sentence structures) so that students engage multiple processing channels at once. This multisensory design helps the brain build stronger neural connections among sounds, spellings, and meanings — supporting orthographic mapping, retention, and automaticity.

Multisensory approaches support the delivery of explicit instruction — the core of structured literacy. In practice, that means breaking complex skills into smaller units; modeling skill use and gradually fading scaffolded support until students can perform independently; offering targeted and timely corrective feedback; and providing plenty of opportunities for repeated, goal-directed practice.

Explicit, multisensory instruction reduces the cognitive load of learning for all students, and particularly for striving readers, students with characteristics of dyslexia, and Multilingual Learners. When students can externalize their thinking through movement, touch, and vocalization — rather than holding every new spelling pattern and unfamiliar word in working memory — they can attend more fully to how sounds map to spellings and how spellings map to meanings.

8.1 Introduce New Words Using Syllables

Multisensory Routine

Builds decoding and vocabulary through visual (displayed word with syllable breaks), auditory (choral blending and repetition), and kinesthetic–tactile (clapping syllables, copying the word, writing it from memory) practice.

Students decode an unfamiliar multi-syllabic word by breaking it into manageable parts, then build meaning through definition, context, and practice.

Why This Routine Matters

Decoding and vocabulary are not separate problems. Students who cannot reliably decode a word will not retain its meaning no matter how many times they hear it defined. This routine builds the automatic word recognition that fluent reading requires — by explicitly teaching students a transferable strategy for attacking multi-syllabic words. Used consistently, it develops the phonological and orthographic awareness that underpins independent reading.

Best Used When

When introducing vocabulary words that do not contain high-leverage morphemes worth explicit instruction — words where syllable structure and meaning are more important than root analysis. Also useful early in a unit when students need to read a word fluently before they encounter it in the anchor text.

How to Introduce It

Model the full sequence before asking students to participate. Decode the word aloud while writing it on the board, narrating each step: counting vowels, marking syllable breaks, blending. Make the strategy explicit — students should finish the modeling knowing not just this word but how to attack the next one they encounter independently.

Step-by-Step

1. Display the word. Underline the vowels and count them to determine the number of syllables.
2. Draw syllable breaks on the board. Model blending each syllable aloud: in—i—tia—tives. Students repeat chorally.
3. Encode: students write the word from memory in their Personal Dictionary, using syllable breaks as scaffolds. Check against the board.
4. Provide a student-friendly definition. Explain how the word is used in the anchor text.
5. Give two or three examples of the word used in context, then ask students to construct and share a sentence of their own.

Facilitation Tips

The encoding step — writing from memory — is the part most often skipped in the interest of time. Do not skip it. The physical act of reconstructing the word from its parts deepens orthographic memory significantly more than reading or copying does. If students consistently misspell the same syllable, that is diagnostic: spend more time on that pattern before moving on.

Differentiation Suggestions

For Spanish-speaking students, identify cognates before the routine begins and write the Spanish form alongside the English on the board. During the encoding step, invite students to write both versions and compare syllable structure. For students who struggle with phonological processing, provide a pre-segmented version of the word during the first pass, then have them try it unsupported on the second.

Introduce New Words Using Syllables Routine Fidelity Checklist

The Introduce New Words Using Syllables Routine provides students with a strategy for decoding the longer, multisyllabic words that they encounter in middle school texts by analyzing syllable structure. This multisensory routine develops students' ability to chunk longer words into smaller, recognizable sound-spelling units that can be blended into a whole word. By explicitly teaching syllable-based decoding using key academic words from the lesson's target text, the routine supports accurate word

recognition while building vocabulary knowledge. Use this checklist when planning or observing the routine to confirm that each component is delivered as designed.

Introduction

- The teacher explains that students will decode the word and learn its meaning to support text understanding.
- The teacher explains that words can be broken into syllables, each containing one vowel sound.

Syllable Segmentation

- The teacher displays the target word and models breaking it into syllables, clapping for each syllable.
- Students chorally segment the word into syllables, clap, and count the syllables.
- The teacher displays the word with hyphens between syllables; students copy it into their notebooks.
- Teacher models analysis of spelling patterns within syllables.
- Students read and blend the syllables to form the whole word.
- The teacher monitors accuracy and provides immediate corrective feedback as needed.

Meaning Focus

- The teacher provides a student-friendly definition and explains the word's use in the text, including examples.
- Students use the word in a meaningful sentence and share their responses.
- The teacher monitors usage, provides immediate corrective feedback, and reviews the word's meaning.

8.2 Introduce New Words Using Morphology

Multisensory Routine

Builds decoding, vocabulary, and spelling through visual (circling and underlining word parts), auditory (looping and blending each part aloud), and kinesthetic–tactile (copying the word, writing it from memory, marking morphemes) practice.

Students unlock the meaning of a new word by analyzing its prefix, root, and suffix — then extend that knowledge to related words built from the same parts.

Why This Routine Matters

Morphological knowledge is one of the strongest predictors of reading comprehension and vocabulary growth, particularly in the middle grades when academic vocabulary becomes increasingly Latinate. This routine does not just teach one word — it teaches students a system. A student who understands that segreg- relates to greg- (group) and that -ation marks a noun now has a tool for decoding and defining dozens of words they have never seen before.

Best Used When

When the target word contains a root, prefix, or suffix that recurs in other high-value academic words. The routine is most powerful when the morpheme payoff extends beyond the immediate lesson —

prioritize morphemes with wide reach (un-, dis-, -tion, -ify, graph-, ject-, port-) over those that appear in only one or two words.

How to Introduce It

Start with a word students already know that shares the target morpheme. Establish the morpheme's meaning from familiar ground before introducing the new word. This activates what students already know and positions the new word as a manageable extension rather than an isolated unknown.

Step-by-Step

1. Display the word. Circle any prefix or suffix. Underline the remaining root.
2. Loop under each word part as you say it aloud. Students repeat.
3. Encode: students write the word from memory, using morpheme knowledge to anchor spelling. Check against the board.
4. Explain the meaning of the prefix, suffix, and root. Build the word's definition from those parts.
5. Generate two or three related words using the same morpheme. Students record them and write one from memory.
6. Verify: students use a dictionary or reference material to confirm the meanings they constructed.

Facilitation Tips

The verification step is not optional. Students who construct a plausible but incorrect meaning from morpheme parts — and never check it — may retain the wrong definition. Build the habit of treating morpheme analysis as a hypothesis to be tested, not a definition to be accepted.

Differentiation Suggestions

Cognate leverage is high here — many Latin and Greek morphemes appear in Spanish, French, and Portuguese academic vocabulary in nearly identical form. Before the routine, identify cognates and make them visible on the board. For students with significant orthographic challenges, provide a word frame with the morpheme pre-filled so they can practice the non-morpheme portion of the spelling separately.

Introduce New Words Using Morphemes Routine Fidelity Checklist

The Introduce New Words Using Morphemes Routine supports students in decoding and understanding complex words, particularly those with Greek and Latin roots, by analyzing their meaningful parts. This multisensory routine develops students' ability to identify prefixes, suffixes, and base words, and to use these parts to both read and understand the meaning of unfamiliar words. By explicitly teaching morphological analysis using key academic words from the lesson's target text, the routine helps students recognize and understand those words in context while also equipping them with word-part knowledge for understanding new, related words that contain the same morphemes. Use this checklist when planning or observing the routine to confirm that each component is delivered as designed.

Introduction

- The teacher explains that students will analyze word parts to decode and understand words from the text.
- The teacher explains that words can be broken into prefixes, suffixes, and base words.

Morphemic Segmentation

- The teacher displays the target word and models circling prefixes, suffixes, and base words and underlining remaining vowels.
- Students copy the word and mark word parts as modeled.

- Teacher models blending the word parts, looping under each part; students chorally blend the word.
- The teacher monitors accuracy and provides immediate corrective feedback as needed.

Meaning Focus

- The teacher provides student-friendly definitions of word parts and explains the word's meaning in context.
- The teacher provides examples from the text and additional examples with the target morpheme(s).
- Students use the words in meaningful sentences and share responses.
- The teacher monitors usage, provides immediate corrective feedback, and reviews the meaning of the word and its morphemes.

8.3 Language Study

Multisensory Routine

Builds syntactic awareness through auditory (fluent teacher read-aloud, choral chunked reading), visual (projected sentence and identified chunk boundaries), and kinesthetic–tactile (manipulating chunks, writing the meaning in students' own words) practice.

Students closely examine a complex sentence from the anchor text, deconstructing its structure and meaning before reconstructing it in their own words.

Why This Routine Matters

Syntactic complexity is one of the primary barriers to comprehension of academic and literary texts. Students who can decode every word in a sentence may still fail to understand it because the grammatical structure is beyond their current processing capacity. This routine builds syntactic awareness explicitly and incrementally — giving students tools to pull apart complicated sentences and reassemble meaning rather than glossing over difficulty.

Best Used When

When a sentence from the anchor text contains a grammatical structure, a figurative expression, or a vocabulary cluster that will block comprehension if left unaddressed. Also valuable when preparing students for a writing task that requires a particular sentence structure — encountering it first as readers makes producing it as writers significantly easier.

How to Introduce It

Select the sentence before the lesson and annotate it yourself: identify the chunks, the grammatical structures, the vocabulary worth discussing, and the meaning each part contributes. The richness of the student discussion depends almost entirely on the quality of the sentence you choose. Avoid sentences that are merely long — choose sentences where the structure itself is doing meaningful work.

Step-by-Step

1. Project the target sentence. The teacher reads it aloud fluently; students listen without looking.
2. Students chorally read the sentence in chunks as the teacher reads each section.

3. Deconstruct: identify the meaningful chunks of the sentence. Discuss what each chunk contributes to the whole — grammatical function, vocabulary, implied meaning.
4. As time allows, rearrange the chunks to explore how placement changes meaning or emphasis.
5. Reconstruct: students discuss the meaning of the full sentence. What is the author saying? Why did they say it this way?
6. Students write the meaning of the sentence in their own words.

Facilitation Tips

The rearrangement step is where the richest learning often happens — when students discover that moving a clause changes the emphasis or connotation, they start to see grammar as a set of choices rather than rules. If time is short, skip rearrangement before skipping the reconstruction step: students writing the meaning in their own words is the payoff that makes the deconstruction worth doing.

Differentiation Suggestions

For emerging Multilingual Learners, provide the sentence with chunk boundaries already marked before the lesson. During the deconstruct step, invite students to identify what grammatical function a word or phrase serves in their home language — this cross-linguistic comparison often illuminates the English structure more clearly than English-only analysis can. Provide a sentence frame for the reconstruction step.

Language Study Routine Fidelity Checklist

The Language Study Routine builds syntactic awareness by guiding students through a structured cycle of listening, reading in chunks, deconstructing grammatical structure, optionally rearranging those chunks, and reconstructing the sentence's meaning in their own words. The routine engages auditory processing (fluent teacher read-aloud, choral chunked reading), visual processing (projected sentence, identified chunk boundaries), and kinesthetic–tactile processing (manipulating chunks, writing the meaning in students' own words). Use this checklist when planning or observing the routine to confirm that each component is delivered as designed.

Introduction

- The teacher selects a target sentence from the anchor text that does meaningful grammatical, figurative, or vocabulary work.
- The teacher annotates the sentence in advance: chunk boundaries, grammatical functions, key vocabulary, and the meaning each part contributes.

Fluent Reading

- The teacher projects the target sentence and reads it aloud fluently.
- Students listen to the teacher's reading without looking at the projected text.

Chunked Choral Reading

- The teacher reads the sentence in meaningful chunks; students chorally repeat each chunk.
- The teacher monitors accuracy and prosody and provides immediate corrective feedback as needed.

Deconstruction

- Students identify the meaningful chunks of the sentence.
- Students discuss the grammatical function, vocabulary, and implied meaning each chunk contributes to the whole.
- The teacher facilitates discussion and clarifies grammatical terminology as needed.

Rearrangement (as time allows)

- Teachers and students rearrange the chunks to explore how placement changes emphasis, connotation, or meaning.
- Class discusses how each rearrangement shifts the author's intended effect.

Reconstruction and Paraphrase

- Students discuss the meaning of the full sentence, including what the author is saying and why they said it this way.
- Students independently write the meaning of the sentence in their own words.
- The teacher monitors paraphrases and provides immediate corrective feedback as needed.

8.4 Sentence Combining

Students combine two simple kernel sentences into a single, more complex sentence — exploring how grammatical choices affect meaning.

Why This Routine Matters

Writing instruction that focuses only on what students say — the content of their ideas — produces writers who can think but not yet express that thinking in the complex, fluent sentences that academic writing requires. Sentence combining builds syntactic complexity from the inside out: students start with meaning they already own and learn to encode it in increasingly sophisticated grammatical structures. The routine develops writers, not just ideas.

Best Used When

When students are preparing for a writing task that requires a particular sentence structure; when analysis of mentor texts has surfaced a grammatical pattern worth practicing; when student writing reveals a persistent reliance on simple sentences. Also effective as a regular vocabulary practice — using target words in the kernel sentences brings vocabulary and syntax instruction together.

How to Introduce It

Model the first combination yourself, narrating your thinking: why you chose a particular connector, how the punctuation changes, what the combined sentence does that the two originals could not. Students need to see that combining sentences is an act of craft, not just grammar compliance.

Step-by-Step

1. Project two kernel sentences about the anchor text. Include target vocabulary where possible.
2. The teacher models one way to combine them. Discuss the meaning of the new sentence and the punctuation it requires.
3. Project a second pair of kernel sentences. Students work in partners to combine them, then discuss results as a class — including combinations that differ from the model.
4. Project a third pair. Students combine independently, then 1–2 students share.

Facilitation Tips

Resist rewarding only combinations that match your model. A student who produces a grammatically sound combination using a different connector has demonstrated syntactic flexibility — that is the goal. Use divergent responses as occasions to compare how different connectors shift meaning: 'Although' sets up a contrast; 'because' sets up a cause. The comparison is the lesson.

Differentiation Suggestions

Provide a connector bank for students who need it — conjunctions organized by the relationship they signal (addition, contrast, cause, sequence). For students who struggle to generate the written combination, allow oral rehearsal with a partner before writing. For advanced students, ask them to produce two different combinations and explain how the meaning shifts between them.

8.5 Sentence Expansion

Students develop a simple kernel sentence by adding detail that answers who, where, when, why, and how — building toward more precise and complex writing.

Why This Routine Matters

Many students understand more than they can write. Their ideas are richer than their sentences. Sentence Expansion closes that gap by giving students a structured method for adding specificity, context, and complexity to their thinking without losing the meaning they started with. The routine also develops the habit of asking, before every sentence, whether it is doing all the work it could — a habit that transfers directly to independent writing.

Best Used When

When students are drafting or revising an extended writing piece; as a vocabulary practice when target words can be embedded in the kernel sentence; when student writing shows ideas without detail or claims without elaboration. Also effective as a model before any writing task where elaboration is required.

How to Introduce It

Begin with a kernel sentence drawn from the anchor text or unit topic. Choose a sentence simple enough that the expansion possibilities are obvious, but substantive enough that the expansions will produce genuinely interesting writing. Demonstrate the questioning process yourself before involving students.

Step-by-Step

1. Project a kernel sentence: a simple subject + verb structure. Read it aloud.
2. As a class, generate questions the sentence leaves unanswered: Who? Where? When? Why? How?
3. Expand the sentence together, adding detail that answers the questions. Discuss how the additions change the sentence's precision and effect.
4. Project a second kernel sentence. Students expand in partners, then share.
5. Project a third kernel sentence. Students expand independently.

Facilitation Tips

Students often add words without adding meaning — expanding 'She walked' to 'She walked quickly' is technically an expansion but not a substantive one. Push for specificity: 'Where was she walking? Why was she going there? What was she thinking?' The questions are the scaffold; what matters is whether the answers produce sentences that are more precise and more interesting than the original.

Differentiation Suggestions

Provide a visual expansion frame with labeled slots for each question type (who, where, when, why, how). For Multilingual Learners, accept expansion in any language during the partner step, then support

translation of key phrases into English before the written step. For students with significant writing challenges, allow oral expansion as a bridge to written production.

8.6 Vocabulary Review: Example and Non-Example

Students sharpen their understanding of a word's precise meaning by distinguishing situations that genuinely illustrate the concept from those that do not.

Why This Routine Matters

A student who can define a word but cannot recognize it in an unfamiliar context does not yet own the word. Example and Non-Example routines develop the critical thinking that genuine word ownership requires: distinguishing what a word does and does not apply to, and articulating why. This is particularly important for abstract academic vocabulary — words like injustice, segregation, or integrity whose meanings depend on nuance rather than concrete referents.

Best Used When

After a word has been introduced and defined — when students need to deepen and test their understanding rather than receive it. Also effective as a review activity at the beginning of a unit week, when several related words can be compared simultaneously. Particularly valuable for words that students commonly misapply or overgeneralize.

How to Introduce It

Prepare example and non-example scenarios in advance. The non-examples should be plausibly related to the concept — not obviously wrong, but clearly distinguishable with careful thinking. The goal is productive difficulty: scenarios that require students to articulate why something is not an example of the concept, not just recognize that it is not.

Step-by-Step

1. Display a target word and a brief review of its definition.
2. Present the first scenario. Students discuss with a partner: is this an example or non-example of the word? Why?
3. Partners share their reasoning. Teacher probes: what makes this an example? What is missing in the non-example?
4. If time allows, repeat with additional scenarios, including at least one that is genuinely ambiguous or debatable.
5. Close with a synthesis question: what would always have to be true for something to be an example of this word?

Facilitation Tips

The discussion of non-examples is often more instructive than the discussion of examples, because it forces students to identify the essential features of a concept rather than just recognizing its prototype. Invest more time in non-examples that students initially misclassify — those misclassifications reveal what students actually believe the word means, and that is the most valuable instructional data this routine produces.

This routine can lead to rich discussions that can run long. Limiting to one word or one scenario for example and non-example for a Lesson Launch can keep the routine in a short time block without eliminating meaningful discussion.

Differentiation Suggestions

For emerging learners, begin with one example and one obvious non-example before introducing ambiguous cases. Provide sentence frames for the reasoning step: 'This is an example because ___, and the definition says ___.' For advanced students, ask them to generate their own examples and non-examples, explaining their choices in writing.

8.7 Word Associations

Students explore a word's meaning through the connections it activates — building a richer, more personal relationship with academic vocabulary.

Why This Routine Matters

Words are not stored in memory as definitions. They are stored as networks — clusters of associated images, experiences, emotions, and related concepts. Word association routines leverage this natural architecture of memory: by helping students build explicit connections between new words and existing knowledge, they create the retrieval pathways that make vocabulary stick. This is especially effective for abstract academic words that lack a clear concrete referent.

Best Used When

After initial introduction of a word, when students have a basic definition but need to build depth and personal connection. Also effective at the beginning of a unit to surface what students already associate with key concepts before instruction shapes those associations. Particularly valuable for emotionally resonant words where personal and cultural experience is relevant.

How to Introduce It

Frame the routine explicitly as exploration, not assessment. The goal is to surface the full range of what students connect to a word — not to confirm that they know the definition. Unexpected or unconventional associations often reveal the most interesting and most durable connections. Welcome them.

Step-by-Step

1. Display the target word. Students think silently for 30 seconds: what images, feelings, memories, or ideas come to mind?
2. Students share associations with a partner, explaining the connection they are making.
3. Whole-class share: teacher records associations on the board, organized by type (images, emotions, events, related concepts).
4. Prompt students to connect their associations to the unit's anchor text: which associations align with how the word is used in the text? Which do not?
5. Students write a sentence using the word that reflects both its definition and one of their personal associations.

Facilitation Tips

The final step — connecting personal associations back to the text — is what makes this routine rigorous rather than merely effective. Without it, word associations risk becoming a feelings exercise rather than a vocabulary one. The question to keep returning to is: how does this personal connection help you understand the word as the author uses it in this text?

Differentiation Suggestions

Word associations can be done in any language — home-language associations are as valid as English ones and often reveal cultural dimensions of a concept that English-only discussion misses. Invite students to share associations from their home language and discuss what those connections reveal. For students who struggle with abstract vocabulary, offer visual prompts alongside the word to activate more concrete associations.

8.8 Generating Situations, Context, and Examples

Students generate multiple situations, contexts, and examples for a target word, stretching it across different domains (school, community, history, personal experience) to surface its full range of meaning and connotation — the kind of flexible understanding that transfers into independent writing and speaking.

Why This Routine Matters

Most vocabulary words travel further than students realize. A word like *injustice* shows up in history, current events, personal relationships, literature, and civic life — but students often know it in only one narrow context, usually the one the text introduced. The gap between recognizing a word in a single passage and using it flexibly across new situations is where vocabulary instruction most often breaks down. This routine closes that gap by requiring students to generate their own examples across multiple domains, surfacing the full range of situations the word can describe. Generation is the deepest form of vocabulary practice, and breadth of application is what makes word knowledge transfer into independent writing and speaking.

Best Used When

After a word has been defined and encountered in the anchor text, when students are ready to move from recognizing the word in its original context to applying it elsewhere. Especially powerful with abstract or high-utility words that span many domains (*segregation*, *injustice*, *compromise*, *resilience*) and with words students tend to use narrowly despite broader meaning. Also valuable as a prewriting activity when target vocabulary is expected to appear in an upcoming essay, discussion, or performance task.

How to Introduce It

Model two or three examples yourself *from distinctly different domains* — for example, one from history, one from school life, one from a book or film — before asking students to generate their own. Name the domains out loud so students see that you're deliberately stretching the word. Include at least one example that applies the word in an unexpected context. This signals that the goal is genuine, flexible application, not a search for the teacher's intended answer, and gives students permission to reach across their own lives and learning.

Step-by-Step

1. Review the word's definition. The teacher generates two example situations from different domains (e.g., school, history, community, personal experience) and names the connection between each situation and the word's meaning.
2. Students generate a situation with a partner and explain why their situation fits the word.
3. Whole-class share: record 3–4 student-generated situations. As you record them, label the domain each comes from and notice which domains are still unexplored.
4. Students independently generate one more situation in a domain that hasn't come up yet — pushing the word into a new context.

5. Optional: students write a sentence about their situation using the target word, preparing the word for transfer into upcoming writing or discussion.

Facilitation Tips

Watch for situations that technically fit the word's definition but miss its connotation — a student who calls something *unjust* when *unfair* would be more accurate is using the word but not yet owning it. Gently probe: "Does this situation feel as serious as the other examples of injustice we discussed? Why or why not?" Connotation is part of a word's range. Also watch for students who cluster all their examples in one domain (everything is a school example, or everything is a history example). Prompt them to stretch: "Where else in your life or in what you've read might this word apply?" The variety of domains is what builds flexible understanding.

Differentiation Suggestions

Provide a domain menu for students who struggle to generate situations: "Think about a time in school, in your community, in history, or in a book you've read when ___." The menu removes the blank-page problem without removing the cognitive work of matching a situation to a word. For Multilingual Learners, allow generation in the home language or through drawing before translating into English — identifying an applicable situation is the higher-order work, and the language of production can follow. For students ready for more of a challenge, ask them to generate a *non-example*: a situation that seems like it might fit the word but actually doesn't, and to explain why. Distinguishing a word from its near-neighbors is one of the strongest signals of true ownership.

8.9 Word Relationship

Students explore the semantic relationship between two or more vocabulary words — building the connected knowledge that supports reading, discussion, and writing.

Why This Routine Matters

Isolated word knowledge is weaker than connected word knowledge. A student who understands how segregation and injustice relate to each other — and can articulate that relationship — has a richer, more usable understanding of both words than a student who has memorized two separate definitions. This routine builds the semantic networks that support comprehension of complex texts, where ideas connect to one another across paragraphs and sections.

Best Used When

When two or more unit vocabulary words are semantically related — when they appear together in the text, when one causes or defines another, or when they can be organized in a hierarchy or spectrum. Most effective after students have been introduced to both words individually and have some working definition of each.

How to Introduce It

Model the thinking aloud before asking students to articulate a relationship. Show students what it sounds like to describe a relationship precisely: not 'these words go together' but 'segregation is a form of injustice — it is a specific, enforced instance of the broader concept.' The more precisely students can articulate the relationship, the more usable their understanding becomes.

Step-by-Step

1. Display two target words. Students think silently: how are these words related?

2. Partners discuss and agree on a statement describing the relationship. Encourage precision: is one an example of the other? A cause? An opposite? A component?
3. Whole-class share: record 2–3 different relationship statements. Discuss which is most precise and why.
4. Prompt: can you have one without the other? What would it mean if you tried? This question tests the depth of the relationship claim.
5. Students verify their relationship claim using a dictionary or thesaurus. Does what they found confirm or complicate the relationship they identified?

Facilitation Tips

Provide a bank of relationship vocabulary: 'is a type of,' 'causes,' 'is the opposite of,' 'is an example of,' 'is necessary for,' 'often leads to.' Without this language, students tend to say 'they are connected' rather than specifying how. The relationship vocabulary is itself an academic language goal worth developing.

Differentiation Suggestions

For students who need a concrete scaffold, provide a sentence frame with the relationship type built in: '___ is a type of ___ because ___.' For advanced students, ask them to generate a third word that fits the same relationship pattern and explain how. For Multilingual Learners, allow discussion of the relationship in the home language before constructing the English relationship statement.

8.10 Word Matrix

Multisensory Routine

Builds morphological pattern recognition through visual (matrix display and generated word forms), auditory (pair and whole-class discussion of candidate words and morpheme contributions), and kinesthetic–tactile (combining morphemes, recording candidates, writing sentences with the correct grammatical form) practice.

Students build a family of related words by combining prefixes, roots, and suffixes — developing morphological pattern recognition across vocabulary.

Why This Routine Matters

A word matrix makes the generative power of morphology visible all at once. When students see that a single root — greg (group), just (fair), port (carry) — produces a dozen words they will encounter across their academic careers, the cumulative value of morphological knowledge becomes concrete and motivating. The matrix also provides a reference tool students can return to throughout the unit, reinforcing the patterns through repeated use.

Best Used When

After students have been introduced to a target word using the morphology routine and have some familiarity with its root. Most effective mid-unit, when students have accumulated enough vocabulary from a common morphological family to see the pattern across multiple words. Also a strong pre-writing tool — having the full word family visible helps students choose the grammatically appropriate form for their purpose.

How to Introduce It

Build the matrix with the class rather than presenting it completed. The process of generating words — trying combinations, rejecting ones that are not real words, discovering unexpected words — is more instructive than the finished product. Distribute dictionaries or devices for the verification step and treat it as a genuine inquiry.

Step-by-Step

1. Display the root and its meaning in the center column. Place known prefixes on the left, known suffixes on the right.
2. Students work in pairs to combine prefixes and suffixes with the root, generating candidate words.
3. Class shares: record all candidate combinations on the board, including ones that are not real words. Do not pre-filter.
4. Verification: students use a dictionary to check each candidate. Cross out non-words; add definitions to confirmed words.
5. Discuss patterns: how does each prefix change meaning? How does each suffix change the word's grammatical function?
6. Students select three words from the matrix and write a sentence for each, using the correct grammatical form.

Facilitation Tips

Students are often surprised to discover that not all morpheme combinations produce real words — and that discovery is instructive. Exploring why 'disgregate' does not exist but 'segregate' does opens up interesting questions about how language evolves. Do not resolve those questions for students; let the uncertainty fuel curiosity.

Differentiation Suggestions

For students who find the open matrix format overwhelming, provide a partially completed version with some combinations pre-filled. For Multilingual Learners, add a column for home-language cognates alongside the English words — seeing the morpheme preserved across languages reinforces the pattern and connects new learning to prior knowledge. For advanced students, extend the matrix to etymology and ask them to research how the root traveled from Latin or Greek into English.

Word Matrix Routine Fidelity Checklist

The Word Matrix Routine builds morphological pattern recognition by guiding students to generate, verify, and apply a family of related words built from a shared root combined with known prefixes and suffixes. The routine engages visual processing (the matrix display and generated word forms), auditory processing (pair and whole-class discussion of candidate words and morpheme contributions), and kinesthetic–tactile processing (combining morphemes, recording candidates, writing sentences with the correct grammatical form). Use this checklist when planning or observing the routine to confirm that each component is delivered as designed.

Introduction

- The teacher displays a root in the center column and its meaning clearly stated.
- The teacher places known prefixes in the left column and known suffixes in the right column of the matrix.
- The teacher explains that students will build and test a family of related words using the root.

Word Combination

- Students work in pairs to combine prefixes and suffixes with the root, generating candidate words.
- Students record each candidate word in writing, using the matrix as a scaffold.

Class Share

- The teacher records all candidate combinations on the board, including ones that may not be real words; no candidates are pre-filtered.
- The teacher monitors contributions and invites pairs to explain the reasoning behind each candidate.

Verification

- Students use a dictionary or reference resource to check each candidate.
- Non-words are crossed out; confirmed words receive definitions built from the morpheme meanings.
- The teacher facilitates discussion of why certain combinations do or do not produce real words.

Pattern Discussion

- Class discusses how each prefix shifts the meaning of the root.
- Class discusses how each suffix changes the word's grammatical function.
- The teacher clarifies or extends morpheme meanings as needed.

Sentence Application

- Students select three confirmed words from the matrix.
- Students write a sentence for each selected word, using the correct grammatical form.
- The teacher monitors usage and provides immediate corrective feedback, including on spelling, grammatical form, and meaning.

8.11 Cloze Vocabulary

Students complete sentences with missing vocabulary words, using context clues and word meaning to select the best fit.

Why This Routine Matters

Cloze tasks measure a different kind of vocabulary knowledge than definition recall — they require students to reason about meaning in context, attending to both the word's semantic range and the grammatical demands of the sentence. Used consistently, this routine develops the contextual flexibility that genuine vocabulary ownership requires: knowing not just what a word means, but which form of the word fits a particular syntactic slot and why.

Best Used When

As a review and consolidation activity after a set of related vocabulary words have been introduced — typically at the end of a lesson sequence or before a writing task. Most effective when the sentences are drawn from or closely related to the anchor text, so students must integrate vocabulary knowledge with text comprehension. Less appropriate as an introduction to new words.

How to Introduce It

Design cloze sentences that require genuine reasoning rather than pattern-matching. If students can fill every blank by process of elimination after placing one word, the task is too easy. Sentences should

require close attention to context, and the word bank should include forms of the same root (segregate, segregation, segregated) to demand grammatical precision as well as semantic accuracy.

Step-by-Step

1. Display the sentences and the word bank together. Read all sentences aloud before students begin.
2. Students complete each sentence independently, writing the selected word and underlining the context clues that supported their choice.
3. Partners compare responses and discuss any disagreements.
4. Whole-class review: for each blank, ask a student to name the word and identify the context clues. Discuss sentences where more than one word is defensible.

Facilitation Tips

The context clue discussion is the most valuable part of the routine — more important than whether students selected the 'right' answer. When students can point to specific words in the sentence that constrained their choice, they are demonstrating exactly the kind of reading that transfers to independent comprehension. If they cannot identify context clues, the sentence may need to be revised to include more contextual support.

Differentiation Suggestions

For students who struggle with the open format, reduce the word bank to two options per sentence. For Multilingual Learners, allow students to discuss the sentence in their home language with a partner before selecting the English word. For students who need extension, remove the word bank entirely and ask them to generate an appropriate word independently before comparing it to the intended answer.

8.12 Context Clues

Students infer the meaning of an unfamiliar word using the surrounding sentences — developing an independent word-solving strategy they can apply during any reading.

Why This Routine Matters

No vocabulary list will cover every word a student encounters in grade-level text. Context clue strategies are the bridge between what teachers explicitly teach and what students encounter independently. When students learn to stop, look at the surrounding language, and reason toward a meaning — rather than stopping to look up a definition or skipping past the unknown word — they become more self-sufficient readers. This routine makes that invisible strategy visible and teachable.

Best Used When

When a text contains a high-leverage word that the surrounding sentences can substantially illuminate. Context clue instruction is most effective when the text genuinely provides enough information to support a reasonable inference — do not use this routine with words where the context is thin, or students will learn that context clues are unreliable. Also effective as an occasional alternative to morphology instruction for words whose parts do not provide useful information.

How to Introduce It

Select the target word and the surrounding sentences in advance. Annotate the passage yourself, identifying every word or phrase that contributes to the word's meaning before the lesson. The richness of student reasoning depends on how carefully the surrounding context has been scoped — one or two

sentences are rarely enough. Three to five sentences, including the sentence before and after the target word, is usually more productive.

Step-by-Step

1. Display the sentence containing the target word with the word highlighted. The teacher reads it aloud.
2. Display the surrounding sentences. Students reread the full passage with a partner, looking for words or phrases that help explain the target word.
3. Students identify specific context clues: Does the text define the word directly? Give an example? Show a character's reaction? Restate the idea in different words?
4. Students infer a meaning based on the clues. Accept approximate meanings — precision comes next.
5. Test the meaning: substitute the inferred definition back into the sentence. Does it hold?
6. Verify: students check their inferred definition against a dictionary. Confirm or revise together.

Facilitation Tips

Name the type of context clue explicitly when students identify one — definition, example, contrast, inference from reaction. Students who can identify the type of clue they used are better equipped to find that same type in future reading. If the text does not provide enough information for a reasonable inference, say so: one of the most important things students can learn is to recognize when context is insufficient and a definition is needed.

Differentiation Suggestions

For emerging readers and Multilingual Learners, provide the surrounding passage with potential context clues already highlighted and ask students to explain the connection between the clue and the unknown word. This reduces the search demand while preserving the reasoning demand. For advanced students, ask them to evaluate the quality of the context clues available — how confident can we be in an inference based on this particular evidence?

How the Routine System Supports Learning

The routines in *Threads & Themes* are intentionally repeated across units — not because variety is unimportant, but because procedural fluency with collaborative, analytical, and foundational-skills structures is itself a literacy goal. When students do not have to pause and figure out how to run a Socratic Seminar or a Jigsaw Read, they can put all their cognitive resources into what they are learning: the text, the evidence, the argument, the sound–spelling–meaning connections that make reading fluent.

Over the course of the year, students move from heavily scaffolded, teacher-directed use of routines to increasingly independent, student-initiated use. By spring, you should be able to say 'We are going to do a Fishbowl on this question' and have students set it up, manage transitions, and self-facilitate with minimal prompting. That independence is the goal — and the routines are the path to get there.

For foundational-skills routines, the fidelity checklists in this guide serve a complementary purpose: they keep the critical components of multisensory instruction visible even as delivery becomes faster and more automatic across a year of practice. Periodically revisiting a checklist — alone, with a coaching partner, or during a team observation — ensures that the explicit, sequential, and systematic qualities of each routine do not drift over time.

The deeper literacy goals this system serves — close reading, knowledge building across texts, academic discourse, extended writing, and accurate, automatic word recognition — require the kind of sustained, purposeful engagement that only consistent structures can support. Use these routines faithfully, release them gradually, and trust that the repetition is doing exactly what it is designed to do.