

# Get Them Talking! Using Student-Led Book Talks in the Primary Grades

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Student-led book talks can develop oral language skills and increase student motivation to read. The author shares a simple gradual-release model of implementing student-led book talks in a primary-grade classroom.

Anyone who observed my second-grade classroom on a Friday afternoon would be amazed to see the enthusiasm students showed about standing at the front of the room and presenting to their peers a book they had read. The students had no fear about talking in front of their peers because a reading community had been established through readers' workshop.

During my first year of readers' workshop, I noticed that one of the major components, community, was greatly lacking in my classroom (Hudson & Williams, 2015). I knew that Atwell (2007) had proposed five components for readers' workshop: time, choice, response, community, and structure. It became clear to me that without a vibrant reading community, our readers' workshop was not complete or as effective as it could be.

I began searching for a practice to strengthen the community aspect of readers' workshop in my classroom. Atwell (2007) suggested that entwined in the five key components of readers' workshop are various instructional practices such as book talks, read-alouds, and conversations and an ever-expanding classroom library. For this article, I focus on just one of those elements: book talks.

## Why Book Talks?

Calkins (2001) believes that the books that mean the most to us are the ones we discuss with our peers. Book talks give children this opportunity. Book talks are brief, enthusiastic oral descriptions of a book that a student has read, and book talks are given with the intention of enticing others to read the book (Atwell, 2007). This is something that we do naturally as adult readers. It is important to note that a book talk is not a book report, nor is it given to prove to the teacher

that the student has read a book (Atwell, 2007; Miller, 2009). Rather, a book talk is an opportunity for a reader to share with other readers a book that he or she enjoyed. During a book talk, the speaker familiarizes the audience with the book in just one to two minutes (Aronson, 2012). In this brief period, the book talk introduces the audience to the main characters of the story and the problem that the characters encounter in the book (Wozniak, 2011).

Research has shown that students become more interested and eager to read a book after they have listened to a book talk about it (Wozniak, 2011). Furthermore, Riesterer (2002) found that the circulation of books in her library increased by more than 2,500 books after the introduction of various types of book talks. Book talks not only increase students' motivation to read but also help to build a community of readers. Miller (2014) believes that discussing books together builds relationships among readers because one can learn a lot about another person's reading tastes by listening to their book recommendations. Book talks are also a way of introducing students to a vast array of texts because they can expose students to many different authors, genres, and series within a matter of minutes. Miller (2009) believes that introducing books and authors to students is especially beneficial for those students who lack reading experience and confidence in choosing books for themselves.

Although much of the research on book talks has focused on older students, I know from my experience that primary students can create and benefit from book talks as well. The conversations

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that arise from student-led book talks are a valuable piece of students' overall comprehension of a book. Ganske, Monroe, and Strickland (2003) found that even beginning readers can benefit from discussions that center on comprehension. Book talks are therefore a valuable practice to use with emergent readers because they teach students early on how to make meaning of a text in order to share it with their peers.

In addition to building students' comprehension, student-led book talks support many of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts in reading and in speaking and listening by providing opportunities for readers to describe characters and setting, to ask and answer questions about key details in a text, and to participate in collaborative conversations (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; see Table 1).

### PAUSE AND PONDER

- How do your students discuss and share books with one another?
- What opportunities do your students have for developing their speaking and listening skills?
- How can you broaden your students' knowledge of various authors and genres?

## Implementing Student-Led Book Talks

The following steps will help general educators implement student-led book talks in their primary-grade classrooms. It is recommended that the implementation of student-led book talks take place over the course of several weeks with a slow, gradual release of responsibility to the students.

### Step 1: Model, Model, Model

In order to get my students excited about book talks, I searched the Internet for videos of primary-age students giving book talks to their respective classes. I watched several videos and noted the ones that I felt were good examples of what I expected from my students. Each day for an entire week, I began reading time in my classroom by showing the students one or two of the videos that I had selected. After two days of showing

**Table 1**  
**Common Core State Standards Supported by Student-Led Book Talks**

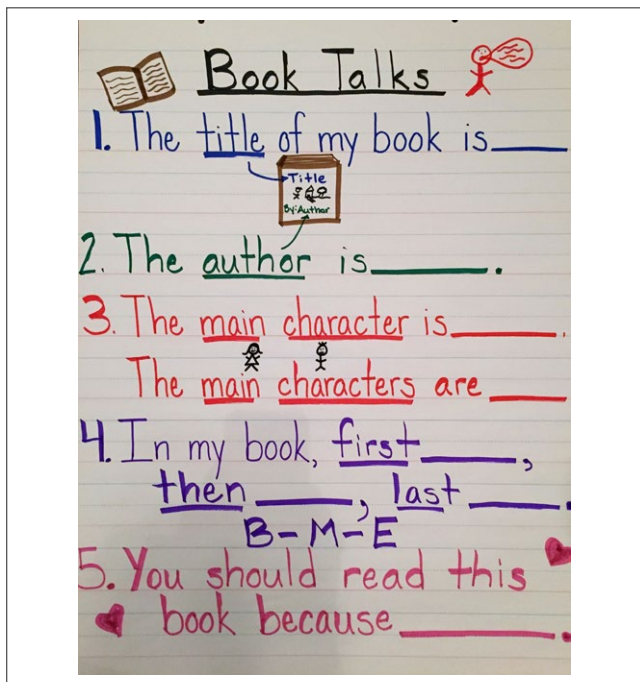
Standard Number	Student Expectation
<i>Reading</i>	
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.1	Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.2	Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.1.3	Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.1	Ask and answer such questions as <i>who</i> , <i>what</i> , <i>where</i> , <i>when</i> , <i>why</i> , and <i>how</i> to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.
<i>Speaking and Listening</i>	
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.1.1	Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about <i>grade-level topics and texts</i> with peers and adults in small and larger groups.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.2.1	
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.1.1.A	Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions (e.g., listening to others with care, speaking one at a time about the topics and texts under discussion).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.2.1.A	Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions (e.g., gaining the floor in respectful ways, listening to others with care, speaking one at a time about the topics and texts under discussion).
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.1.1.C	Ask questions to clear up any confusion about the topics and texts under discussion.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.2.1.C	

my students these virtual book talks, I began having them discuss with their neighbor what they noticed about the student book talks from the videos. I guided my students to see that the book talks all identified the title and author of the book, discussed the main character of the story, and explained the main idea of the book. I also discussed with my students how adult readers recommend and share with one another books that they enjoyed. Students came to realize that the purpose of the book talks that we had been watching was to try and get others to read the book as well.

### Step 2: Direct Instruction

The following week, I provided direct instruction on book talks to my class and allowed them to practice with their table groups. To begin, I read a picture book aloud to the class. After reading, I carefully explained how to prepare a book talk and what information was required. As I discussed this with students, I created an anchor chart for them to reference (see Figure 1). The anchor chart supported students' oral language because it provided children with the scaffolding that they needed in order to practice having a conversation about a book with their peers.

**Figure 1**  
**Book Talks Anchor Chart**



Then, using the anchor chart, I modeled giving a book talk on the book that I had just read aloud. I continued to model giving a book talk in this way for several days, using picture books that most of the students had previously heard and were familiar with. For example, I read and modeled a book talk on *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* by Kevin Henkes (1996) and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle (1987).

### Step 3: Practice Makes Perfect

After direct instruction, I provided students with familiar fairy tales from the *Folk & Fairy Tale Easy Readers* collection (Findley, 2006) because the students had a lot of background knowledge on these classic stories. During this part, students were responsible for a section of their group's book talk. This was to help them gain understanding of a book talk and provide a support when they were initially preparing and presenting book talks. I monitored the small groups' preparations and presentations. This same small-group activity was repeated for several days using different fairy tale assignments. Each day, the students were responsible for preparing and presenting a different part of the book talk. Holding students accountable for only a part of a book talk in the beginning provided a scaffold for them to become comfortable with the idea of book talks and presenting to one another.

Additionally, I worked with small groups of students at my teacher table during the first few minutes of readers' workshop. During this part, students were responsible for developing their own complete book talk. They did not work with a group any further after the initial group book talk practice that was discussed in the previous paragraph. From here on out, each student developed an entire book talk on their own and presented it to the class. I worked with these small groups for a few minutes each day so that their book talks would be ready to present to their peers that afternoon.

### Step 4: Present

After the small-group meetings, the students sat one at a time in the rocking chair at the front of the classroom. They held the book that they were discussing in one hand and their book talk paper in the other to speak. When they were finished, we celebrated the student and allowed for a few questions from the audience. This question and answer time developed students' oral language by providing them time to practice raising questions and providing information



to answer others' questions. I continued this process of meeting with five students each day to prepare a book talk until every student had presented one book talk to the class.

After I worked with each student in a small group, I allowed them to begin creating book talks on their own. I informed my students that every Friday afternoon would be "Book Talk Friday." I created a checklist for myself to record each student's name and book talk choice in order to ensure that each student presented at least once a month and that my students were giving book talks on a variety of texts. Most students were anxiously awaiting their turn each Friday, as was the case with Carlos (all names are pseudonyms), who was once overheard saying with great disappointment, "Oh, man, I forgot my book at home! I was going to give a book talk on it today!"

### Step 5: Model, Model, Model and Accommodate as Needed

Throughout the year, I continued to periodically model giving book talks and reference the anchor chart posted in the classroom. This helped to refresh students' memory of book talks and provided a continuous model. Texts such as *I Love My Hair!* by Natasha Anastasia Tarpley (1998) or *Too Many Tamales* by Gary DeSoto (1993) could be used to both model book talks and introduce students to a variety of multicultural texts.

For students who were reluctant to speak in front of their peers, I modified the book talk experience by pairing the student with a partner to give a book talk on a book that they both read. To support the needs of linguistically or culturally diverse students, I provided sentence stems and many opportunities for them to practice presenting book talks prior to their time to speak in front of their peers. Another modification I used with a special education student was to allow him to verbally tell me his book talk while I transcribed it. On the Friday of his book talk, I read it aloud to the class for him while he stood next to me, holding the book.

To provide enrichment opportunities, I allowed a group of students to work together to present a book talk to the entire student body at morning assembly. Other possible accommodations could include video recording book talks for other classes and challenging students to develop a book talk from the point of view of one of the characters in the story.

## Closing Thoughts

Book talks are not limited to a certain type of reader or a certain type of text. Teachers can instruct students on how to give book talks on nonfiction titles with a few minor adjustments. For example, rather than talking about the story elements of a text, a student could tell the main idea of the text and key facts learned from reading.

Student-led book talks support students' comprehension of text and help create a reading community by allowing students to learn about each other as readers. For example, during reading conferences, students were often heard saying things like, "Leslie said that this was a funny book during her book talk, so I thought I'd try it out." Furthermore, students would bring books from home to share with their peers or seek out books in the library for one another after learning which genres other students liked during their book talks.

As a stand-alone activity or as part of the readers' workshop framework, book talks help prepare students for the future. They assist in developing a vibrant reading community, aid in building students' comprehension, and promote students' oral language development by teaching students to use language to summarize and explain a book that they read, let others know how they feel about it, and ask and answer questions. Student-led book talks are an authentic activity that can easily be incorporated into any primary-grade classroom.

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