

Why use Reading Circles?

In all cultures, over thousands of years, people have been fascinated by a good story – and language students are no exception. And a good story is at the heart of every Reading Circle.

Reading Circles combine, in a natural way, the skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. They help motivate students to acquire both the habits of reading extensively and of working autonomously. They accomplish this by providing two things that are often lacking in many oral communication courses: material that is both comprehensible and interesting to talk about, and a framework which makes having a real discussion in English an achievable goal for students.

Once students are engaged by a story, they are willing to write carefully in order to be prepared for their group discussions; to speak in English almost all of the time while in their groups; to eagerly point to passages within a text in order to support their arguments; and to question each other in order to establish what the text really means. There are many reasons to use Reading Circles in the classroom, but the best way to discover them is to try Reading Circles for yourself.

What are Reading Circles?

Reading Circles are small groups of students who meet in the classroom to talk about stories. These groups allow language learners to have enjoyable, interesting discussions in English. In a Reading Circle, each student plays a different role in the discussion. The six main roles are:

Discussion Leader	Summarizer	Connector
Word Master	Passage Person	Culture Collector

To prepare for their roles, each student completes a Role Sheet. The Role Sheets break reading down into smaller sub-skills with each student focusing closely on one way of encountering the text. The students read the story from their given perspective (role) outside the class. Then they are brought together in the Reading Circle, where they use their Role Sheets as prompts for discussion, and during this process of discussion the parts become whole.

Key Features of Reading Circles

Reading Circles are reading and discussion groups which are very much student centred. The teacher's role is to provide students with a framework for success.

1 Teachers select reading material appropriate for their student population

Reading Circles ask language learners to have 'real-life', meaningful discussions about the stories that they have read. So it is important for the teacher to choose appropriately graded reading texts, which students can read *without* using a dictionary.

2 Small temporary groups are formed in the classroom

Five to six students in a Reading Circle works best. At first, teachers should manage the groups so that each group has one or two confident students who are willing to take a risk with something new.

3 Different groups read the same text

There are a number of advantages if each group reads the same story. First, it is much easier for the teacher to monitor the progress of the discussion groups. Secondly, using the story text as core material, it is possible to assign a number of different extension activities, including oral presentations and poster sessions. Group projects and extension activities are ways to evaluate students for their Reading Circles work.

4 Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule to discuss their reading

This is a crucial aspect to the success of Reading Circles. Reading Circles require some student training time, so a teacher must be willing to commit to several stories and rounds of discussion if there are to be positive results.

5 Students use written notes to guide both their reading and their discussion

The Role Sheets (described on pages 8 and 9) prompt each member of the group to read a story from a different perspective, and to make notes in English in order to prepare for a group discussion based on their reading. In this way, students are learning that there are a number of different reasons for reading, and that there are also varying perspectives on any given text.

6 Discussion topics come from the students

It is important to allow students to generate the topics for discussion. These are not classes in literary criticism, but informal discussions about stories. The Role Sheets provide the help needed for students to find interesting topics.

7 Group meetings aim to be open, natural conversations about stories

Students are encouraged to share their opinions about the texts which are read for Reading Circles, so not all of the discussion will be serious.

8 The teacher serves as a facilitator, not a group member or instructor

Teachers need to step back and allow students to assume responsibility for guiding the Reading Circle discussions. Some teachers may not be used to this, but since students complete the Role Sheets in advance, and know the roles that they are to play in the group, teachers must allow this process to work naturally.

9 A spirit of playfulness and fun pervades the room

Of course, if Reading Circles are not fun, then we are simply repackaging the types of lessons which students tell us that they hate. The goal of Reading Circles is clear and simple – to promote informal talk about great stories!

Getting Started with Reading Circles

Material Selection

In Reading Circles students are asked not only to read stories, but also to discuss them in English. So it is important for the teacher to choose appropriately graded reading texts that students can read without using a dictionary. Here are some good 'rules of thumb' for students to find their reading level:

- There should be no more than 2 to 3 unknown words per page.
- The learner is reading 8 to 10 lines of text or more per minute.
- The learner understands almost all of what they are reading with few pauses.

More advice on assessing the suitability of texts for extensive reading can be found in *Using Graded Readers* by Rob Waring on the website <www.oup.com/bookworms>. It is usually a good idea to begin with a graded text that is one level *below* the student's current reading level. This helps to boost their confidence and enjoyment of the activity.

Introducing the Role Sheets

The magic behind Reading Circles lies in the Role Sheets, which guide learners through their reading, and make it both easy and manageable to prepare for discussions in English about stories they have read. So it is important to spend some class time introducing the Role Sheets clearly to students. These steps are recommended:

- 1 Put students into groups of five or six. (These will become the first Reading Circle groups.) Try to make sure that there are at least two confident students in each group.
- 2 Give each student a set of the six Role Sheets from pages 14–19, or from the website <www.oup.com/bookworms>. There are also small versions in the students' books, but the larger sheets allow more space for students to write notes during the introductory session.
- 3 It is often a good idea to introduce the first five roles now, and wait until the second or third session of Reading Circles before introducing the sixth role, Culture Collector.
- 4 Present each role one at a time (using the notes on the next two pages), pausing after each one. Allow students time to talk among themselves in their groups, to consolidate their understanding of the role. Encourage them to write notes on the Role Sheets, which they can keep and refer to later when they are assigned a particular role.
- 5 After the five (or six) roles have been presented, give students a photocopy of the Role Sheet Examples (pages 20–21). Invite them to write down a few questions about the roles. These questions can then be put on the board, and teachers can either answer them or elicit answers from other groups in the class.

Here are suggestions for presenting each role to students. On the left are the ‘job descriptions’ from the Role Sheets which the students will be looking at; on the right are some notes giving extra information or emphasizing important points.

Student’s Role Sheets

The Discussion Leader’s job is to ...

- read the story twice, and prepare at least five general questions about it.
- ask one or two questions to start the Reading Circle discussion.
- make sure that everyone has a chance to speak and joins in the discussion.
- call on each member to present their prepared role information.
- guide the discussion and keep it going.

Notes for the Teacher

*It is a good idea to arrange for a confident student to act as **Discussion Leader** for the first few sessions.*

- 1 When asking the first questions, the DL calls on each student at least once, so that everyone speaks before the other roles are presented.
- 2 After each role is presented, the DL asks a new general question and calls on each student to answer, so that everyone in the group has many chances to speak.
- 3 The DL encourages people to ask questions at any time in the discussion.
- 4 The DL does not act as a teacher, but as a discussion guide.

The Summarizer’s job is to ...

- read the story and make notes about the characters, events, and ideas.
- find the key points that everyone must know to understand and remember the story.
- retell the story in a short summary (one or two minutes) in your own words.
- talk about your summary to the group, using your writing to help you.

*The **Summarizer** should focus only on the main events of the story.*

- 1 Emphasize that the Summarizer retells the story in their own words, and does not copy too much from the story text.
- 2 The Summarizer should not read a prepared text to the group, but give a spoken summary, using the notes from their Role Sheet as a guide.
- 3 In the first discussions, it can be a good idea for the Summarizer to give their summary once, pause for a minute, then give the summary a second time.

The Connector’s job is to ...

- read the story twice, and look for connections between the story and the world outside.
- make notes about at least two possible connections to your own experiences, or to the experiences of friends and family, or to real-life events.
- tell the group about the connections and ask for their comments or questions.
- ask the group if they can think of any connections themselves.

*Students can find the **Connector** role challenging at first, so it is a good idea if a confident student is given this role for the first few discussions.*

- 1 Emphasize that students can focus on characters as well as events in the story.
- 2 In some kinds of story (for example, mystery, horror, adventure), students will rarely have had similar experiences. But they can still find connections with the feelings or thoughts of characters in the story (for example, fear, shock, guilt, excitement).
- 3 Connectors should present one connection, then ask the group for questions before moving on to the next connection on their Role Sheet.

The Word Master's job is to ...

- read the story, and look for words or short phrases that are new or difficult to understand, or that are important in the story.
- choose five words (only five) that you think are important for this story.
- explain the meanings of these five words in simple English to the group.
- tell the group why these words are important for understanding this story.

The Word Master can ask other group members to read aloud the sentences where the words appear. This allows everyone more speaking time and helps the group to focus on the words in context.

- 1 Make sure that students understand they should look for words that are important in the story – they do not have to choose unknown words.
- 2 Students should use an English-to-English learner's dictionary to define new words.
- 3 Encourage students to look for special uses of common words and to ask questions such as, 'What do you think _____ means here?' Or 'Why does the writer repeat the word _____ eight times in the first two pages of this story?'

The Passage Person's job is to ...

- read the story, and find important, interesting, or difficult passages.
- make notes about at least three passages that are important for the plot, or that explain the characters, or that have very interesting or powerful language.
- read each passage to the group, or ask another group member to read it.
- ask the group one or two questions about each passage.

The Passage Person can also ask other group members to read aloud the selected passages, allowing everyone more speaking time and helping the group to focus on the context in which the passages occur.

- 1 Remind students that they do not have to choose passages containing the main events in a story. Interesting descriptions, characters' thoughts, or pieces of dialogue often provide good material for group discussion.
- 2 Students must remember to give their reasons for choosing a particular passage.
- 3 Encourage the Passage Person to ask the group for help with any passages they find puzzling. Some of the best discussion occurs while students are trying to work out the meaning of difficult passages together.

The Culture Collector's job is to ...

- read the story, and look for both differences and similarities between your own culture and the culture found in the story.
- make notes about two or three passages that show these cultural points.
- read each passage to the group, or ask another group member to read it.
- ask the group some questions about these, and any other cultural points in the story.

The Culture Collector role is probably the most challenging one, and it may be best not to introduce this role until the groups have read and discussed at least one story. It is also a good idea if a confident student acts as Culture Collector the first time the role is used.

- 1 Explain that 'your culture' includes your background, your customs and traditions, your everyday life.
- 2 Encourage the Culture Collector to ask the group for help in understanding puzzling cultural issues in the story.
- 3 This role and the Connector role are similar. Both look for connections: the Connector finds connections with personal experience; the Culture Collector compares and contrasts cultures, and finds cross-cultural connections.

Reading and Role Sheet Preparation

After the Role Sheet introductory session, here are some other useful things to do to help prepare students for Reading Circles. (See also the Frequently Asked Questions opposite.)

1 Reading Schedule

Each student fills in their own copy of a Reading Circles Schedule (page 13). They write the story title, the names of their group members, and the role each member will play during the discussion meeting.

2 In class or out of class

With younger or lower-level students, both the reading and the Role Sheet preparation can be done in class. However, students usually read the entire short story and complete their Role Sheet, in English, as homework, to prepare for the discussion meeting. If students are working on their Role Sheets out of class, remind them of the advice given on the Reading Circles Roles page in their students' book – *Read, think, connect, ask ... and connect.*

3 Accessible language

Students must understand that their Role Sheets will be used as notes for discussion, so they must use vocabulary and structures which their classmates will understand. Advise students not to use a dictionary while completing their Role Sheets unless it is an English-to-English learner's dictionary.

4 Rehearsal

Encourage students, before coming to class, to practise reading aloud to themselves their Role Sheet notes. Emphasize that their written notes are to help with the discussion.

5 Absent group members

In some teaching situations, it is a good idea to tell students that even if they are absent on the day of the Reading Circle meeting, they still must have their work ready, and must pass it to another group member who can present it for them in class. Making students responsible for their roles, whether they are in class or not, promotes not only student responsibility but also a very high attendance rate. When students realize that they have to complete the assignment whether they are present or not, they often decide that it is easier to come to class and participate than to arrange to send in their homework by proxy.

6 Role badges

If appropriate, and if students wish, they can make role badges for themselves, using the photocopyable role icons on the last page of this book. The role icon badges are also on the last page of the students' books and the website <www.oup.com/bookworms>.

Group Discussions

Discussion in small groups of five or six may be new for many students, and for the first Reading Circle session, it is a good idea to allow only thirty to forty minutes of discussion time. This should be enough for each group to go through all the roles and have time for follow-up questions and comments. The goal is to finish before the students have exhausted their enthusiasm for discussion so that they will be motivated to try Reading Circles again!

Frequently Asked Questions



1 My class doesn't divide evenly into groups of 5 or 6. How do I organize it?

If the groups are larger, two different students can take the role of Connector or Passage Person. In other words, there can be two Connectors and/or Passage Persons in a group (they work independently, not as partners). If there are not enough students in a group, the Discussion Leader can also act as Summarizer.

2 Who allocates the roles? Do students take a different role in turn? Can students choose their own roles?

For the first Reading Circle discussion in a class, it is recommended that the teacher allocate the roles. For subsequent stories, new groups are formed, and students may then be allowed to choose roles in their new circles. However, students should always be asked to take a different role for each new story.

3 What age groups are Reading Circles aimed at?

Reading Circles can be used with language learners of almost any age, from junior high school right through to college and university level, and in vocational training and adult education.

4 How long will one complete round of Reading Circles take?

The first round of Reading Circles will take longer than subsequent rounds, as introducing the roles and a general introduction to Reading Circles usually takes about 35 to 45 minutes in class. After the first round, it need not take more than 10 or 15 minutes to form new groups, allocate roles, and remind students of Reading Circle procedures. Students should plan on between 30 and 60 minutes for reading the story and role sheet preparation, either inside or outside the class. Discussions in class should run to about 40 minutes.

5 Can students in Reading Circles choose which stories they want to read?

No, at least not at first. Asking students to have purposeful, small-group discussions in English about the stories they have read is a complex undertaking for both students and teachers alike. With each group reading the same story, it is much easier for the teacher to monitor the progress of the discussion groups and to make adjustments where necessary. Also, the stories in the *Bookworms Club* series are organized so that students read and discuss progressively longer texts, and the last stories in each book move up one stage in the Bookworms grading system, so it is best to read and discuss the stories in the order presented.

6 When should students do the activities after each story in the students' book?

Since the *Bookworms Club* series does not gloss words outside the headword list for the level, students should read the story straight through without stopping, and then complete the *Word Focus* activity. If reading time is allocated in class, the *Word Focus* activity can be done in class in pairs. The *Story Focus* activities are designed to model the close-reading skills needed to complete the Role Sheets, so students can be asked to complete these activities before working on the Role Sheets, either in class or as part of their preparation at home.

Using Reading Circles with Longer Stories

The *Bookworms Club* series contains collections of short stories and support materials especially designed for use with Reading Circles. It is also possible to use longer texts, such as full-length Bookworms. The procedures for forming groups and introducing the roles remain the same, but there are some important differences to keep in mind.

Key Differences

1 Choosing the level

It is very important for the teacher to select an appropriately graded text, and a full-length story should be *one level below* the students' current reading level. Students are being asked to read, make notes, and discuss a larger quantity of text, so the teacher must make sure that students are able to process these longer texts without reaching the point of frustration.

2 Chunking the story

With a longer story, students are assigned a specific number of pages to read and asked to prepare one role for this 'chunk' of the text. Usually, ten to fifteen pages of assigned reading, or one or two chapters, is a manageable amount. Look for natural breaks in a story, at chapter ends or other divisions in the text. It can be helpful to look at the *While-Reading* activities (found at the back of each full-length Bookworm), which often chunk the story into groups of chapters at strategic points in the plot. Prediction activities – speculating about developments in plot or character – can be a useful way of carrying the story forward from one Reading Circle meeting to the next. However, always remind students *not* to read ahead of the assigned section, otherwise discussions can become very confusing, with some students knowing more of the story than others.

3 Rotating the roles

Students should rotate through the different roles for each meeting discussing different sections of the story. A student who acts as Discussion Leader for the first assignment of reading (for example, chapters 1 and 2) might then play the role of Connector for the second session (chapters 3 and 4). This change of focus and activity helps to keep students interested in the reading, and encourages them to bring fresh perspectives to each meeting.

Reminders

Whichever texts are used, the essence of Reading Circles remains the same. It is enabling learners to have meaningful, interesting discussions in English. The teacher's role is to

- make sure that students are reading stories at appropriate language levels for them
- present the roles clearly so that students know what is expected of them
- assign a manageable quantity of text for Role Sheet preparation
- then step back, and allow Reading Circles to work their magic!