

Topic Talking and Topic Focusing¹

To introduce a new topic of study to your students or to prepare your students to read a selection, begin with a “Topic Talking” or “Topic Focusing” activity. (Several examples can be found at the end of this handout.) These types of pre-reading activities not only will introduce to your students the topic at hand, but also will require them to tap into their prior knowledge. In addition, students’ curiosity will be piqued. When the actual nonfiction text is read, students’ brains will have a purpose for reading and they will tie what they read to what they already know.

Providing opportunities for students to participate in topic talking and topic focusing meshes well with what research says about learning:

- Students interact socially.
- Students access prior knowledge.
- The brain is given a purpose for reading.
- Students take risks.
- Students are actively involved.

Topic Talking

Select three words that relate to the topic that will be studied. As an example, a focus on study of matter might begin with these words:

- ◆ molecules
- ◆ liquids; and
- ◆ density.
- ◆

Assign students to partners, A and B, and explain the procedure. Write the first word on the board and allow student A to tell everything he or she knows about the topic to Student B. After fifteen seconds, stop the discussion and allow Student B to discuss the topic for fifteen seconds. Continue this procedure until all the words and/or phrases have been used. Gradually increase the time students talk and the size of the group.

Topic Focusing

Create four or five interesting questions related to factual information about a topic to be studied. (See the examples that follow.) To increase student risk-taking, include questions that will require students to guess. Arrange students in pairs or groups of four. (Always use even numbers of students in groups, if possible, so that there is no case of “odd man out.”) Give students a short time to come up with answers to the questions. As groups report out, write their answers on the board. Immediately after this activity, have

¹Based on the work of Nancy Polette

students read the text containing the answers to the questions. A lively discussion will ensue.

Whether you use a Topic Talking or a Topic Focusing activity, the role of the teacher while students are interacting is a most important one. The teacher should circulate and listen to what students are saying. If there is silence or a lull, students probably do not have much background knowledge about the topic. If the teacher hears students exchange misinformation, he or she can later correct it.