

Story Events and Student Questions: Pairing *Books Aren't for Bears* with a Strategy for Literature Circle Talk

William P. Bintz

Kent State University, Kent, OH

Shabnam Moini Chaghervand

Kent State University, Kent, OH

ABSTRACT

Elementary students often struggle to launch and sustain genuine conversation in literature circles. This teaching tip pairs a recent picturebook, *Books Aren't for Bears* (Barry, 2023), with Story Events and Student Questions, a low-prep strategy in which students record a key event and a discussion question at each episodic pause during a read-aloud. Those captured events and questions then anchor peer talk in the literature circle. We describe the procedure, explain why this picturebook works well as an entry text, and offer companion titles for extending the conversation.

KEYWORDS

picturebooks;
literature circles;
response to literature;
instructional strategy;
interdisciplinary teaching

When most people hear the word *bear*, they first think of a large, strong, brown mammal with stocky legs and a long snout that likes to live in forests, forages for food to eat, and hibernates during the chilly winter months. Sometimes, they also think of famous television bears like Yogi Bear, Paddington Bear, Baloo, and, of course, Winnie the Pooh, who always enjoys a good pot of honey for dessert.

The main character in the picturebook *Books Aren't for Bears* (Barry, 2023) is also an endearing bear. He is not famous like the TV bears; instead, he is important in an unexpected way. Specifically, he matters because of the valuable lesson he teaches everyone about books.

Picturebooks occupy a unique and enduring space in literacy education. Research has consistently demonstrated that high-quality picturebooks serve as powerful vehicles for building vocabulary, strengthening comprehension, and developing a love of reading across grade levels (Wooten et al., 2018). Crawford et al. (2024) further argue that picturebooks function as stepping stones into the literary arts, offering children opportunities to make meaning through the interplay of text and illustration while supporting authentic responses to literature.

Beyond their literary value, picturebooks can serve as springboards for interdisciplinary learning by connecting narrative and visual texts to content knowledge in science, social studies, and the arts (Bainbridge & Pantaleo, 1999). Moreover, when teachers pair picturebooks with structured response strategies, students engage more deeply with text, develop critical thinking skills, and strengthen their identities with reading (Serafini, 2011). This teaching tip introduces one such pairing: a recently published picturebook with an accompanying instructional strategy designed to support meaningful literary response and classroom discussion.

Picturebook

Books Aren't for Bears is a charming, colorful, and patterned picturebook about a bear who lives a comfortable, happy life in the woods. One day, however, while foraging in the forest, he finds something that changes his life forever. He discovers a book. He asks Owl to help him learn to read. Bear reads the book but becomes discontented, wanting more books to read. He searches through the forest but finds no more books. He does, however, find an abandoned bicycle. Bear uses the bicycle to travel to the big city to find its owner and, of course, more books.

Once in the city, Bear stops at a school, enters a classroom, and excitedly discovers books. The teacher, however, demands that he leave and shouts, "Classrooms are for children and books aren't for bears." Bear leaves reluctantly. Next, Bear enters a bookshop and finds more books. The owner, however, demands that Bear leave and shouts, "Bookshops are for people and books aren't for bears." Feeling dejected, Bear begins his walk back to the forest. Along the way, he sees a library filled with people reading books. The librarian welcomes Bear inside, where he receives a library card and takes home a large pile of books. Once home, Bear reads to his forest friends at the foot of Owl's tree and feels content once again.

Books Aren't for Bears is a charming and entertaining picturebook about a bear who discovers a love of books and reading. Unfortunately, pursuing this new love is challenging for Bear, as he is told repeatedly that books are for people, not for bears. Bear perseveres, however, and in the end learns that his new discovery changes his life and the lives of his forest friends forever.

This picturebook also features colorful illustrations with the names of books for Bear to read. For example, the book Bear finds in the woods is *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. The books he finds in the classroom are *A Bear's World, Forest, and Bear Tales*. In the bookshop, Bear discovers *A Day Out in the Woods*. At the library, he selects *Goldilocks and World Travel*.

This book is special for several reasons, particularly because three key lessons emerge near the end of the story, making it especially meaningful. One lesson is the value of libraries in communities of all sizes. Another is the important influence of librarians on readers of all ages as they develop and extend their love of books and reading. The third lesson is that books are for everyone, regardless of who they are or where they come from, emphasizing inclusive access to reading.

Together, the narrative, illustrations, and lessons make this a picturebook that children and adults will return to again and again. Who knows? It may even help a non-reader or reluctant reader discover a love of books and reading, and it may also help readers discover something new about books and reading. In all cases, this picturebook is an entertaining and informative read.

Instructional Strategy

Background

Educators consistently strive to provide students with opportunities to engage with effective instructional strategies. *Story Events and Student Questions* is a simple yet powerful strategy for readers of all ages. We value this strategy because we believe it is important for students to read and discuss their reading in literature circles. Based on our experience, many students struggle to start and sustain genuine conversations about a book with others. We have found this to be the case, especially with younger students. This strategy, as described in detail below, helps students prepare for an upcoming literature circle discussion by writing down an important or interesting event from the text and generating a question to guide their discussion with peers.

Procedure

To start, we display the strategy's name and explain its purpose on the whiteboard or in a PowerPoint slide, then discuss it as a class. Next, we read the picturebook aloud, pausing at episodic changes in the story. These changes could include introducing a new problem or character, changing the setting, or shifting the time, etc. We pause at each episodic change for a few minutes, during which students record significant story events and personal questions on the strategy sheet (see Figure 1). After reading, we organize students in literature circles and invite them to use their questions to discuss the story with other members of the circle. As a culminating event, we invite students to write personal reflections on the overall experience.

Figure 1: Story Events & Student Questions

Story Events	Student Questions
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.
6.	6.
7.	7.

Note. Students record a key story event and a discussion question at each episodic pause during the read-aloud. Questions guide the literature circle discussion.

Moving Forward

We hope this short article will do for readers what this new picturebook, *Books Aren't for Bears*, did for us. It humored, motivated, and inspired us to read more picturebooks like this one. To that end, we recommend *Growly Bear: A Bear Who Discovers Its Best To Be Himself* (Adams, 2019), *Bears Make the Best Buddies* (Oliver & Claude, 2016), and *Hey Bear, Whoa Bear, and Whoa Bear's Reading Woes* (Schechter, 2024). We encourage readers to continue exploring picturebooks that spark curiosity and inspire imagination. Happy reading!

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