

Non-Fiction Toolkit Focus: Discussion Texts

Discussion texts involve presenting a reasoned and balanced over-view of an issue or controversy. Discussion writing is highly prized because it involves presenting both sides of an argument, weighing up evidence and points of view and coming to a reasoned conclusion. One essential feature which distinguishes this from other forms is the need to be able to switch viewpoint as you write. This is a challenge for many younger writers which needs to be carefully managed, for example by choosing issues with clear opposing sides and focussing on each side of an argument separately before trying to bring the two together. Discussion writing is the foundation of more formal and discursive, essay-type, writing. Conquering this form with confidence by the end of the primary school will stand children in good stead for future success in the school system. Discussion contrasts with persuasion, which develops only one viewpoint (usually the writer's own) and may or may be based on preference, prejudice or other nefarious motives. Discussion, on the other hand, should be balanced, objective and reasoned.

Discussion writing is not limited to controversial issues - although polarised views may make it easier to teach. Discussions can equally well be evaluations e.g. points of view about a film, a book or a product; or considerations of the pros and cons of a proposed course of action; or interpretations of outcomes, for example of a science experiment which lends itself to competing explanations. Because of its nature, discussion writing is often more cognitively demanding than other text-types, requiring a degree of hypothetic-deductive reasoning i.e. imagining possibilities then exploring the consequences. It needs to be carefully introduced from Y1 onwards but should have a major emphasis along with persuasive writing in Y5 and Y6. As with other text-types, discussion writing is not a discrete form and may well incorporate elements of recount and anecdote, instructions, explanations, and frequently, the use of persuasive language and argument.

Year 1, 2	Year 3, 4	Year 5, 6
<p>Invest time in structured discussion before attempting to learn a model text. Choose familiar issues, close to children's experience, with clear opposing points e.g. <i>Should we be allowed to keep animals in the classroom? Should we eat crisps at playtime?</i> Or choose a story with a simple dilemma e.g. <i>Should Goldilocks have eaten the porridge?</i> Discuss and note points on each side of the issue separately;</p> <p>Orally rehearse the arguments on each side, separately and list them <i>We should have crisps at playtime because...</i>, etc.</p> <p>Learn and retell prepared text on the issue that you have been discussing with</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a title: <i>Should we keep a animals in the classroom?</i> • an opening sentence to introduce the issue e.g. <i>We have been discussing whether we should...</i> • list points in favour e.g. <i>Some of us think we should keep animals in the classroom, Our reasons are:...</i>, • use numerical connectives <i>firstly, secondly etc.</i> • then change viewpoint e.g. <i>On the other hand...</i>, and list points against, • An ending e.g. <i>In conclusion/so, we think that...</i> etc. <p>Use this as a framework for discussion and shared writing of a different issue substituting new reasons. Keep ideas simple and straightforward to focus on balancing the argument.</p> <p>Use complete simple or compound sentences with correct punctuation. Write mostly in the present tense 1st person (I or We)</p> <p>Focus on a few essential connectives to join ideas and structure the argument:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>whether (or not)...</i>, to set out alternatives. • <i>But...</i>, <i>although...</i>, <i>on the other hand...</i> etc. to mark change of viewpoint; • <i>if...then...</i>, to show consequences e.g. <i>If we keep animals in the classroom, someone will have to look after them at the weekend...</i>; 	<p>Building on Y1/2 work</p> <p>Draw on a wider range of topics but still well within children's interests and experience e.g. from their own concerns e.g. <i>What's the point of wearing school uniform? Should children have mobile phones?</i> from fantasy topics <i>Do giant exist?</i>, from stories <i>Should Daleks be allowed to live on earth?</i></p> <p>Develop the framework from Y1/2, boxing the text up, to create connected paragraphs in place of simple sentences and lists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • opening paragraph to interest the reader in the topic e.g. <i>Since the arrival of the Daleks, there has been much discussion about whether...</i> • a series of points in favour in a connected paragraph, • a series of points against in a connected paragraph • a reasoned conclusion which can be justified by the arguments. <p>Use complex sentences to combine information, create emphasis and make the text more interesting for the reader:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relative clauses e.g. <i>Daleks, who are fearless and hard-working, are also...</i>, • subordinate clauses <i>While many people think this is a good thing, others believe... First they point to the fact that, when Daleks have previously visited, they always...</i>, etc., <p>Use generalised language to depersonalise and objectify the writing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • generalisers: <i>some, most, everyone,</i> • category nouns e.g. <i>people, animals, food, vehicles, vegetables.</i> <p>Use a variety of connecting words and phrases to guide the reader through the argument:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to set out alternatives and set the scene e.g. <i>to decide ... whether or not/ if we should/ where the/ either...or etc...</i>, • to add on and sequence ideas e.g. <i>The first reason..., also..., furthermore..., moreover...</i>, • to introduce a different viewpoint e.g. <i>However..., On the other hand..., many people also believe that...</i> • to conclude e.g. <i>In conclusion..., Having considered the arguments..., Looking at this from both sides...</i> <p>Use correct punctuation for sentences, clauses, questions, exclamations.</p>	<p>Building on Y5/6 work</p> <p>The framework for discussion writing introduced in Y3/4 should be practised and extended in Y5/6, with increasing emphasis on discussion writing across the curriculum. These are likely to be more abstract and outside children's immediate experience. Key areas include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PHSE e.g. <i>Should bullies be punished? Should boys and girls be taught separately?</i> • History e.g. <i>Should children have been evacuated in World War 2? Was King Alfred a hero or a bully?</i> • Geography e.g. <i>Should we burn wood for electricity? Is recycling a good idea?</i> • Science e.g. <i>Why should we have a balanced diet? Should we reduce air travel? Should we turn off street lights to save electricity?</i> • from stories- moral dilemmas <i>Should Danny help his father to take the pheasants?</i> <p>When assembling arguments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • try to support views with reasons or evidence, • or make clear that these are your opinions e.g. <i>I think... in my opinion...</i>, • or try to persuade – see below. <p>It is important to know the difference between these ways of arguing.</p> <p>Write openings to introduce the reader and explain why you are discussing an issue e.g. <i>Since last summer, people have been arguing about whether or not to build a new supermarket next door to our school. We think everyone should be clear about the reasons before a decision is made.</i></p> <p>Give examples which move from the general to the specific: <i>Most shoppers would agree that ... One lady who has shopped in the town for many years told us...</i></p> <p>Use indirect, reported speech e.g. <i>It has been said that..., the local policeman told us that...</i></p> <p>Vary sentence structure, length and type e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • complex sentences to combine and compress information: <i>Although the new store will be easier to drive to, it will cause traffic congestion around the school and increase the likelihood of accidents to children.</i> • Short sentences for effect e.g. <i>No-one wants this.</i> • Sentence openers: <i>interestingly..., from our point of view..., Indeed there could even be...</i>, • Passive voice to sound more formal: <i>It could be said that..., Additional disturbance would be created by...</i>

- Conditional and hypothetical (*if...then*) sentences using the subjunctive 'were' *If that's the best they can offer... If it were to be approved...*

Use persuasive devices to press points - see toolkit guidance for persuasive texts

Address readers directly from time to time to hold attention and draw them in to the arguments:

- inviting them to speculate *You may be wondering why...*
- asking questions e.g. *How would you like to meet one of these creatures on your way home...*
- using exclamations e.g. *...and they smell horrible!*
- Extend the range of connectives given in Y3/4 to link sentences and paragraphs interestingly, coherently and effectively. Including:
- addition: *also, furthermore, moreover, etc.*
- change of direction: *on the other hand, however, although, unfortunately, despite etc.*
- cause and effect: *so that..., owing to..., due to..., etc.*
- uncertainty: *perhaps, it is possible that..., another possible reason... etc.*
- comparison: *equally, similarly, just as..., in contrast, whereas etc.*
- Emphasis: *most/least of all..., importantly etc.*

Make views sound more reasonable through use of modal verbs e.g. *might/may/could be*, and words and phrases that leave room for alternative views or contrary facts e.g. *often/usually/commonly/mostly/tend to/are likely to...*

Use a variety of phrases for drawing conclusions e.g. *In conclusion..., to sum up..., Having considered..., In the light of..., given these arguments..., On the whole..., By and large..., In the circumstances..., All things considered...*

When you have finished, re-read and check you have been fair to both sides.