

Reading Informational Text

Ask Thick and Thin Questions

Common Core Standards

Reading: Informational Text—Key Ideas and Details, RI.3.1; Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity, RI.3.10–12.10

Reading: Foundational Skills—Fluency, RF.3.4–5.4

Speaking & Listening—Comprehension and Collaboration, SL.3.1–12.1

NOTE: *The examples in the chart for this activity are about a geography lesson but you can change them to reflect other topics and lessons.*

Explain to your students that there are two basic kinds of questions, which we can call *thin questions* and *thick questions*. Thin questions are based on facts, such as “How many legs does a spider have?” Thick questions often begin with “Why,” “How come,” or “Do you think?” For example, “Why is multiplying the opposite of dividing?” Thick questions may also ask for opinions, such as, “Why do you think archaeologists look for the trash pits of long-ago Indian tribes?” Thin questions can usually be answered with one word, a few words, or a few short sentences. Thick questions make readers think, come up with opinions, or research to find answers. They often require readers to infer, or draw their own conclusions. In some cases there is no right or wrong answer to a thick question. For example, a thin question might be “Which of the planets are mostly made of rock?” A thick question might be “Which of the planets do you think are the most interesting?” or “Should we send manned spacecraft to explore Mars? Why or why not?”

Draw a T-chart on the board with columns labeled “Thin Questions” and “Thick Questions.” Write examples of thin questions from the previous lesson. Explain why they are thin questions and ask students to think of other examples from material they have studied in the past few weeks (in any subject). Do the same for thick questions. See the model below for some examples about geography.

Thin Questions	Thick Questions
What is absolute location?	Why do people use absolute location?
What are the regions in your state?	Which region in your state do you think is the best to live in, and why?
How much has the polar ice cap melted in the last 30 years?	Why are many scientists worried about global warming?

Have students read the rest of the lesson individually or in pairs. As they read, students will make a two-column list of thick and thin questions—at least one thick question and one thin question per section. When they are finished,

invite students to share their best questions and discuss possible answers with the class.

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

The reading activity can be differentiated in the following ways to accommodate students of varying abilities.

STRUGGLING LEARNERS

After modeling thick and thin questions as described above, distribute two colors of index cards to your students. Then read the first 3–4 sections of the lesson as a class. Ask your students to write down questions on colored index cards that come up as you read together. Students should write thin questions on one color of index card and thick questions on another color of card. Create a T-chart on the board with one side labeled “Thick Questions” and the other side labeled “Thin Questions.” Stop reading at the end of each section and choose students to tape question card on the board under the correct headings. Students should explain why they think the questions belong under those headings. Help them refine their thinking about thick and thin questions as they work.

Next, assign students to read the rest of the lesson with a partner, still using the colored cards to record thick and thin questions. Let them know that they should write at least one thick question and one thin question for each section. When they are finished, meet again as a class. This time tell them to choose one question they know is thick or thin and one question they’re not sure about. Discuss these as a class and have students put them on the board in the correct categories.

GIFTED LEARNERS

Once students have completed the activities described above, have them work independently to change all of their questions. If the question is thin, students should rewrite it as a thick question. If the question is thick, students should rewrite it as a thin question. Give students time to compare their new questions with a partner. Then have each student read one of their revised questions to the class. The other students will try to determine the original question. Discuss the questions and their usefulness.