

Speculating with Key Words

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Two critical factors in the reading of informational text is for learners to use their existing knowledge of the subject and read with purpose and focus. The Key Word strategy is designed to maximize these two important ingredients.

From the text students are about to read, select 5-10 items that relate to the topic and can be associated with one another in different ways. Tell students all the items have something to do with the topic. Have them work in groups to decide how they think the terms relate to the topic and to each other. Tell them you don't expect them to know the answers and that they should just decide what makes sense to them. Allow time for groups to share and debate points of view. Avoid giving hints as to the right answers. Instead, let students know they're simply expected to form hypotheses, and explain their reasoning. Students don't need topic-specific information to speculate; *being right isn't the point*. Ask probing questions like these to encourage careful thought and promote debate while not giving the correct answers away:

I know you don't know for sure, but what do you think?
That's an interesting idea. Why do you think that?
In your opinion, how does ___ relate to ___?
What led you to make that connection?

After reading [the text](#), students look at the terms again and tell or write about how their thinking has changed. Use prompts like these to encourage review and reflection:

What did you learn?
What was the most interesting or surprising thing you learned?
What do you understand now that you didn't understand before?
What do you think are the most important things to remember about this topic?
Is there anything you still find confusing?
What questions do you still have about this topic?

Students can be invited to write a brief summary of what they read, using the terms in the array and expressing the information in their own words.

Why use this strategy?

- The pre-reading discussion encourages divergent thinking.
- Hypothesizing arouses curiosity, a powerful motivator.
- Students don't just recall what they know, they *use* what they know to form hypotheses.
- Speculating and justifying hypotheses requires careful reasoning.
- Listening to and evaluating others' hypotheses develops critical thinking.
- Speculating is often fun, improving the climate for learning.
- Tentative thoughts serve as hypotheses that are then tested by reading.
- Comprehension is enhanced because reading is highly purposeful and the correct information seems especially salient to the students.
- The post-reading discussion is focused and purposeful; it will include but go beyond the initial set of words.

An Example

love starving Alaska food
EARLY CALIFORNIA
otters Nicolai 1842
Concepción Spanish governor

Early California

In 1806, a Russian official named Nicolai Rezanov came to Alaska to check on the Russian settlements. Russians had come there to hunt for otters, but the short growing season and harsh climate prevented them from growing enough food. They were almost starving. Quickly, Rezanov sailed south on a food-buying mission, presented himself to the governor of San Francisco, and explained the situation. The governor, like many Spanish Californians, didn't like the growing numbers of Russians who were hunting along the coast and refused to help.

While staying in San Francisco, Rezanov met Concepción Arguello, the 16-year-old daughter of a Spanish officer. Nicholai and Concepción fell deeply in love and became engaged. Concepción pleaded with the governor to help her fiancé, and at last the governor gave permission for Rezanov to buy food.

Vowing to return as soon as possible, Rezanov bid farewell to Concepción. He sailed back to Alaska with the food and then on to Russia to report to his government. Concepción waited for Rezanov to return, refusing all other offers of marriage. Forty years after their betrothal, she learned that he had been killed in an accident on the journey back to Russia. She joined a religious order and devoted the rest of her life to helping the poor.

Less than ten years after Rezanov left San Francisco, another group of Russians came from Alaska to set up a trading post in California and grow food for the Russians in Alaska. They chose a site near Bodega Bay—on the coast about fifty miles north of San Francisco. There they built a sturdy compound which they called Fort Ross. The name was based on the word *Rossiya*, the Russians' name for their country.

The settlers at Fort Ross had many difficulties. Their crops did not thrive, and the San Franciscans did not like having a Russian fort so near. But when the Russians left in 1842, it was neither scarce food nor wary Spaniards that drove them away. The otters did. Rather, it was the lack of them. Such great numbers of the animals had been killed for their fur that there were not enough left to sustain a profitable fur trade. (The playful creatures did survive these years. They can often be seen today among the kelp plants in California coastal waters.)

Fort Ross still stands on a high bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The fort and the name of a nearby river, the Russian River, are reminders of the onetime presence in California of the people of Rossiya.

This text was created with information from several sources.