# Making Reading Fun: Engaging Pre-Reading Activities for ELLs

Pre-reading tasks allow students to draw on their own knowledge and experiences, create connections, and familiarize themselves with relevant vocabulary before beginning a text. Excitement for reading builds as students form questions and gain insights.

In this session, we will:

- learn why pre-reading activities are beneficial.
- explore student-centered pre-reading activities that can be easily modified for any age group, class size, skill level, or technology access level.
- discover how to adapt fun and effective pre-reading activities to help all of your students get excited about reading!

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Ami holds an MA in TESOL from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls and a BA in Theatre from Northwestern College. Her interests include rhetoric and writing, English for professional purposes, technology in education, and finding new ways to foster student engagement.

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# Making Reading Fun

## Engaging Pre-Reading Activities for ELLs

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# Goals

To explain why pre-reading activities are beneficial for students

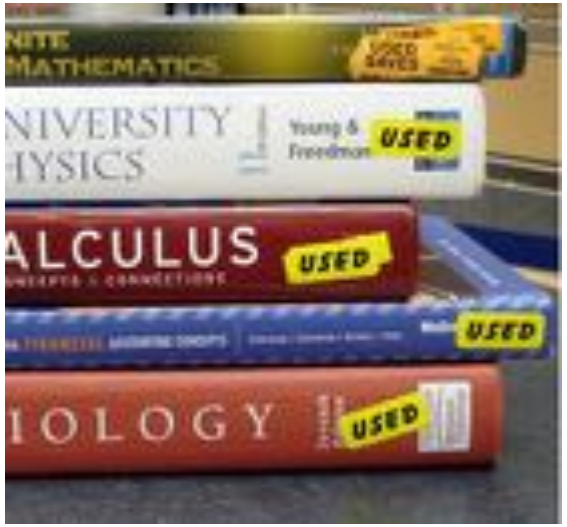
To share activities that can be easily adapted for any classroom

To inspire you to try out some new activities in your classroom

# What kinds of texts do your students read in their daily lives?

NewScientist
33 REASONS WE CAN'T THINK CLEARLY ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

THIS IS A DESIGNER T-SHIRT.
(IT USES HELVETICA AND IS BLACK.)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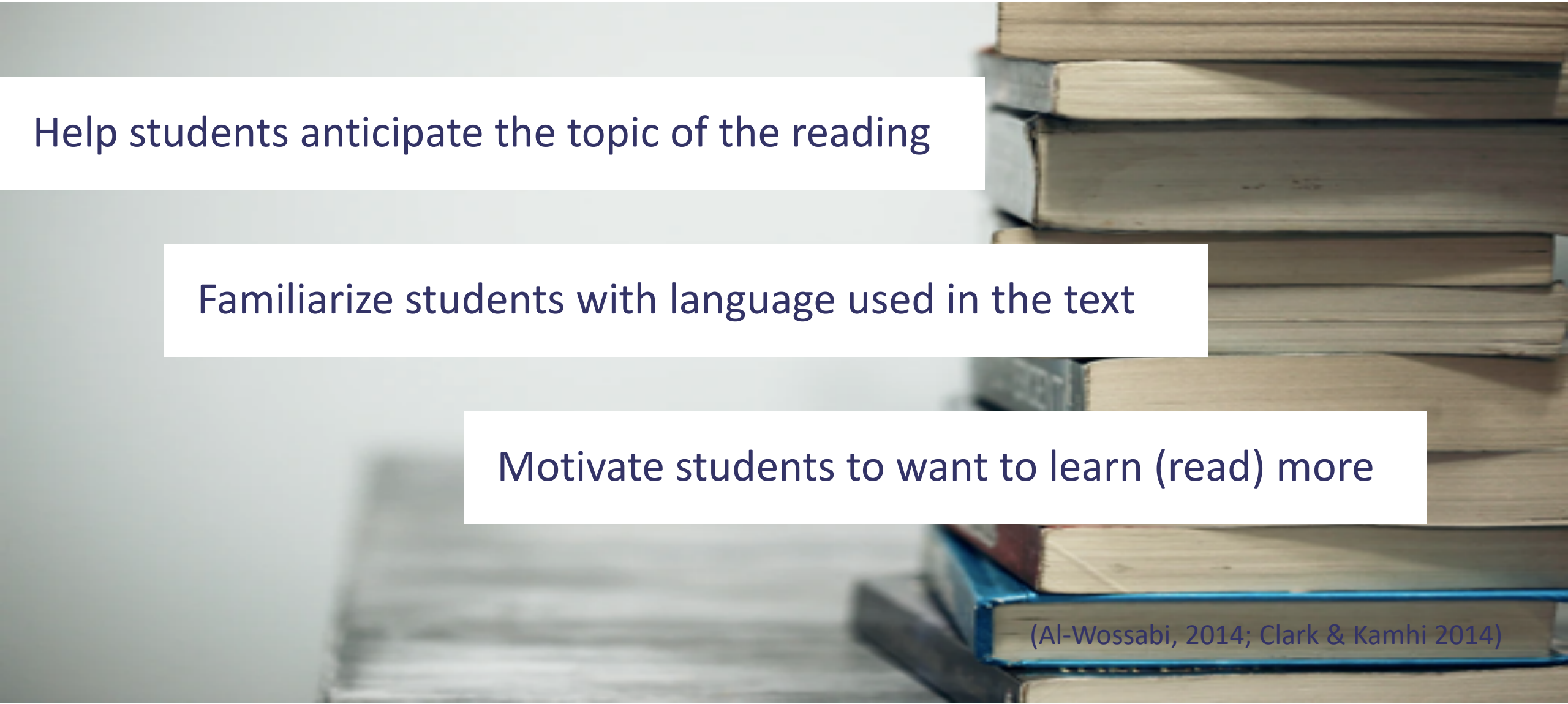
# What are pre-reading activities?

"All of the things that you do, before you start reading, to increase your capacity to understand the material."

(Austin, 2007)

# Why are they important?

# Benefits of Pre-Reading Activities



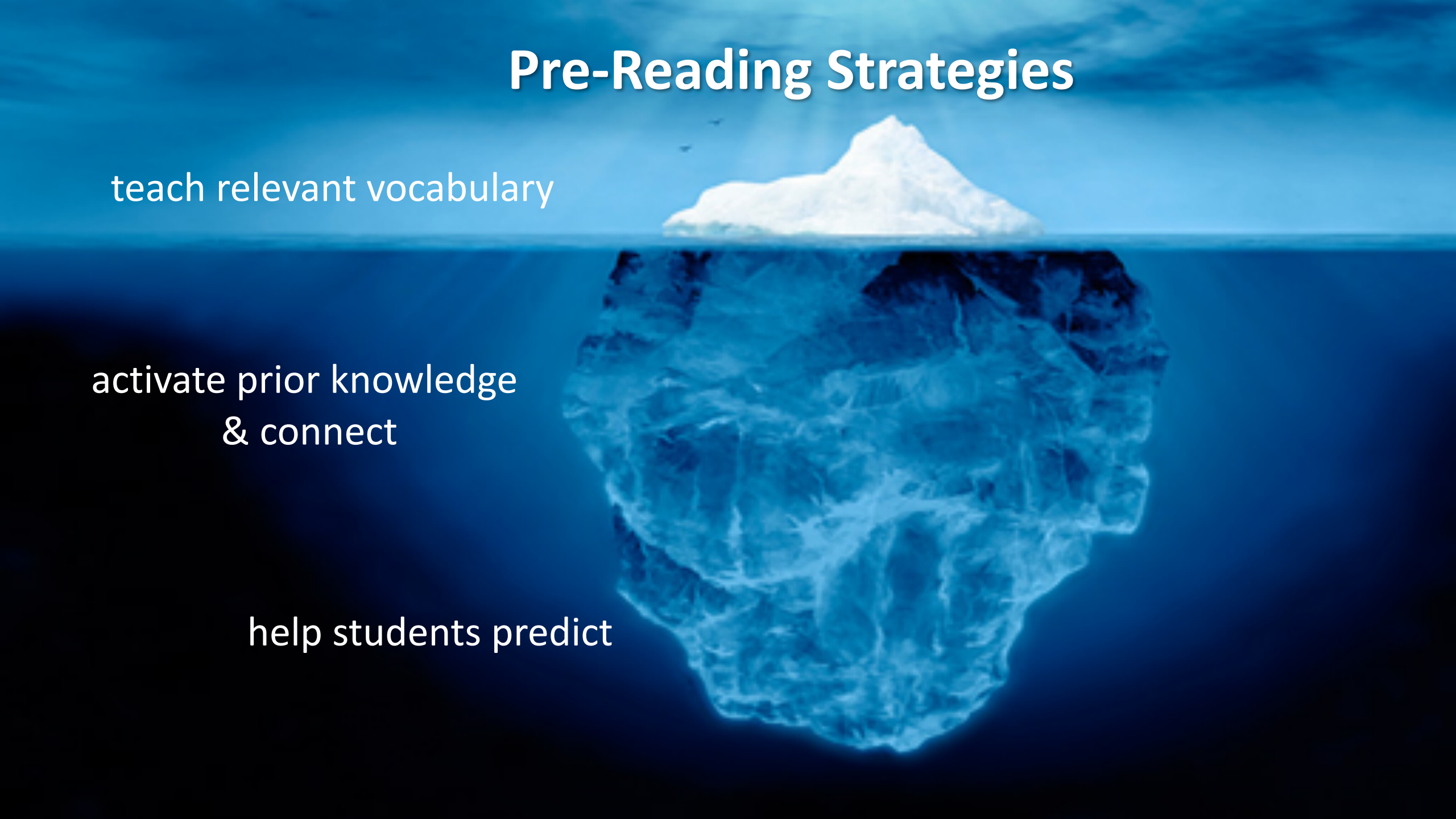
Help students anticipate the topic of the reading

Familiarize students with language used in the text

Motivate students to want to learn (read) more

(Al-Wossabi, 2014; Clark & Kamhi 2014)

# Pre-Reading Strategies

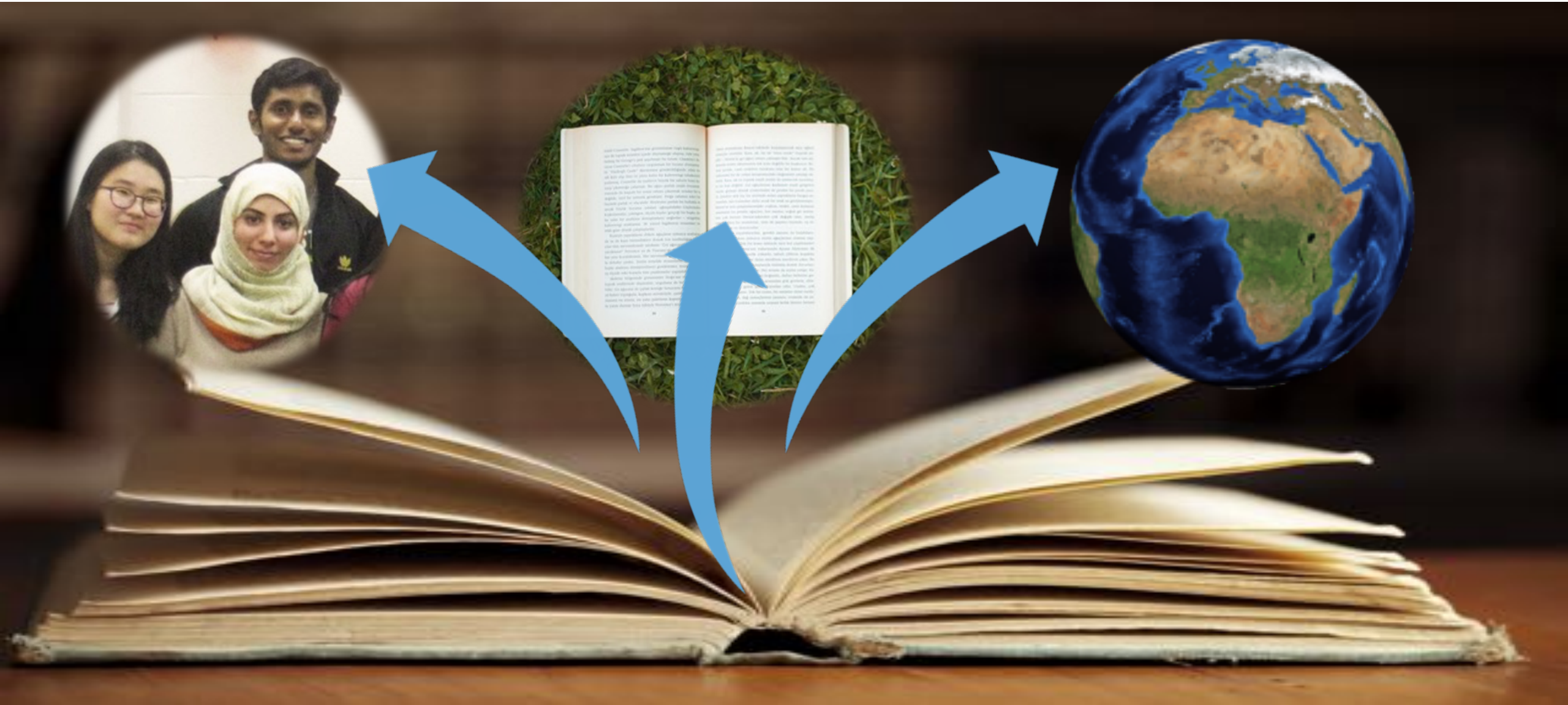


teach relevant vocabulary

activate prior knowledge
& connect

help students predict

# We want our students to connect with the reading.



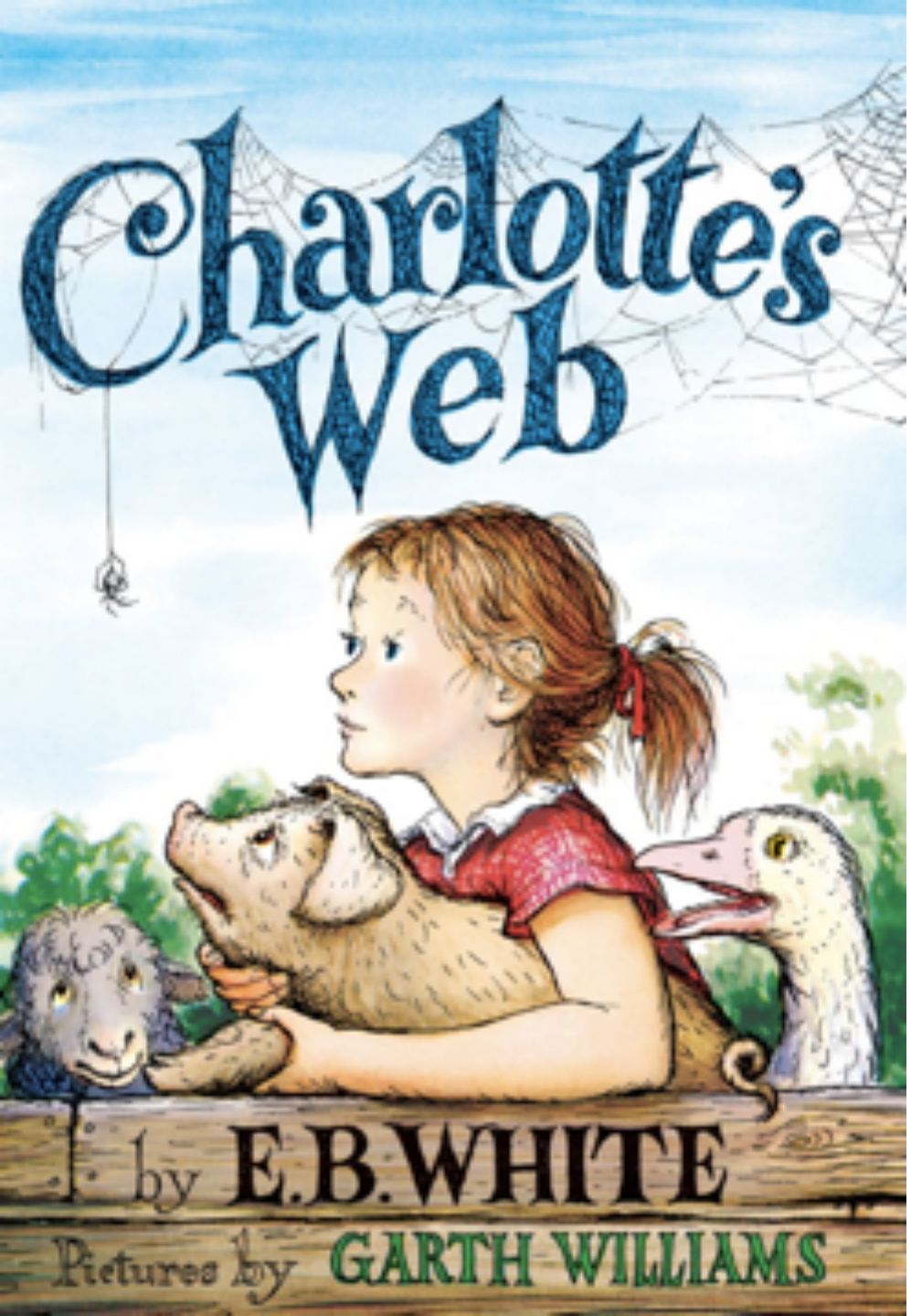
# 3 Pre-Reading Activities

1. What do you know about . . . ?

2. Stand Where You Stand

3. Tossing Lines

(Berkley, 2010; O'Brien, 1993)




***Charlotte's Web*** is the story of a little girl named Fern, who loves a farm pig named Wilbur. With the help of a talented spider, Charlotte, Fern and the farm animals make plans to save their friend Wilbur.

# 1. What do you know about . . . ?

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(activating background knowledge beginners; words and phrases)

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(activating background knowledge; beginners; words and phrases)

Ask students to walk around the room and look at each picture.

Ask students to write anything they know about the picture.

# What words or phrases would you use to describe these pictures?

red
barn
fence
farm

web
spider
don't like
scary

# 1. What do you know about . . . ?

(activating background knowledge; advanced; sentence-level writing; grammar variation)

Ask students to write complete compound sentences about each picture.

- My mother grew up on a chicken farm, and she worked hard.
- Baby farm animals are cute, but they grow up fast.

# 1. What do you know about . . . ?

(no-tech)

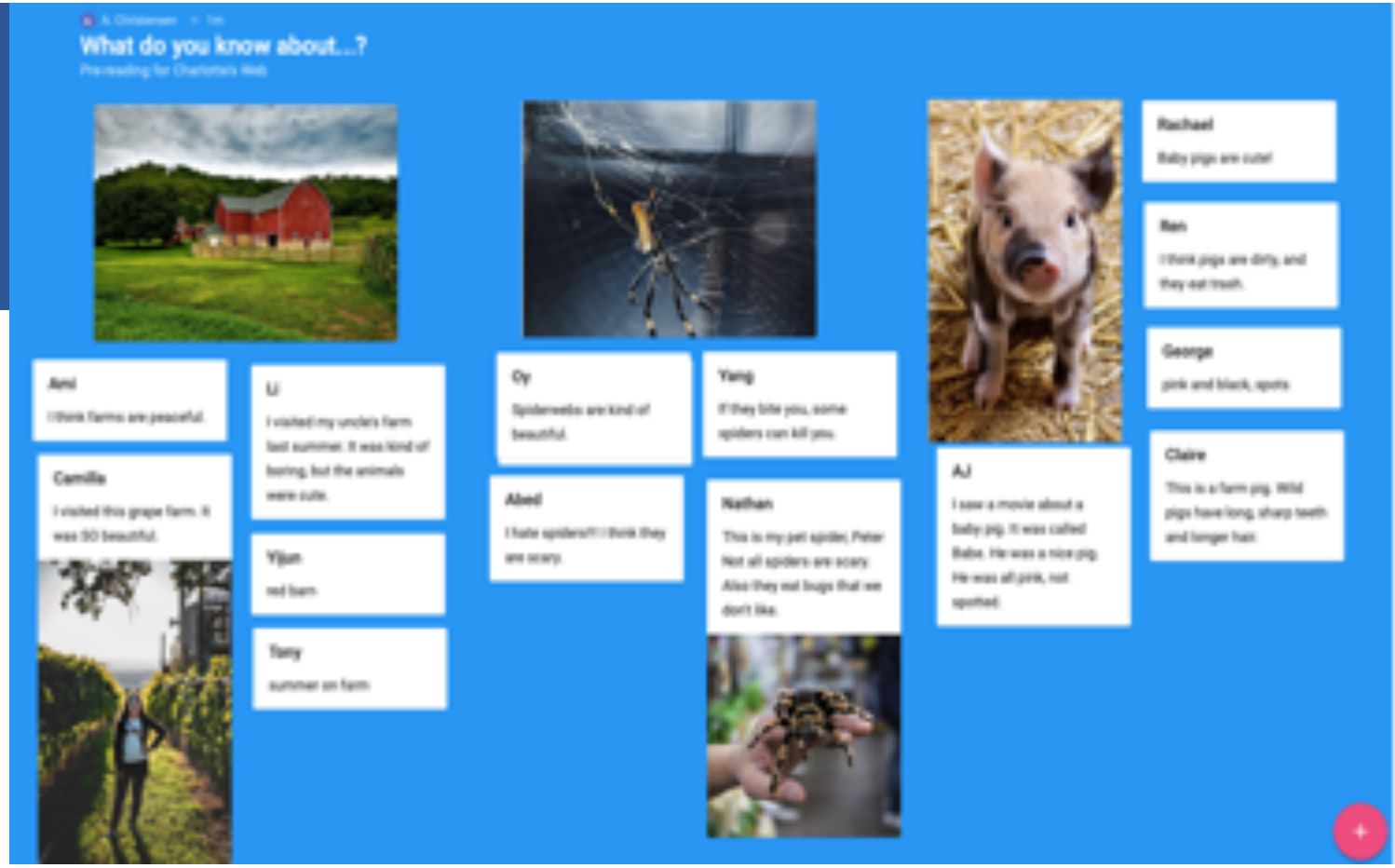
Give students a word, phrase, or sentence.

Ask students to draw where they would use that word or phrase, or list what they know about it.

# 1. What do you know about . . . ?

(high-tech or online classes)

Use an online app, like Diigo, Padlet, or Wakelet.



A. Christensen + Tim

# What do you know about...?

Pre-reading for Charlotte's Web

**Ami**

I think farms are peaceful.

**Camilla**

I visited this grape farm. It was SO beautiful.

**Li**

I visited my uncle's farm last summer. It was kind of boring, but the animals were cute.

**Yijun**

red barn

**Tony**

summer on farm

**Oy**

Spiderwebs are kind of beautiful.

**Abed**

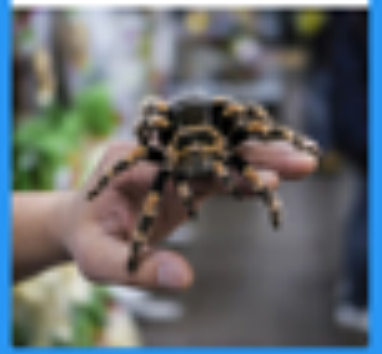
I hate spiders!!! I think they are scary.

**Yang**

If they bite you, some spiders can kill you.

**Nathan**

This is my pet spider, Peter. Not all spiders are scary. Also they eat bugs that we don't like.



**AJ**

I saw a movie about a baby pig. It was called Babe. He was a nice pig. He was all pink, not spotted.

**Rachael**

Baby pigs are cute!

**Ren**

I think pigs are dirty, and they eat trash.

**George**

pink and black, spots

**Claire**

This is a farm pig. Wild pigs have long, sharp teeth and longer hair.

# 2. Stand Where You Stand

# 2. Stand Where You Stand

(connecting to topic; beginners; simple sentences)

Make a simple statement related to the topic of the reading.

Ask students to stand together based on which group fits their level of agreement.

strongly disagree

disagree

Pigs are very smart.

strongly agree

agree

# 2. Stand Where You Stand

(connecting to topic; advanced; supporting ideas)

Ask students to explain their choices.

If other students change their positions based on arguments presented, they move to that group.

# 2. Stand Where You Stand

(connecting to topic; simple grammar variation)

Ask students a question of frequency.

Ask students to stand together based on which group fits their answer.

Ask individual students or the group to answer using an adverb of frequency.

every day

often

# How often do you feed animals?

never

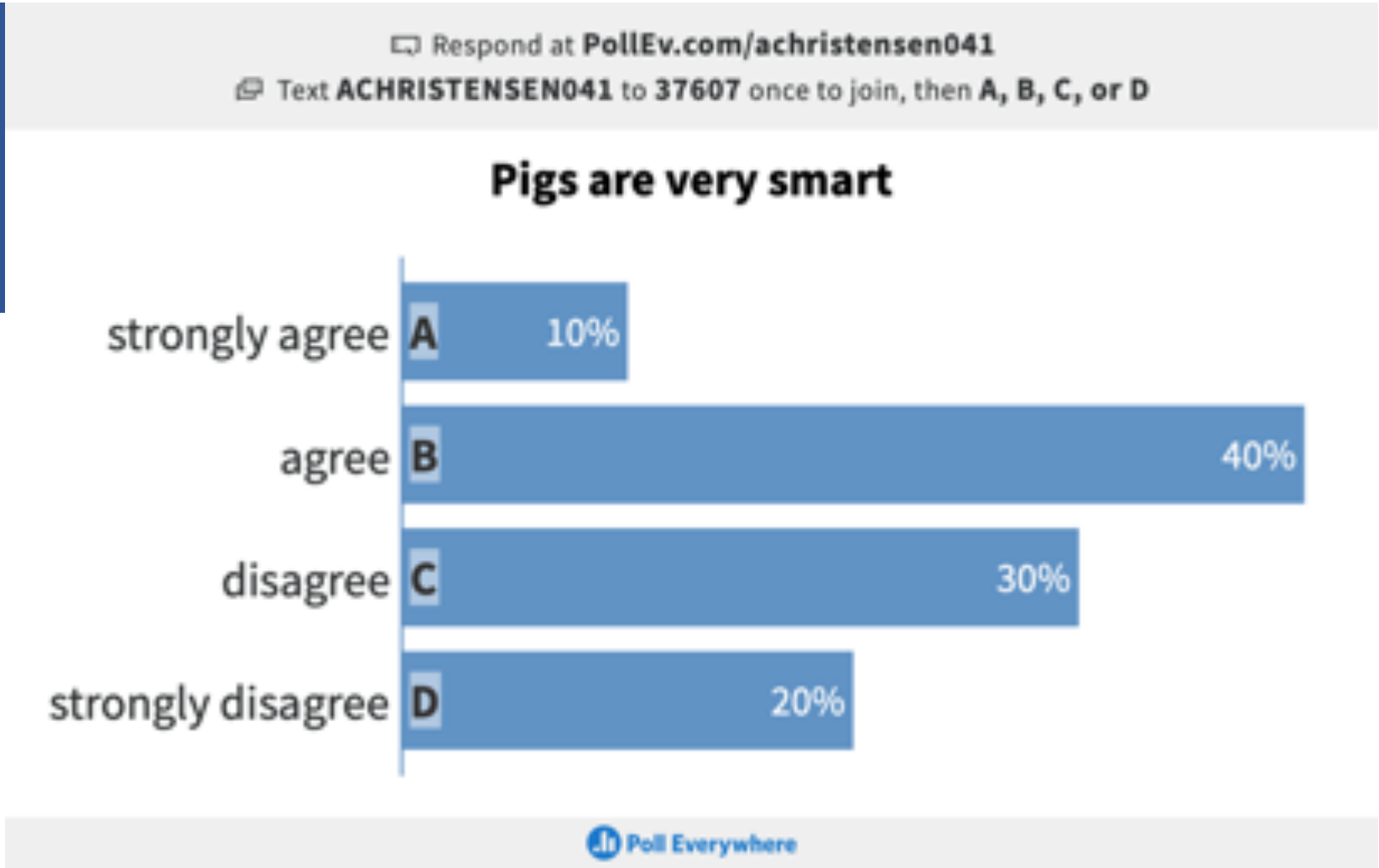
sometimes

I sometimes feed animals.

# 2. Stand Where You Stand

(high-tech or online classes)

Use an app like Kahoot or Poll Everywhere to survey students.



# What topics are students reading about in your classes?

# 3. Tossing Lines

# Find detailed instructions for this activity on the Ning.

Tossing Lines – **Charlotte's Web**

**Objective**
The purpose of this activity is to familiarize students with *Charlotte's Web* by exposing them to lines of dialogue spoken by characters in the story. Based on these lines, students are to make predictions about the story's characters and central conflicts and discuss these predictions with the rest of the class. This activity helps students form questions, gain insight, and build excitement for meeting the characters and reading these lines in the story. This activity serves the students best if completed before they read the story.

**Time Allotted**
20-30 minutes

**Materials**
- Tennis ball, hacky sack, or small stuffed animal
- Ten slips of paper, cut from Tossing Lines Resource on the following page

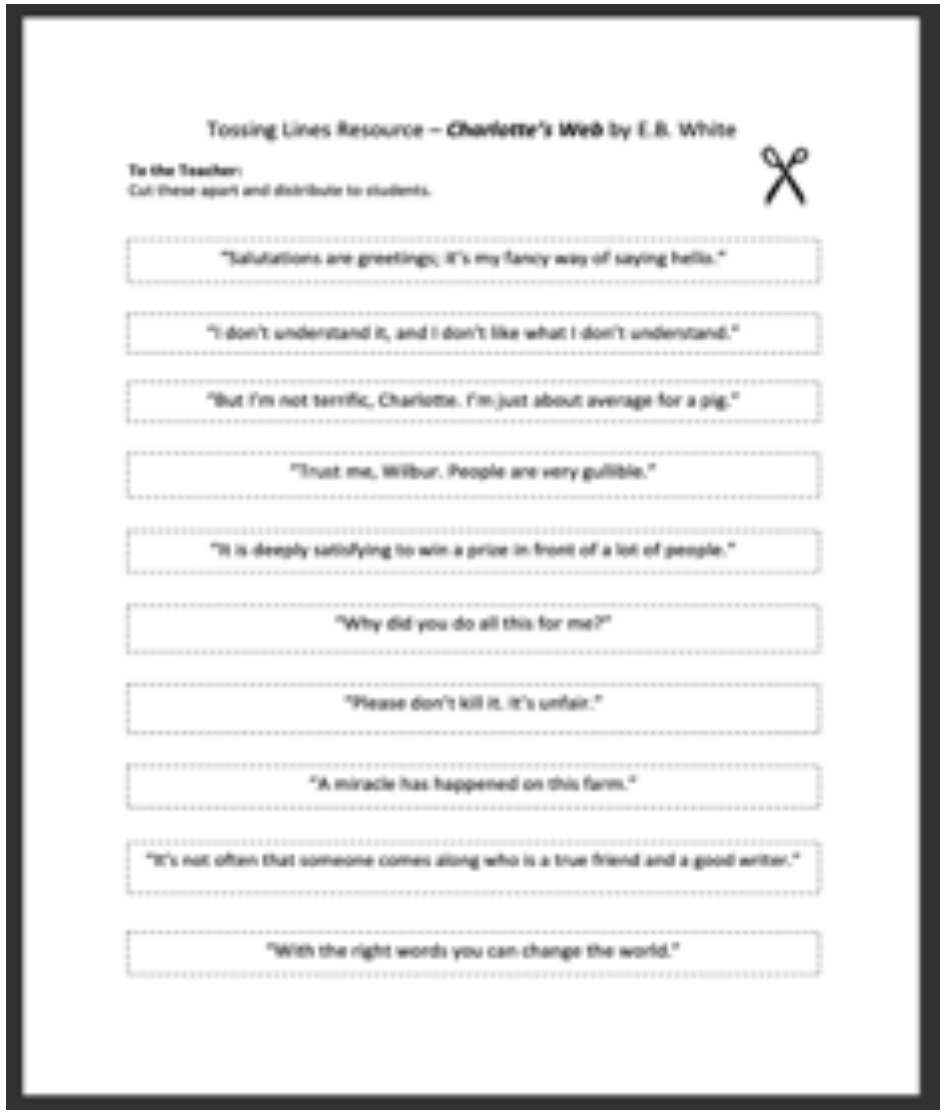
**Procedure**
Cut out the slips of paper printed on the following page and distribute them to ten volunteers. Give students a few minutes (or overnight, if appropriate) to memorize or practice their lines. When they're ready, have these ten students form a circle and give one student the ball. After she speaks her line, the student tosses the ball to another student who speaks her assigned line. Students toss the ball throughout the circle until all lines have been heard a few times. Encourage students to speak lines with varying emotions, seeking out a variety of ways to perform the lines.

**Optional**
Re-assign lines within the group (or to other students in the classroom) and continue for another round.

**Writing/Discussion**
After lines have been tossed, allow students five minutes to write their ideas and questions about the content of the story. The following questions may be used to guide writing and/or discussion.

1. What mood do these lines create?
2. Predict what the story might be about.
3. What can you tell about the characters?
4. Describe a possible theme in the story.
5. What types of conflict do you think will occur? Why?

Adapted from Peggy O'Brien's *Shakespeare Set Free* (1993) pg. 45



Tossing Lines Resource – ***Charlotte's Web*** by E.B. White

**To the Teacher:**
Cut these apart and distribute to students.

"Salutations are greetings; it's my fancy way of saying hello."

"I don't understand it, and I don't like what I don't understand."

"But I'm not terrific, Charlotte. I'm just about average for a pig."

"Trust me, Wilbur. People are very gullible."

"It is deeply satisfying to win a prize in front of a lot of people."

"Why did you do all this for me?"

"Please don't kill it. It's unfair."

"A miracle has happened on this farm."

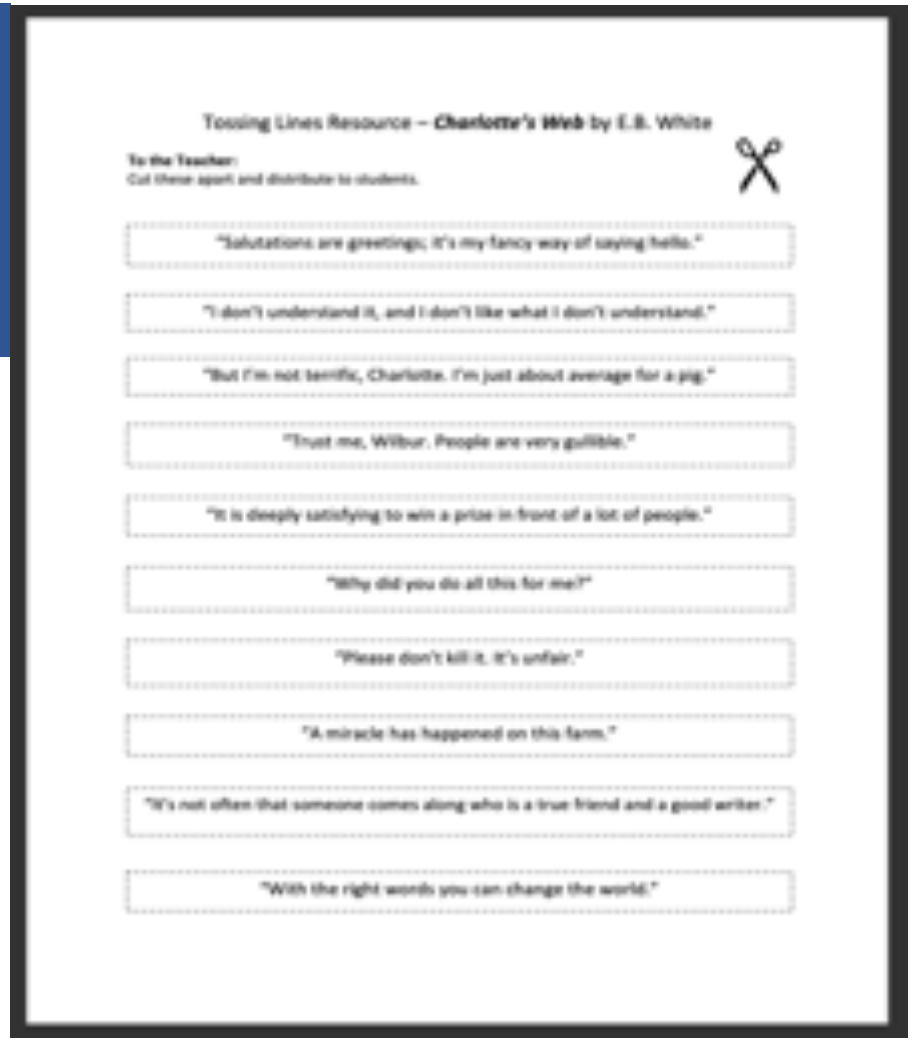
"It's not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer."

"With the right words you can change the world."

# 3. Tossing Lines

(getting familiar with language used in text)

Step 1 - Select key lines from the text. Create sentence strips and distribute them to students.



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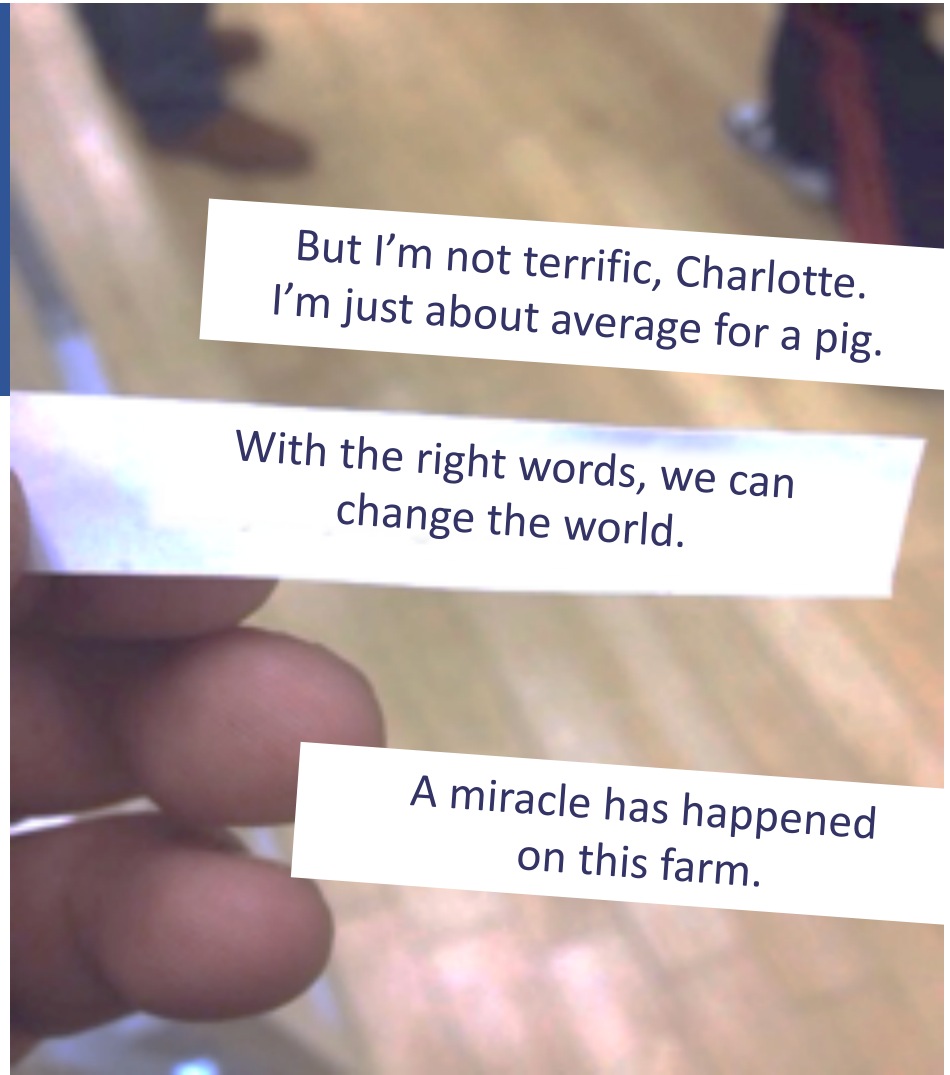
# 3. Tossing Lines

(getting familiar with language used in text)

Step 2 - Give students a few minutes (or overnight, if appropriate) to memorize and practice their lines.



# 3. Tossing Lines

(getting familiar with language used in text)

Step 3 – Ask students to form a circle and give one student a ball.

After she speaks her line, the student passes the ball to another student.

# 3. Tossing Lines

(getting familiar with language used in text)

Step 4 – Students toss the ball throughout the circle until all lines have been heard a few times.

# 3. Tossing Lines

(familiarize students with language used in text; beginners)

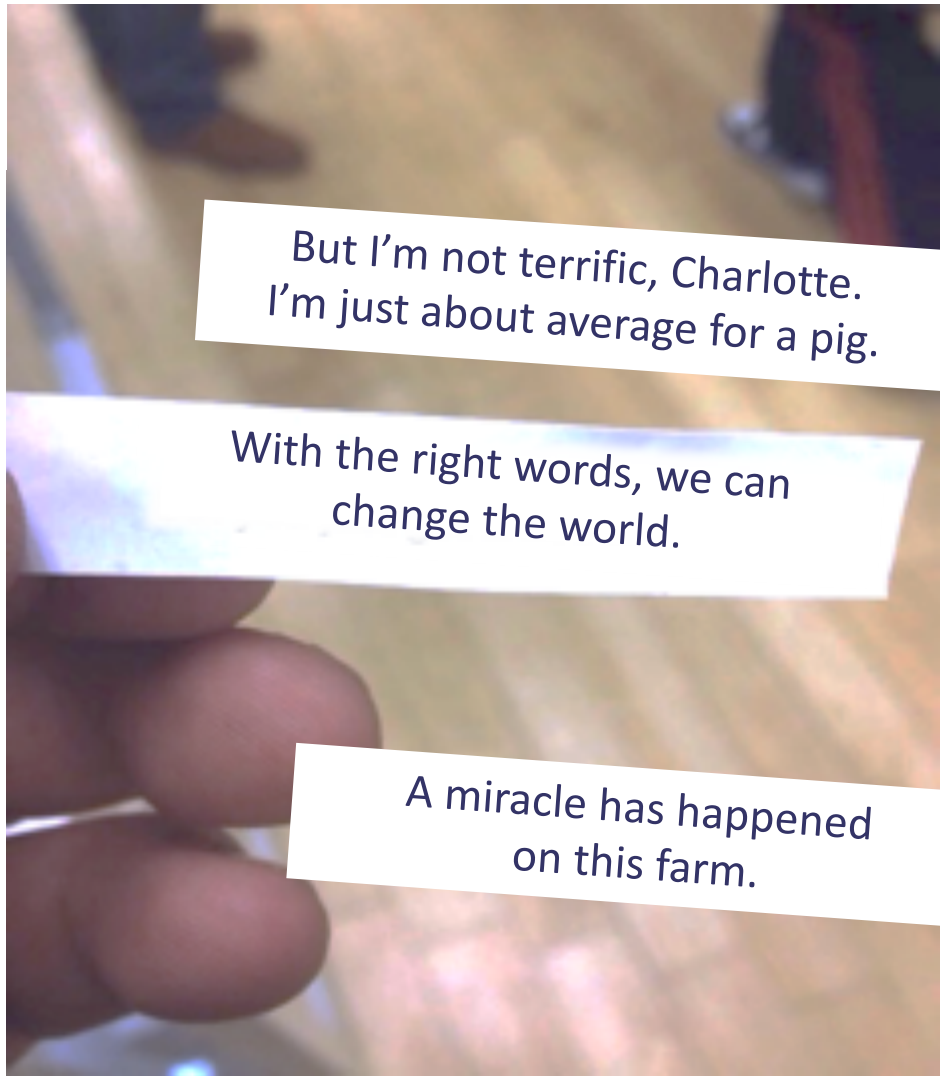
Students toss single words, or all students use the same 1-2 simple sentences.

# 3. Tossing Lines

(familiarize students with language used in text; advanced)

Encourage students to speak lines with varying emotions, seeking out ways to perform the lines.

# What are some new ways students could say these lines?



# 3. Tossing Lines

(familiarize students with language used in text; predict)

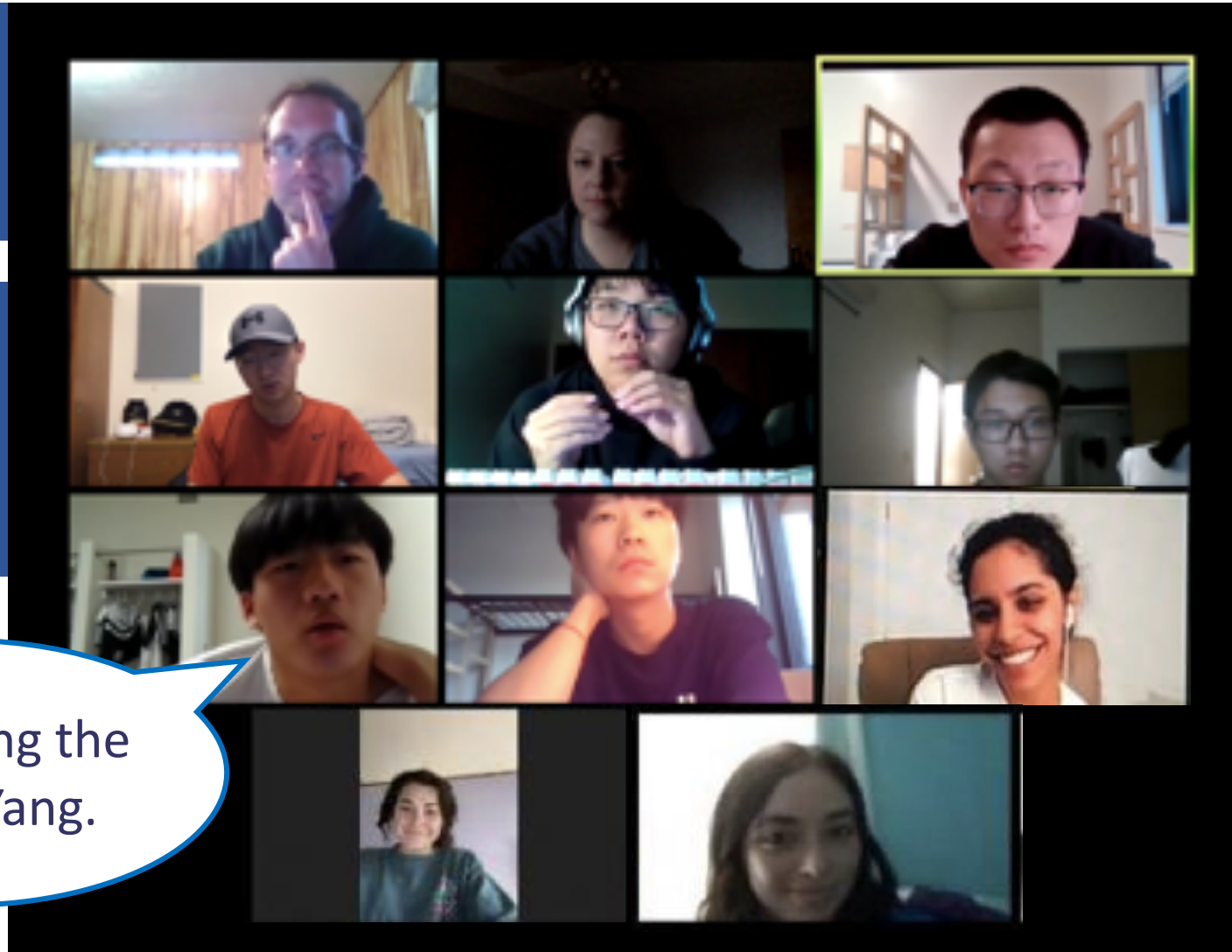
After lines have been tossed, give students 5 minutes to write their ideas and questions about the content of the reading.

# 3. Tossing Lines

(high tech. or online classes)

Use a meeting app, like Zoom, for a live online class.

After saying his line, ask the student to verbally toss the ball to another student.



# 3 Pre-Reading Activities

1. What do you know about . . . ?

2. Stand Where You Stand

3. Tossing Lines

# Which activity will you try in your classroom?

What Do You Know About…?

Stand Where You Stand

Tossing Lines

**Pre-reading activities help our students connect to the text.**

**They help students anticipate the topic of the reading.**

They familiarize students with language from the text.

They motivate students to want to learn more.

# Pre-reading activities are fun!

# References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# Reflection Questions

1. Why are pre-reading tasks especially important for English Language Learners (ELLs)?
2. Consider what makes pre-reading activities and tasks successful. What aspects are important to consider when planning a pre-reading activity for your students?
3. How might you adapt the pre-reading activities presented today to be successful in your classroom context?

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