INTRODUCING THIN AND THICK QUESTIONS

Note: If small-group guided reading is a regular routine for your students, the introduction to thin and thick questions could be done in that setting. However, carrying out the following steps is also viable in a whole-group setting.

1. Let students know that they can ask questions for many different reasons. Before reading a text, perhaps they are curious about something they might find out. During reading, asking questions can help them stay engaged with difficult or unfamiliar material. Stress the importance of stopping to consider what has been read along the way and let them know that turning the information into questions—even questions that they already know the answers to—leads them to reflect on and better comprehend what has been read.

2. Introduce the idea of two different types of questions: thin (or factual) and thick (or inferential). Describe thin questions as ones whose answers can be found in the text and that can be answered with a few words or short sentences. Describe thick questions as ones that readers have to think about more fully since the answers come from one’s head, not solely from the text. Let students know that answers to thick questions are open to argument, but that the text should support the answer and, again, one’s own reasoning comes into play.

3. Display the T-chart that you prepared with the columns labeled as ‘Thin’ and ‘Thick.’ Write a sample thin question in that column of the T-chart. Develop a question from a text your students already know, preferably one you have read recently. If, for example, you have read a Captain Underpants book by Dav Pilkey, a thin question could be: ‘Who is Captain Underpants?’ (Answer: Mr. Krupp, the principal)

4. Have students state more thin questions based on their knowledge of the book you have chosen. As you proceed, let other students answer the questions and discuss with students why these questions are thin ones.

Point out that some thin questions may only have one answer, such as ‘Which legs do frogs use to jump?’ (Answer: The rear) Some, however, can have multiple answers, such as ‘What are the colors of some frogs?’ (Possible answers: Green, yellow, spotted, etc.)

5. Next, pose a thick question to the students. A good practice here is to change a thin question into a thick one. For instance, one could change the thin question ‘Who is Captain Underpants?’ into ‘Why is the principal Captain Underpants so funny?’ [Two possible answers: 1) Principals don’t usually come to school in their underwear 2) It is funny to see a character who is normally an authority figure become ridiculous]

You might ask how we know that these are truly thick questions. With both sample responses, the answer is not found completely in the book; rather, the person answering the question would have to
form an opinion or offer support in order to answer it.

6. Accept thick questions from students and allow other students to answer them. Make sure that students see that they are expressing something of their own mind for thick answers, not just recalling facts as they did with thin questions.

7. Post the list of question words near the T-chart for easy reference during the read-aloud.

8. Let students know they should write questions on sticky notes (one question per sticky note) as you read aloud. Students are not to interrupt the reading with oral questions at this sitting, just to listen and write their questions.

Since they have some experience with thin and thick questions from the previous activity, they should be able to differentiate between the two types of questions; however, it is normally more difficult for students to compose thick questions initially as opposed to thin ones. Remind them that they can try changing their thin questions into thick ones.

9. Begin the read-aloud, pausing from time to time to model for students your thinking when you have a question about an important point in the material.

10. After the read-aloud, have students place their sticky notes on the T-chart under the appropriate headings and explain to the group what their questions are and why they are thin or thick. Remind students to make up their minds before they approach the chart, possibly writing ‘thin’ or ‘thick’ at the top of the sticky beforehand.

11. Have students give feedback to see if they agree with where classmates put the thin or thick questions (pointing thumbs up or down works well here). If repeated questions come up, organize them in groups so that when questions are answered, entire groups are addressed.

It is not necessary to answer all the questions at this time. The primary purpose of generating questions is to give students practice in forming questions, hearing the questions of their classmates, and giving and receiving feedback.

Source: http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/questioning-comprehension-strategy-small-408.html