Accountable Talk® discussions, particularly those that ask students to develop, support, and defend their own interpretations to literature, don’t happen spontaneously. There’s a great deal of advance planning to be done when we want students to talk with each other about their interpretations to texts. One of the most crucial aspects of that planning includes selecting the right text.

When we select texts to read and discuss with students, we want texts that are relevant and engaging—texts that can enrich students, make them want to be readers, and provide them with opportunities to wrestle with complex ideas and writing. We want to engage students in discussions that allow them to practice creating text-based interpretations and discussion protocols that we use when we talk with others about literature.

We also want to make sure that the texts we select link to the state or national standards and provide opportunities for students to develop the knowledge and skills set forth in the standards. But only using those criteria to select texts is not enough. In order for students to develop, support and defend their own interpretations to literature, the texts that we read with them must be open to multiple interpretations. In other words, we need to select texts in which certain aspects of them such as the relationships between characters, character motivations, themes, meanings of quotations, or issues of race, class, and gender are not explicit or explained away. We need to select texts that allow discussion leaders to pose questions for which there are multiple and varied interpretations that can be argued from evidence in the text. Narratives, for instance, that are straightforward with no headroom or ambiguity provide little room for students to develop their own interpretations.

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Generally, the complexity of the topic or theme of a text has little to do with whether it is able to support multiple interpretations. For instance, "Marigolds," a widely anthologized short story by Eugenia Collier, is an engaging text that deals with complex topics like poverty and despair. The narrative centers on an incident in the life of a poor, African-American teenage girl living during the Great Depression. The adult narrator recounts the time she destroyed her neighbor's marigolds after hearing her father crying about losing his job. The narrator described these marigolds as a "brilliant splash of sunny yellow against the dust" of her youth. There is a great deal to admire (and talk about) in the events, themes, and figurative language in this story, but there is little opportunity for multiple interpretations. Collier explicitly explains her ideas about the marigolds and the characters' motivations or concerns. Because of this, readers have very little room to imagine, for instance, what the marigolds stand for or what the themes might be.

Characteristics of Literary Texts That Open Them to Multiple Interpretations

Research tells us that the more implicit the relationship between ideas in a text, the more the text allows readers to create their own understandings and interpretations. Junior Great Books promotes a popular discussion technique that sums up text selection by saying that texts for discussion should be "rich in ideas" and ones "in which the author's meaning is not explicit."

Texts that are open to multiple interpretations typically have some of the following characteristics:

- Debatable central conflicts
- Unresolved conflicts or tensions
- Complex problems without clear right or wrong answers
- Some ambiguity in the author's representations of the characters, character motivations, subjects, themes, settings, race, class, and gender
- Ambiguous endings
- Complex or unique ways of using language (e.g., recurring images or symbols, unique or unclear comparisons)
- Unconventional uses of genre conventions (e.g., flashbacks, flash-forwards)
- Unique points of view (e.g., narrator is outside the action, unreliable narrator)
It's important to keep in mind that narrative texts that are open to multiple interpretations will not have all of these characteristics; in fact, they may just have one or two. Additionally, there are levels or degrees of interpretation.

To test if the text is open to multiple interpretations, try to come up with a question that allows for multiple, varied responses that can be supported with textual evidence based on the characteristics that you identified. Pose the question to your colleagues and see what they have to say in response to it. If you can come up with a question that prompts multiple, varied responses grounded in textual evidence, then you've got a question for a text that is open to multiple interpretations and good for a rich discussion.