

Using Big Questions

Motivating and Engaging Students

National Geographic *Panorama* units are each framed around a Big Question. A Big Question is provocative. It evokes multiple responses and perspectives, and makes discussion and reading more purposeful.

A Big Question does not have a simple answer. It is rich. It motivates students to tell what they know, but it also encourages them to find out more. It solidifies students and teachers into a community of learners with a common goal of investigating and building layers of comprehension.

Each book that students read in the unit is a new lens from which to look at the Big Question. Each Big Question discussion expands meaning as students learn about their classmates' and teachers' unique ideas, viewpoints, and what they have gleaned from reading and writing.

With a thought-provoking question guiding them, students are motivated. They use conversation and reading as tools to expand and grow ideas (Cervetti & Pearson, 2012). When students have a question to explore, they read and talk more. They benefit when inquiry is at the center of learning.

Furthermore, when students are reading because they are curious about a topic or want to understand a concept, they are more likely to acquire a deeper understanding of the text than those students who are reading simply to complete an assignment or be rewarded for good performance. (Guthrie et al, 1996) Having a Big Question that piques their curiosity will encourage students' comprehension and quest for answers in the text and through dialogue with their peers.

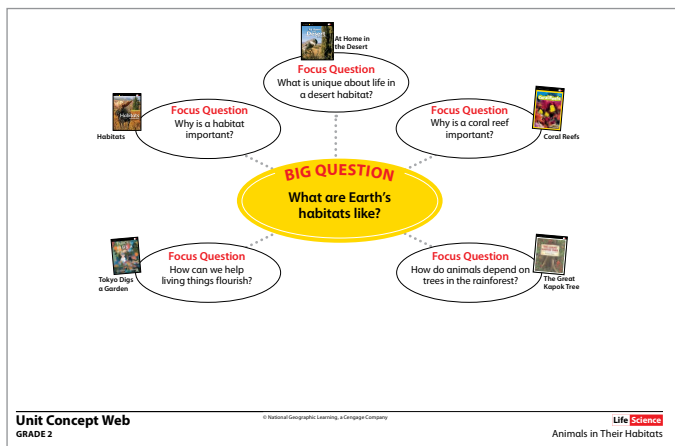
Using Big Questions in *Panorama*

A Big Question is at the heart of every *Panorama* unit. After the Big Question is introduced, students discuss what they already know about the topic. They are prompted to consider various elements, anything they have already read or seen, and also what they *want* to know about the topic. The class records their thoughts on a Unit Concept Web, which they will update throughout their exploration of the Big Question. They are ready to read and learn more!



Why Big Questions?

For some students more than others, reading requires an effort. And students will make a conscious choice to expend that effort or not. So reading also requires motivation (Baker and Wigfield, 1999).



As students read each book in the unit, they return again and again to the Big Question. A targeted Focus Question for each book reflects an aspect of the Big Question and helps students focus on the book-specific information. For example, when studying the Big Question *What are Earth's habitats like?* and reading a book about the rain forest, students explore the Focus Question *How do animals depend on trees in the rain forest?* Students return to these ideas daily in their reading, writing, and discussions. Their knowledge and curiosity grow as they gain more insight on the Big Question.

By the end of the unit, students' Unit Concept Web is chock full of ideas. Students review what they have learned and talk about what they still want to know. They share their ideas through a final discussion as well as a written product.

Big Questions = Motivation

A Big Question focuses each unit in *Panorama*. It sets a purpose for reading, talking, listening, participating, and sharing knowledge and opinions. Students read each book and join each conversation with a quest to share and build their understanding. They read more deeply and understand the content more thoroughly. The result is a motivated, engaged classroom!

References

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Guthrie, J.T., Van Meter, P, McCann, A.D., Wigfield, A., Bennerr, L., Poundstone, C., Rice, M.E., Faibisch, F.M., Hunt, B., & Mitchell, A. (1996) Growth of literacy engagement: changes in motivation and strategies during concept-oriented reading instruction *Reading Research Report 53*.

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