

Review games are a staple in middle school classrooms, especially in ELA and social studies, where recalling content accurately is key to success. But if your students are guessing answers instead of thinking through them, these games can quickly lose their instructional value. As a teacher with 11 years under my belt and experience coaching new educators, I've faced this challenge countless times. I've learned that the solution isn't to ditch review games altogether, but to tweak how they're structured to encourage deeper thinking, accountability, and meaningful engagement.

The Problem with Guessing During Review

Guessing during review often signals a lack of engagement or insufficient retrieval practice. When students shout out answers or buzz in without thinking, it turns the activity into a noisy race with shallow cognitive work.

- Guessing promotes passive review rather than active retrieval.
- It reduces accountability—students rely on chance rather than content knowledge.
- It disrupts the learning flow and can demotivate quieter students.

So how do you shift from guessing to thoughtful participation? Let's explore strategies that ensure review games demand explanations, evidence, and accountability from all students.

1. Prioritize Active Retrieval Over Passive Review

Active retrieval—the process of recalling information from memory—is the cornerstone of effective review. Unlike rereading notes or passive listening, retrieval solidifies **student-generated questions** learning.

To foster retrieval, your review games need to do more than just ask "What's the answer?" They must require students to:

- **Explain their reasoning:** Why did they choose that answer?
- **Show evidence:** What part of the text or content supports their choice?
- **Accountability:** Consider and articulate why other answers may be incorrect.

This approach stops guessing because vague or unsupported answers won't earn points.

How to implement this:

1. During your game, after a team or student answers, require a brief explanation.
2. Use prompts like "What evidence from the text supports this?" or "Why is choice B less likely?"
3. Reward teams not just for correct answers but for quality of explanations.

2. Use a Team Challenge Format with Simultaneous Answer Reveals

One effective method to reduce guessing chaos is structuring review games as team challenges with simultaneous answer reveals. Here's why it works:

- **Protects Think Time:** Teams discuss among themselves before answering, allowing all members to process information instead of rushing.
- **Reduces Blurting:** Because answers are shared simultaneously and not verbally shouted, it lowers the chance of one student dominating or others tuning out.

- **Encourages Collective Responsibility:** Every team member is accountable to the group and must contribute to formulating the answer.

For example, you might give teams 1-2 minutes to discuss a question and write down their answers on whiteboards or paper. Then, all teams reveal their answers at once. This creates suspense, reduces impulsivity, and keeps all students engaged.

Steps to set this up:

1. Divide the class into teams of 3-5 students.
2. Pose a question or task requiring explanation or evidence.
3. Set a timer (keeping one in my pocket, of course!) for think time—typically 90 seconds.
4. Have teams write answers silently and reveal simultaneously.
5. Facilitate brief discussions about the reasoning behind each team's answer.

3. Incorporate Scoring That Rewards Explanations and Analysis

Scoring systems can heavily influence how students approach review games. If points are only awarded for correct answers, it incentivizes guessing. Instead, design a scoring rubric that encourages depth of thought.

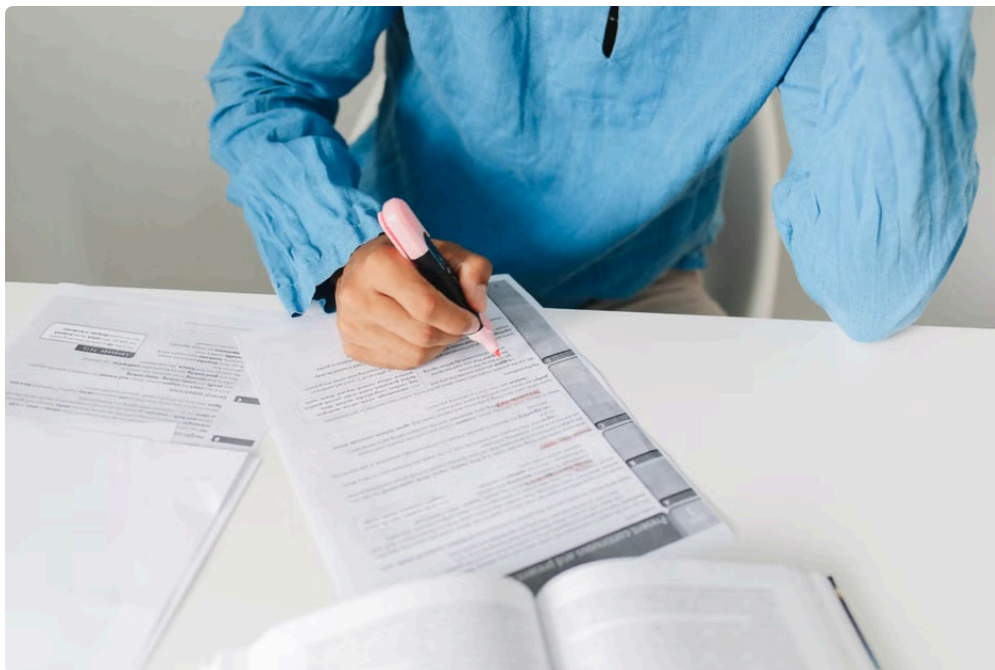
Point	Category	Description	Example	Correct Answer	Team/student selects the right option.	+2 points	Quality
+3 points	Explanation	Provides clear reasoning or textual evidence.	Critique of Other Answers	Identifies why an incorrect choice is wrong.	+1 point		

This encourages students to think beyond “What do I think is right?” to “Why might other choices be incorrect?” and “How can I support my answer with evidence?” The result is richer discourse and less guessing.

4. Foster Student Ownership Through Question Writing

When students write their own review questions, they develop a deeper understanding of the material and engage in metacognitive thinking.





Here's why student-generated questions help combat guessing:

- They must understand the content well enough to create good questions.
- They think about different answer choices and why one may be correct instead of others.
- They become invested in their peers' learning by contributing to review.

How to integrate this practice:

1. Assign students or teams to create review questions with answer choices and explanations.
2. Incorporate student-created questions into your team challenge games.
3. Encourage students to evaluate the quality of questions and answers as a class.

This not only increases accountability but diversifies perspectives and deepens content engagement.

5. Keep Instructions Simple and Clear

To avoid confusion and maximize participation, limit instructions to 3 bullet points maximum—this keeps your expectations clear and manageable.

Example instructions for a round:

- Discuss the question and write your team's answer with evidence.
- Be ready to explain your reasoning to the class.
- Earn points for correct answers, explanations, and critiquing other choices.

Summary and Why It Matters

Guessing during review games wastes valuable instructional time and hampers student learning. By designing review activities that:

- Require explanations and evidence, holding students accountable,
- Use team formats that protect think time and reduce impulsive blurting,
- Implement scoring tied to reasoning and analysis,

- Empower students to write and evaluate questions,
- Communicate clear, concise instructions,

you foster a classroom culture where knowledge is actively constructed and valued. This keeps review meaningful and moves beyond shallow or noisy guessing to genuine understanding.

Don't let review games just pass the time—use them as a powerful tool for deepening content mastery and student engagement.