

The Art of Asking Questions

Successful conversations begin with dynamic questions. Asking the “right” kind of question that will drive a conversation is an art. It is crucial that a facilitator formulate questions that will accomplish the following objectives:

- Excite curiosity.
- Engage higher level thinking skills: analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creation.
- Encourage multiple points of view.
- Challenge thought, instead of stifling it.
- Fortify understanding of curriculum.
- Inspire the application of knowledge in new and innovative ways.
- Draw on personal experiences and perspectives.
- Foster collaboration.
- Build a strong community.

Question Types That Foster Conversations

- **Interpretive Questions** have more than one “right” answer. The answer to an interpretive question must be supported by evidence. It requires that students interpret the information based on their unique perspectives.
Example: William Golding has said, “The theme of Lord of the Flies is an attempt to trace the defects of a society back to the defects of human nature.” Based on your interpretation of the events in the novel, what are the principle defects in human nature that led to the breakdown of the boys’ ability to govern themselves and maintain order?
- **Subjective Questions** require students to produce information based on personal opinion. Each answer will vary based on the subjective point of view being presented. The person or group of people being asked the question must make sense of the subject at hand using their individual perspectives.
Example: Why does Maya Angelou choose to end her childhood autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, shortly after she gives birth to her son? What does this choice communicate about this moment in her life?
- **Evaluative Questions** have no wrong answer because they ask students to formulate a response based on their opinions and beliefs. Because students enter the classroom (traditional or online) with a lifetime of experiences that color their opinions and perspectives, these questions invite a more personal dialogue. Evaluating an issue, topic, piece of information, situation, etc. allows a student to assess the quality, significance and value of the topic at hand using their particular viewpoints to support those judgments.
Example: Do you agree or disagree with the criticism of the feudal society expressed in the subtext of “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*?

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- **Problem Solving Questions** present a situation, dilemma, or problem to be solved. Students must present clear solutions based on their knowledge and opinions. Students approach problem solving in a variety of ways, which will lead to rich conversations about strategies, rationales, unforeseen obstacles, etc.
Example: In section two, "The Sieve and the Sand," of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* Guy Montag is faced with the dilemma of maintaining his role as a conformist or challenging the rules that govern society to become a non-conformist. What path(s) would allow Montag to challenge conformity while protecting himself (and those he loves) from danger?
- **Brainstorming Questions** ask students to generate a large number of ideas. The quantity and diversity of ideas generated are crucial to the success of brainstorming questions, which encourage a variety of responses.
Example: Scout, the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is influenced by a variety social factors in the novel that affect her views on race and equality. Brainstorm all of the factors (major and minor) that impact her views on these topics.
- **Debate Questions** ask students to take a position on an issue and then provide a justification for their position. Students must understand the topic, provide convincing evidence, address counter arguments by evaluating other points of view, and organize their points to maximize their effectiveness. Questions that ask students to take a side on an issue or topic effectively spark conversations between students with opposing view points while allowing students with similar view points to find commonality with one another.
Example: Do you think George made the "right" decision when he killed Lennie in the final scene of Steinbeck's novel, *Of Mice and Men*?

Best Questions Begin With:

- Why?
- How?
- What?
- Should?
- Could?

Questions Types That Kill Conversations

- **Factual Questions** have one "right" answer, which must be supported by evidence. Since there is one correct response, this question does not invite further discussion once a student has correctly answered the question.

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- **Information Retrieval Questions** ask students to find a particular piece of information from a source (i.e. textbook or online resource). Similar to the factual question, these types of questions do not allow students to engage in discussions because once the correct answer is presented there is little left to discuss.
- **Rhetorical Questions**, by their very definition, are questions “asked solely to produce an effect or make an assertion and not to elicit a reply” (dictionary.com). These questions tend to force a facilitator’s ideology on the class without allowing the group the freedom to disagree.

Additional Tips for Optimal Student Participation

- **Layering Your Questions** opens the door for increased participation and student engagement. Beginning with a general question that is followed by more specific questions will narrow the scope of the conversation and encourage students to examine the issue/topic more closely. The broad “hook” question draws students in, but the more specific follow-up questions allow them the freedom to focus on the aspect of the topic they find most interesting. If the questions are more specific, the responses are more likely to be specific.
- **Ask Controversial or Polarizing Questions** to draw students into a conversation or debate. If you have established a safe space online, presenting controversial questions allows students to engage in constructive discussions about topics they are passionate about. As a facilitator, you need to follow the conversations closely to ensure students maintain a respectful tone when articulating opposing viewpoints.
- **Encourage Connections** between your topic of discussion and the students’ life experiences. If students are able to connect the discussion to their families, friends, classes, books, movies, music, interests, hobbies, points of reference, etc., the information being discussed is more meaningful and will be retained longer. Incorporating these connections into the conversation personalizes the discussion and leads to more meaningful student interactions.
- **Be Flexible** during discussions. Sometimes the conversation will head in a direction you did not anticipate. These tangent conversations can be just as valuable as the initial topics presented. It is important to evaluate each individual discussion and ask follow-up questions that keep students on track but do not pigeonhole their responses. Do not get locked into your agenda as a facilitator. Instead, be open to the organic evolution of conversations.