

# A Practical Approach for Increasing Students' In-Class Questions

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Much has been written about creating natural critical learning environments in our classrooms, places where students feel free to pose stimulating questions and pursue interesting answers. But how much do we put students' questions at the heart of our everyday teaching? The answer might be "not as much as we think." A number of years ago I was frustrated by how seldom my students asked questions in class, even after I encouraged them to do so.

Why didn't they take advantage of the most natural component of a critical learning environment? Was it shyness, lack of motivation, unpreparedness? After experimenting with various failed strategies to elicit more in-class questions, I began to suspect something else was happening. It struck me that my students more than likely didn't know where to begin because—unlike their professors—they hadn't spent years interrogating ideas. So the challenge for me was to nudge them from novices to something closer to advanced beginners.

*A useful starting place is to get students thinking about the kind of work they want their question to perform.*

There are many kinds of questions, of course (rhetorical, leading, insincere...). At issue here are those questions students could ask to improve their understanding of a subject and its relationships to other subjects. A question in this sense is simply a tool to support and promote learning, so perhaps a useful starting place is to get students thinking about the kind of work they want their question to perform.

Below [see end of article] is a list of questions grouped according to the kinds of knowledge-generating work needed to answer them. This list is by no means definitive. It was developed for students interrogating primary texts in an Introduction to Humanities course and a first-year honors seminar, but it could be adapted to other courses and disciplines. Its aim was to provide them models for designing their own questions.

In effect, this list mirrors the logic of Bloom's taxonomy, but it reverse engineers Bloom's critical abilities into question forms.

In class I've used these models to help students create questions about assigned read-

ings. Students either bring prewritten questions to class or I allow them take 10 minutes of class time to write out questions. They must ask questions on different levels of the hierarchy and identify the type of thinking required to formulate an answer. Absent some kind of pump-priming model to direct them, they tend to create lower level content-oriented questions: *What does the author say on page 243?*

Requiring them to ask questions emphasizing thinking skills raises the metacognitive bar. They must consider what they want to know and why. *“What exactly does Socrates mean by the examined life?”* (Definition). *“If William James is right about habit, what does that say about our penal system?”* (Extender).

I usually offer a few parameters as well:

- Avoid yes/no questions.
- Be specific in terms of ideas and passages (i.e., specify page numbers).
- Ask about the areas or ideas you struggled with and/or those that really aroused your curiosity.

The latter point is key. The best questions usually arise from a sincere questioner.

Even with some pump-priming, many of the questions students generate will be non-starters and that’s okay. Sometimes this happens because students are simply going through the motions of the exercise, but more often it’s because they aren’t experts and can’t always recognize non-starter questions. Indeed, it’s difficult for students to think like disciplinary experts, and it’s tempting for us to jump in and speed the process along. I have found that if I can be patient and remain quiet students will self-identify dead end questions more quickly than I expect.

The discovery of dead ends is in itself a powerful learning experience, one we can short circuit in our haste. More to the point, we have to work through the bad questions to find the wonderful, thought-provoking questions. And when a student asks a really great question, it’s always appropriate to put it on the board and spend some time celebrating it (even before you attempt to find an answer).

Celebrating wonderful questions and carving out class time for students to formulate, evaluate, and wrestle with their own questions won’t necessarily make them disciplinary experts, but it pushes them in that direction and it sends a clear message that this is a place where asking, pondering, and speculating are highly valued.

# SUPPLEMENTAL

## Prompts to Elevate Students' Questioning Skills

How do we get students thinking about the kind of work they want their question to perform? Below is a list of questions grouped according to the kinds of knowledge-generating work needed to answer them. This list is by no means definitive. It was developed for students interrogating primary texts in an Introduction to Humanities course and a first-year honors seminar, but it could be adapted to other courses and disciplines. Its aim was to provide them models for designing their own questions.

### Level One

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#### Contextuals

- How was X (event, text, work, etc.) shaped by its time?
- Where did X originate and why?
- Who was the originator of X and what was he or she like?

#### Definitions and clarifications

- How do you define X (word, term, idea, etc.)?
- What does this passage, concept, etc., mean?
- What would be a specific, concrete example of X?

#### Analyzers

- What parts or features make up the whole and what does each part do?
- How do the parts contribute to the whole?
- How is X organized and why is it organized this way?

### Level Two

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#### Comparatives

- How is X the same as that?
- How is X different than that?
- How are these more or less similar?

- What is the opposite of X?

### **Causals**

- What factors caused X to happen?
- Which of these factors is sufficient? Which contributing or probable?
- On what grounds can we eliminate possible causes or explanations?

### **Evaluatives**

- What are the most important features of X?
- Why do you like or dislike X (or agree or disagree with this)?
- How strong is the case that X is correct?
- What criteria are best for judging X?
- What is the best order or priority for these things and why?
- What is the strongest argument against X?

## **Level Three**

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### **Counterfactuals**

- How would X change if this happened?
- How would things be different if X had not happened?
- How would things be different if X happened to a greater (or lesser) degree?

### **Extenders (Synthesizers)**

- How can we apply X to this set of circumstances?
- What can we predict if X is correct?
- What ideas should be added to X?
- What might happen if you added this to X?

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