

What Makes a Good Question?

When you are able to ask evocative questions, you will drive classroom discussion first by engaging the participants and then by inspiring their thinking.

There is a consistent set of characteristics that describe a strong question. It is always open – ended, thought – provoking, and clear.

Open – ended questions . . .

- are designed to elicit numerous responses
- invite multiple perspectives and a wide range of participation

Thought – provoking questions . . .

- spark numerous responses
- require participants to synthesize those responses

Clear questions . . .

- are effective because of simplicity of language, the fewer the number of words in a question, the more effective it usually is
- when more complex, are carefully prefaced, delivered slowly and repeated at least twice (asked in a clear and simple way)

When you are structuring a classroom – wide discussion, questions are best divided into three categories: **opening**, **core**, and **closing**.

Opening question:

- typically, only one is asked
- is designed to get participants to identify the ideas and values in the text that will be most interesting to discuss
 - “What is the most important word in the speech?”
 - “What detail do you notice first in the painting?”
- requires that the participants look closely at the text in order to respond
- invites a wide range of possible responses

Core questions:

- typically, there are three to five
- are designed to have participants analyze the text in detail
- require that students study the text before branching out into their own reactions to the text
 - “Why do you think the author chose that specific image?”
 - “How is the message of the first paragraph related to the message of the second?”
- early core questions are often designed to elicit multiple perspectives
- later core questions often ask participants to compare/contrast and even synthesize those responses based on the text

Closing questions:

- usually one, or at the most, two
- ask participants to personalize the ideas and values under discussion
 - “If you were that character, how would you have responded? Why?”
 - “Which of these two paintings would you choose to illustrate your personal journal? Why?”

Questions are about ideas, not just any ideas but the fundamental human concerns that have haunted us as a species for thousands of years. These ideas haunt us because they are themselves not answers but questions.

- “What is destiny?”
- “What is a good life?”
- “How can we achieve a good society?”