



Introduction to Comprehension Tool: Asking Questions



Asking questions is indispensable for creating and strengthening the reader's ongoing dialogue with the page. Questions help a reader clarify ideas and deepen understanding.

Questions lead readers deeper into a piece, setting up dialogue with the author, sparking in readers' minds what it is they care about. If you ask questions as you read, you are awake. You are thinking. You are interacting with the words.

Diving in with questions – even those that are unanswerable – enriches the reading experience.

Young children are master questioners. In their quest to make sense of their world, they bombard those around them: Why are there clouds? How does grass grow? Why is the snow white? Why do geese honk? Do fish sleep? How much does a hummingbird weigh? Frequently, parents have no idea how to answer these endless questions. In desperation they might change the subject or come up with a feeble dodge to get off the hook. In fact, those questions show a child's brilliance. She just wants to figure things out. She just wants to know how all the pieces in her world fit together. Children have the natural curiosity of great scientists. Encourage your students to ask the *real* questions, those questions that really puzzle them, even if you can't answer them.

Wonder keeps the imagination alive and curiosity well-tuned. Asking questions is part of remaining open to wonder and alert to the world around you. Asking questions is how you make sense of the world. Asking questions is about taking risks and pushing the envelope. Asking questions is about furthering passions and satisfying curiosities. Questions indicate engagement. They are a fundamental part of being human. They are a key ingredient in building superb readers.

Start with a book, any old book. Look at the cover. Carefully. What questions come to mind? For example when looking at the cover of *Rose Blanche*, by Roberto Innocenti, you might ask, Why does the little girl look so serious, so worried? Why are soldiers sleeping behind her? Are they on a truck? It looks like some of them have bandages on their heads. How were they wounded? Where are they going? Is the little girl Rose Blanche? What does "Rose Blanche" mean? What is she seeing outside the window?

Using just the cover of the book, talk to students about your questions. Make it clear that some of the questions will be answered when you read the book, but some might not be. Let him know that it's okay to ask questions before, during, and after reading. Questions show that you're engaged and curious about the ideas, characters, relationships, and facts depicted in the book. Read the quotes on the back cover—in the case of *Rose Blanche*, "An excellent book to use not only to teach about the Holocaust, but also about living a life of ethics, compassion, and honesty." A student might ask, "What's the Holocaust?" Tell him what you know. Start a conversation about the book, even before you've read a word.

Taken from *7 Keys to Comprehension* by Susan Zimmerman and Chryse Hutchins

You are teaching your students that asking questions not only develops a deeper understanding of what they read but also helps them gather information and get themselves ready to read. You're showing them that there is nothing passive about reading. It's an active sport that can be done lying on the sofa. Instead of exercising their legs, they are exercising their brains. But that great workout will come only if they are engaged and interacting with the page.

Encouraging your students to ask *real* questions develops an environment of learning and inquiry. Sharing your questions with your students, showing them that even *you* have questions when you read, frees them to ask their own questions. Some questions don't have ready answers, like why there is evil in the world. That's okay. What matters is to care enough to ask the hard questions. That's how people learn.

Your student might not know exactly how to start asking questions. One way you can help them is to set up a dialogue with the author. If you and your students are reading *The Runaway Bunny*, by Margaret Wise Brown, you might say, "I have so many questions for the author. Why does that little bunny keep running away from his mother? What is he trying to find? Let's read the book first and then let's talk about all the questions we can ask the author."

Encouraging your students to ask questions as they read is part of a larger task: inspiring wonder. There are so many things to wonder about: I wonder what a black hole is. I wonder why people risk their lives to climb Mount Everest. I wonder how life began. I wonder what happens when we die. I wonder...Before you start reading a book with your students, play the "I wonder" game.

Language to Use with Questioning

"I wonder ..."

"Why?"

"What does this mean?"

"That was a great question. Do you have any more?"

"Your question made me think of another question."

"How come ...?"

For students to become passionate learners, teachers must ask themselves one simple question: Who owns the questions in our classroom? The answer is equally simple: The learners must.

Questions abound in the classrooms. They are at the end of social studies chapters, accompany science experiments, are handed out during a novel study, and are part of many prepackaged work-your-way-to-the-next-color reading series. But the definition of this strategy is straightforward and has nothing to do with questions posed by an outside source. Good readers generate questions before, during, and after reading.

Sample Guidelines for Asking Questions to Post in Classroom:

1. There's no such thing as a dumb question.
2. Ask questions that really matter to you.
3. Ask questions when reading doesn't make sense.

Questions to Reveal Thinking

Here are some questions to help uncover how questioning is working with your students:

- Did you have a question even before you started to read this book?
- How is asking questions working for you? How do you plan to keep track of your questions? How does that question affect your understanding of this story?
- Wait a minute! When you read that line, it made me stop and think. Let me read it back to you. What's your question when you hear these words?
- Do you have a question following you through the book? Great! So why is it important to ask questions as you read?
- What questions do you have now that you've reread this poem? How did rereading change your questions? What have you learned about the power of rereading?
- Do you notice yourself asking questions when your reading doesn't make sense? Oh, you've stopped to ask a question about the meaning of this word. Is that work keeping you from understanding? How will you figure out its meaning?
- Do you have any questions you expect the author to answer? Which one is the most important for you as a reader? Will you keep it in mind as you read further today? Here's a sticky note. If the author answers that question, or if you're given surprise information, mark that spot with a sticky. I can't wait to find out what happens.
- Did you notice the author just asked a question? What does that say to us as readers? Yes, they do that so we'll pay attention. It's a great device to use as an author. You might like to try asking questions in your writing as well.
- You've just finished reading this chapter. Which questions are still unanswered? How will thinking about those leftover questions help you dig in to the meaning of the next part of the book?
- Think about this question you've written in the margin. What else does it make you wonder about? Do you see what you just did as a reader? The first question made you stop and think about a deeper question. What new ideas come to you now about the meaning of this new article?
- Good for you! Your brain was watching for the answer to your earlier question, and here it is. It makes sense to take out that sticky note now that you've found the answer. You've covered a lot of new information and built your background knowledge. Researchers often need to stop and think about what it is they need to know to continue. Our questions change as we understand more about a topic. Take some time now to generate new questions to push you further in your research project.
- As I listen to you talk about your questions, I notice you keep coming back to this one in particular. You say the text doesn't answer it for you. When we ask questions not answered in our reading, it causes us to add our thinking to the story. What's your thinking about the answer to this question? Are there clues in the text to help you with your answer?
- Now that you've finished the story, do you have any new questions? When I finish a book, my lingering questions often send me back to reread. I'll be checking with you to find out what answers you've discovered after you reread today.

Crafting Session Tips

- Your questions help you interact with the author, discover what you care about, and help you figure out what you want to learn. Questions help you make sense of your reading.
- Questions keep your mind alert as you interact with the words.
- When you dive in with questions, your reading is enriched.
- Your best questions are ones you truly care about.
- Some questions don't have easy answers. But all questions inspire thinking, generate discussion, or lead you to other sources.
- Questions are jumping-off points for going deeper into the meaning of the story or the information being learned.
- Questions keep you turning the pages to find out what happens next.
- Questions send you on a search for answers.
- Questions lead you to new ideas, new perspectives, and additional questions.

Asking Questions (Read the following and note the questions that come to mind.)

He came with his little girl. She wore her best frock. You notice what good care she took of it. Others notice too- idly noticed that, last year, it had been the best frock on another little girl.

In the morning sunshine it had been festive. Now most people had gone home. The balloon sellers were counting the day's takings. Even the sun had followed their example, and retired to rest behind a cloud. So the place looked rather bleak and deserted when he came with his little girl to taste the joy of Spring and warm himself in the freshly polished Easter sun.

But she was happy. They both were. They had learned a humility of which you still have no conception. A humility which never makes comparisons, never rejects what there is for the sake of something "else" or something "more."

-*MARKINGS*, DAG HAMMARSKJOLD

Markings contains reminiscences, observations, and musings that Dag Hammarskjold, former United Nations Secretary General, jotted down from 1925 to 1961.

The entry above leaves me full of questions. Who is the little girl? How old is she? Who is the father? It is her father, isn't it? Where is her mother? Why did they go to the festivities late in the day, after most people had left? Who are the "others" who are noticing her frock? Why is she wearing a hand-me-down dress? Did the man and girl want to avoid being seen? What brought about their "humility of which you still have no conception?"

I'm particularly curious about the relationship one senses between the father and daughter. It is as if some adversity has brought them closer. Hammarskjold paints an image, and we, the readers, are left to make of it what we may. Where are they? At a carnival? A park? Is it a special Easter celebration that they want to go to, but in an unobtrusive way, a way that allows them to enjoy it but doesn't call attention to them? Is this taking place in Sweden, Hammarskjold's home, or somewhere else?

I want to know more. What is the little girl like? The father? I have a vivid picture in my mind of the scene—he is tall and slender; she has long blonde hair; they hold hands and create a world only for the two of them. How have their circumstances—their "learned humility"—brought them to a point where Hammarskjold would observe, "But she was happy. They both were."?