

Four Levels of Meaning within a Text

Meaning can be gained from text by looking at four levels of meaning within the text:

- Word level
- Sentence level
- Passage level
- Story/ complete text level.

To help students engage deeply with text and to get a more comprehensive understanding of the content, teachers should ask questions about a text at all four levels of meaning.

The word level and sentence level are often the root of misunderstandings so it is key to ask questions at these levels to help facilitate a clearer understanding of the text.

Examples of Questions for the Four Levels of Meaning within a Text

Word/ Phrase Level of Meaning

- “The author says, ‘It was the most challenging thing possible.’ What is the ‘it’ she is referring to?”
- “Who is the ‘he’ in that sentence?”
- “The author writes ‘night fell.’ What does it mean that ‘night fell?’”
- “What does it mean that the dogs ‘boiled out of the alley’?”
- “What does it mean that the lion ‘turned on them’? How is that different from ‘turning around?’”

Sentence Level of Meaning

- “Can you take that sentence and put it in your own words?”
- “It says, ‘They were over there whose names she didn’t know.’ What does that tell us about her relationship with these girls?”

Passage Level of Meaning

- “What parts of this paragraph tell you that Mohi is mean-spirited?”
- “Who can explain the most important event that has happened in the first page of this chapter?”

Story Level of Meaning

- “Is Macbeth a tragic hero or a cruel butcher?” Use specific evidence from the story to support your answer.
- “What is the moral of the story *The Lion and The Mouse*?” Use specific evidence from the story to support your answer.
- “What are some possible themes that we already see emerge in the first few pages of our novel?” Use specific evidence from the story to support your answer.

Adapted from Uncommon Schools, Doug Lemov