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# Powerful Questions as Discussion Builders

When exploring any type of text (fiction, non-fiction, poetry) it is important to ask interpretive questions that build upon one another. Interpretive questions are effective both with well planned discussions and in spontaneous situations. Interpretive questions stimulate oral and written language.

## Types of Questions

**Factual** - A factual question has only one correct answer.

**Interpretive** - An interpretive question has more than one answer that can be supported with evidence from the text. Interpretive questions keep discussions going and require the reader to refer back to the text.

**Evaluative** - An evaluative question asks the reader to decide if s/he agree with the writer's ideas or point of view. The answer to an evaluative question depends on the reader's prior knowledge, experience, and opinions.

## Writing Interpretive Questions

**Character motivation** (why a character does something). Developing an interpretive question to discover the reasons behind a character's statements, actions, &/or thoughts.

**Interesting use of language.** An interpretive question used to develop discussion on how the author expresses an idea or creates a description. Some details in the story can function as important elements in an interpretation. The answer cannot be simply resolved from a dictionary.

**Plot.** Well written stories have plots that are interconnected with the various parts supporting one another. An interpretive question can help discover the meaning and relationships between its parts.

**Key words.** To start a question include how, what, where, why, and when.



## Testing the Questions

**There should be genuine doubt about the answer(s) to the question.** If a question is open to different possible answers students will be more willing to share their thoughts.

**You should have genuine interest in the question.** Students will 'read' your interest (or lack of) in the question and story.

**The question should stimulate discussion.** The question should create an interest in revisiting the story for evidence.

**The question should be clear.** The participants should easily understand the question.

**The question should be specific.** The question should fit the story and not generic to any story.

## Leading a Discussion

Here are the basic ground rules for leading a discussion:

- 1 - **Participants must have read or heard (read aloud) the story.**
- 2 - **Discussion is focused on the selection everyone has read or heard.**
- 3 - **Opinions should be supported with evidence from the story.**
- 4 - **Leaders only ask questions – they do not answer them.**

For a discussion based on interpretive questions to be successful, student interest needs to be encouraged and valued.

## Prepared and Spontaneous Questions

To create effective questions and questioning techniques it is very important to develop and test the questions prior to discussing the story with the class. To facilitate quality questions it is beneficial to take notes when initially reading the story. *Writing Interpretive Questions* provides a template of the types of notes to help develop quality questions. After writing questions from your notes have another person read the story and try the questions out on them. This will provide an opportunity to test the *Testing the Question* criteria.

Spontaneous interpretive questions are an important part of all discussions. Experience with preparing questions and using interpretive questioning techniques support spontaneous questioning.

## The Question Game

To start the question game the two participants must initially decide on a topic to *question*. One person starts with an open ended question, then the other person responds with a related open ended question. This continues back and forth with the two participants. An example is:

**Topic:** (e.g. object in the room) *light bulb*

**Questioner A:** *Why is it important to have light?*

**Questioner B:** *Where does light come from?*

**Questioner A:** *How does light help people?*

**Questioner B:** *Where is light used?*

**Questioner A:** *What would happen if there was no light?*



## Resources

**Inspiration & Kidspiration Software** – Word webbing software for Windows and Macintosh. Very easy to use and very powerful in use. 800.877.4292, [www.inspiration.com](http://www.inspiration.com)

**Junior Great Books, Great Books Society** – Shared inquiry for K-12 and adults. Great for questioning skills – whether using their books or others the workshops are fabulous for strategies. 800.222.5870, [www.greatbooks.com/junior/junior.html](http://www.greatbooks.com/junior/junior.html)

**No Contest**, Alfie Kohn – Amazing book on collaborative learning. A must read for education. Houghton Mifflin.

**Thinking Maps and Visual Tools for Constructing Knowledge**, David Hyerle – Innovative Sciences, 975 Walnut Street, Suite 342, Cary, NC 27511, 800.243.9169