

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

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

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

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?

Developed by Steve Snyder, professor of humanities at Grand View University.