

Questions Good for Discussion

Comparative Questions - Ask students to compare and contrast different theories, research studies and so on.

Evaluative Questions – Extend comparisons to judgments of the relative validity, effectiveness or strength of what is being compared

Connective and Causal Effect Questions – Challenge students to link facts, concepts, relationships, authors, theories and so on

Critical Questions – Invite students to examine the validity of a particular argument, research claim, or interpretation

Questions requesting more evidence – Asks a student to defend his or her position using evidence – data, facts, passages from a text, etc.

Clarification Questions – Invites the student to rephrase or elaborate on an answer (“That was interesting. Can you tell us a little more about what you mean by X?”)

Cause-and-Effect Questions – Like Connective Questions above, but here students are asked to generate a hypothesis on the causal relationship

Hypothetical Questions – “What-if” inquiries that require students to think creatively, make up plausible scenarios, and explore how changing parameters or circumstances might alter results (e.g. “A college degree correlates to higher income, but what if everyone had a college degree?”)

Open Questions – Questions with multiple respectable answers. The key is that the instructor must genuinely welcome all answers. Weaker answers can be followed up with clarification or extending questions.

Linking or Extension Questions – Ask students to think about the connections between their answers and those of their peers. Encourages active listening and responding and builds a sense that discussion is a collaborative enterprise.

Brainstorming Questions – Ask students to come up with as many solutions as possible. All answers are recorded on the board at first and are eventually winnowed down.

Focal Questions – Ask students to choose a particular viewpoint or position from several possible ones and to support their opinion with evidence (debate).

Playground Questions – Challenge students to select or develop their own themes and concepts for exploring, interpreting and analyzing a piece of material. (e.g. “What do you think this author is saying in this particular passage?” “What underlying assumptions about human nature must this theorist have?”)

Poor Questions for Discussion Purposes

Recitation or Quiz Show Questions – Usually have only one short answer. Good for factual recall and review.

Analytical Convergent Questions – Can require complex thought. Seem open but actually have only one answer. Good for large concept review.

Questions to Avoid

Fuzzy Questions – Vague and unfocused, often worded in a confusing way (e.g. “Who else knows what doesn’t fall into this category?”)

Shotgun or Chameleon Questions – Questions that come in rapid succession. Often the last question is unconnected to the first. Students do not know what is being asked of them.

Programmed-Answer Questions – Sounds open-ended and can have more than one appropriate answer, but the instructor somehow conveys that there is one right answer.

Adapted from *Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors, 3rd Edition*, by Linda B. Nilson (Jossey-Bass, 2010).

Further Reading

Bender, Tisha. *Discussion-Based Online Teaching to Enhance Student Learning: Theory, Practice and Assessment*. (2003). Stylus Publishing, Sterling, VA.

Bowen, José Antonio. *Teaching Naked: How Moving Technology Out of Your Classroom Will Improve Student Learning*. (2012). Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

***This is the book featured in the FDC Fall Book Discussion.**

Brookfield, Stephen D and Stephen Preskill. *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*. (1999). Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

Caulfield, Jay. *How to Design and Teach a Hybrid Course*. (2011). Stylus Publishing, Sterling, VA.