
QUESTIONING TEXTS

One of the most important skills secondary students must master is the ability to interact with and comprehend the things they read. This might be an article, a textbook chapter, a piece of literature, a graph, a diagram, an equation, a poem, a word problem, etc. Unfortunately, all too often, students get to high school without a clear understanding of how to interact with text, in particular without the ability to ask questions about what they read. Explicitly teaching how to question a piece of text, including the different types and qualities of questions they can use, will do more to improve their overall reading comprehension than almost anything else we can teach them.

Traditionally, there are two major types of questions - deepening and clarifying. A deepening question is one the reader does not know the answer to because it was not given in the text. It is the type of question curious readers ask when they understood what they read but want to know more. A clarifying question is one readers ask when they are confused by what they are reading. The information is there, but they can't make sense of it. It is the type of question one asks when one does not understand all of what has been read.

Teaching questioning strategies is challenging. Students will take the path of least resistance when they are faced with tough academic concepts such as questioning what they read. For example, you may give a student a piece of content to read, or diagram to decipher, and tell them to ask four questions about it. Then students will just circle four things and write "why?" in the margin four times. Or they will circle four words they don't know and write, "what does this mean?" four times. Or they will ask questions without caring what the answer is or questions whose answers they already know. This kind of low-level interaction with text, also known as "hoop-jumping" for the sake of completing the assigned task, ultimately does nothing to increase a student's comprehension. To really push student comprehension, the teacher needs to explicitly teach, and have students practice, the difference between asking "good" questions (a.k.a. thoughtful, relevant, or high-level) and "bad" questions (superficial, irrelevant, or low level) as well as deepening questions and clarifying questions. See sample lesson below.

NOTE: The lesson that follows uses an excerpt called "Learning to Read" from the "Autobiography of Malcolm X" as the text. This excerpt can be easily found on the Internet. Although it seems best suited for an English or history class, this text and the lesson that goes with it can be used in any content area as the basis for teaching questioning strategies. Once this lesson is completed, you can replicate the lesson using a high interest text appropriate to your content area. In this way you help the students generalize and apply the knowledge they have gained to a different type of text. Or, you can modify the lesson below and start with a piece of high interest, but challenging, text from your subject area.

Questioning While Reading: A Sample 2-Day Lesson Plan

Objectives:

- Students will be able to identify and create deepening and clarifying questions about a piece of text they read.
- Students will be able to identify and explain the differences between good and bad questions, and will be able to create both.
- Students will understand and be able to describe the importance of the time Malcolm X spent in jail.

Day 1 of Lesson

Part 1: Intro to Good vs. Bad

- Tell students that one of the most basic skills that all experienced readers use every time they read is questioning. If you can master the skill of questioning what you read, you are 75% of the way to being an expert reader.
- Ask students, “What is the difference between a good question and a bad question?” Elicit some student responses. Someone will inevitably say that there are no bad questions. You might respond to this with “That is a myth that your teachers tell you when you are young, but now you are old enough to know that there are, in fact, bad questions. If you don’t care what the answer to a question is, it is a bad question. If you already know the answer to a question, it is a bad question.”
- Introductory Example: Write the sentence “Malcolm X was a black Civil Rights leader in the 1960s who learned the power of reading while in prison during his youth,” on the board. *(NOTE: Using the following lesson’s Malcolm X materials will work in any subject as an introduction to asking questions. Once students understand the concept, you can switch to more relevant content and see if they can generalize or apply the skill. However, feel free to use content from your subject area instead of the Malcolm X materials and just replicate the design elements of this lesson around your chosen text).*
- Give students examples of bad (or superficial or low-level) questions: “Where did Malcolm learn reading was important?” (because the answer is directly stated in the reading). Or “What was the Civil Rights Movement?” (because you already know the answer from previous lessons. However, if you had never heard of the Civil Rights Movement, then this could be a good question.) So whether a question is good or bad in part depends on who has asked it. A good (or smart or thoughtful or relevant or deep)

question for one person, could be a bad question for another person. Ask for volunteers to give you other “bad” questions about the Malcolm X sentence.

- Ask for volunteers to give you some “good” questions about the Malcolm X sentence. Some good questions might be “Why was he in prison?” or “Was he a more important leader than Martin Luther King?”

Part 2: Practice Good vs. Bad

- Hand out the “Learning to Read” excerpt from the Autobiography of Malcolm X (or any high interest piece of reading relevant to your content area that you can cut into six small sections). This excerpt from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is easily found on the internet. Tell students that they are going to practice asking excellent questions. Read Section 1 aloud to them. When done, give them the “Questioning: The Good and the Bad” worksheet (attached) with eight questions listed. Have them decide if each question is a good question or a bad one and have them write one sentence explaining why for each. Model one for them on overhead so they understand the process.
- Have partners or small groups share and discuss (or go right to whole group share). Call randomly on one person for each question to tell how they categorized it and why. Get agreement from the class, then mark your overhead copy accordingly.
- Next, ask students to come up with three good and three bad questions on their own for the same section of the reading. Have them re-read section 1 silently and write their questions. Make sure they still give a sentence explaining why they believe each is a good question or a bad question. Again call on students randomly but this time call on one to read their question and another to say which category it goes in and why.
- Have students read Section 2 silently to themselves. Then have them write seven good questions. This is a lot, but it forces them to use the whole section. Tell them to look for words or phrases they don’t know and guess at their meaning as a way to add questions to their list.
- Review group work rules and then pair or group students together to share and discuss their questions. Ask them to try to answer each other’s questions.
- In whole group ask if there are any questions left in their group that no one was able to answer OR questions more than one person asked. Discuss these as a class.

DAY 2 of Lesson

Part 3: Intro to Good and Good

- With Section 3 of the reading excerpt, again have students read to themselves. Then hand out “Questioning: The Good and the Other Good” worksheet (attached). Review the difference between Clarifying Questions and Deepening Questions and then have them try to complete the hand out by categorizing the six questions listed on the worksheet as either clarifying or deepening (Note: two are done for them as samples).
- When they are done, review and discuss, making sure kids are clear on the difference between “deepening” questions and “clarifying” questions.
- Have students re-read section 3 and create one clarifying and one deepening question of their own. For each they must write a sentence explaining why they think each goes in what category. Then have students volunteer questions, calling on other students to categorize and defend their choice, and, finally, discussing possible answers to their questions.
- Have students read Section 4 silently and ask seven good questions of any kind. When all are done, have a class discussion about the questions, but allow students to answer when possible instead of giving the answers yourself. Students need to start to see their peers as a resource

Part 4: Practice Questioning

- Have students read Sections 5 & 6 on their own (10 paragraphs) and write five or more good questions. (NOTE: This could be assigned as homework). Collect this to assess whether or not the instruction has been effective. You can grade it at your discretion, but what you are really looking for is evidence that they understand how to ask good questions, that your teaching has been effective.
- Give students a final opportunity to question you about the reading as some may have questions they truly want answered.
- Create comprehension questions or a mini-quiz for the entire reading, to assess their understanding of the content.

Questioning: The Good and the Bad

Directions: Read section 1 of the Malcolm X reading. Then read the following questions, and decide if each is a “good” question or a “bad” question. Fill in a G for good and a B for bad in the space provided. Then write one sentence explaining what makes it good or bad in your opinion.

1. ___ Does “dormant” mean *unknown*?
 Explain...
2. ___ What does it mean to be “mentally alive”? All living things are mentally alive, right?
 Explain...
3. ___ Why would white people want to hide the black man’s role in history?
 Explain...
4. ___ How long did Malcolm go to school?
 Explain...
5. ___ Who is Bimbi? What is his relationship to Malcolm?
 Explain...
6. ___ What does “emulate” mean?
 Explain...
7. ___ Malcolm could read Chinese?
 Explain...
8. ___ What was the motivation that he received that made him want to learn?
 Explain...

Directions: Create three good questions and three bad question of your own for Section 1 of the Malcolm X reading. Write them below. Include an explanation for why each is bad or good.

Bad questions	What makes it bad?

Good questions	What makes it good?

Questioning: The Good and the Bad

Teacher's Master

Directions: Read section 1 of the Malcolm X reading. Then read the following 8 questions, decide if each is a “good” question or a “bad” question. Fill in a G for good and a B for bad in the space provided. Then write one sentence explaining what makes it good or bad in your opinion.

1. **G** Does “dormant” mean *unknown*?
Explain... **while this is a wrong guess it is a good effort to try and figure out meaning from context- the context fits the guess though dormant means asleep**
2. **G** What does it mean to be “mentally alive”? All living things are mentally alive, right?
Explain... **shows real thinking about the phrase and what it is supposed to mean beyond the literal**
3. **G** Why would white people want to hide the black man’s role in history?
Explain...**a far reaching question that opens up a whole kettle of worms and some possible debate**
4. **B** How long did Malcolm go to school?
Explain...**answer is directly in the text- till 8th grade**
5. **G** Who is Bimbi? What is his relationship to Malcolm?
Explain...**At this point in the story Bimbi could be anyone, another inmate, a guard, a visitor. Also it is not established if they are friends or not**
6. **B** What does “emulate” mean?
Explain...**almost a good question but lacks an attempted guess from context. Any lazy reader can ask what an unfamiliar word means but an active, engaged reader works to figure things out**
7. **G** Malcolm could read Chinese?
Explain...**reader is confused by the phrasing of the sentence, but notices the inconsistency or strangeness of the information enough to question it**
8. **G** What was the motivation that he received that made him want to learn?
Explain...**good wondering about the foreshadowing of a motivation**

Questioning: The Good and the Other Good

Directions:

- Read Section 3 of the Malcolm X reading.
- Read the following questions and decide which ones are **deepening** questions and which ones are **clarifying** questions. Place a "D" in the space next to Deepening Questions and a "C" in the space next to Clarifying Questions. (HINT: There are three of each type)
- After placing the letter in the space provided, write one sentence explaining why you believe you have categorized the questions correctly.

D = DEEPENING questions.

- Deepening questions are about "what" has been written. Usually these questions come up when you understand what has been written but you would like more detail or more information. "I understand what the author is saying here, but I want more information, explanation or details."

C = CLARIFYING question

- Clarifying questions are about "how" something is written. Usually these questions come up when you don't understand what the author is trying to say because of unfamiliar words or phrasing. "I don't exactly understand what the author is trying to say here, so I need some clarification."

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1. D Why would inmates get so excited about debating topics that aren't important to them, like the breast milk topic?

EXPLAIN: *it's a deepening question because I understood what I read, that inmates got excited about debating anything, but I wonder why, which is information not given.*

2. Do all prisons have schools?

EXPLAIN:

3. Does "astonished" mean surprised?

EXPLAIN:

4. Why did Parkhurst give his books to a prison instead of a college if the books were so rare?

EXPLAIN:

5. Why wouldn't universities want their students to read like Malcolm read? Isn't that what you do at university?

EXPLAIN:

6. C What is "really serious reading"? How is that different from regular reading?

EXPLAIN: *it's a clarifying question because I don't understand what the author means by "serious" reading even though it explains it in the reading so I need some clarification about the author's use of that phrase*

Directions: Create two questions of your own for Section 3 of the Malcolm X reading - one deepening questions and one clarifying question. Then explain in one written sentence or more why you think each is an example of the category.

Questioning: The Good and the Other Good

Teacher's Master

D = Deepening Questions.

- Deepening questions are about **what** has been written. Usually these questions come up when you understand what has been written but would like *more detail or more information*.
- "I understand what the author is saying, but I want more information beyond what they have provided"

C = Clarifying Questions.

- Clarifying questions are about **how** something has been written. Usually these questions come up when you *don't understand* what the author is trying to say because of unfamiliar words or phrasing.
- "I don't exactly understand what the author is trying to say so I need some clarification"

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1. **D** Why would inmates get so excited about debating on topics that aren't important to them like the breast milk topic?
 2. **D** Do all prisons have schools?
 3. **C** Does "astonished" mean surprised?
 4. **D** Why did Parkhurst give his books to a prison instead of a college if the books were so rare?
 5. **C** Why wouldn't universities want their student to read like how Malcolm read? Isn't that what you do at university?
 6. **C** What is "really serious reading"? How is that different that regular reading?