

What Is a Question?

Put simply, a question is a sentence, punctuated by a question mark, expressed to seek information. This could range from a short, precise, closed question demanding a single-word response to a lengthy, multi-faceted, open-ended question that demands a complex and lengthy response. Whatever their nature, questions are considered critical components of the teaching and learning process, and it is important for educators to be familiar with various kinds of questions and their appropriate use in the classroom.

Kinds of Questions:

It is sometimes said that "questions are the answer," implying the importance of being curious and asking the right questions to find the answers we are looking for, sometimes referred to as Socratic questions. This approach seeks knowledge and truth through a series of questions and answers with one leading to another. Didactic questions, in contrast, are those that deal primarily with factual information and are often used to test for recall and comprehension.

There are a variety of ways to classify questions, one of which is demonstrated in the previous paragraph. Questions can also be classified as convergent (those that have only one or limited number of answers). These are also called closed questions. They could also be classified as divergent (having many potential answers), also referred to as open-ended. Lead questions, as the term implies, are directed towards a desired response. Similarly, questions can be biased as opposed to being truly open and free of direction and bias. There are numerous other ways of classifying questions.

Perhaps one of the more useful ways of classifying questions is that based on Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive levels (listed below), which covers the range from simple knowledge-based recall questions, to higher order thinking skills involving analysis, to synthesis questions.

- knowledge (identification and recall)
- comprehension (organization and selection of facts and ideas)
- application (use of facts, rules, and principles)
- analysis (separation of a whole into component parts)
- synthesis (combination of ideas to form a new whole)
- evaluation (development of opinions, judgements, and decisions)

Questioning Strategies (Teachers):

- Begin asking questions at the start of a new term: let students know that this is an important strategy that you will use.
- Model questioning techniques to encourage students to do the same.
- Prepare good questions prior to the class, and avoid asking closed-ended questions.
- Questions should be clear and precise; ask only one at a time.
- Questions should be non-threatening.

Questioning Strategies (Teachers) *(continued)*:

- Provide adequate response time, and learn to be comfortable with 20 to 30 seconds of silent "thought time" for students to formulate responses.
- Pose a question to the entire class before you call on a student to answer. This allows for response time.
- Know your students well to determine if directing questions to individuals is appropriate.
- Be a good listener.
- Acknowledge all student responses to questions, and restate them for the class if necessary.
- Turn answers into opportunities for discussion or further questioning.
- Never fake responses. Admit if you don't know the answer and suggest ways to find the answer. This can lead to excellent modeling techniques.

Questioning Strategies (Students)

- Encourage students to ask questions—directly and through example.
- Model good questioning at appropriate times.
- There are no "dumb" questions. Nothing inhibits curiosity more than embarrassment in class about a question asked.
- Just because students may be hesitant to verbalize their responses does not mean that they do not have a response or are not thinking about the question posed.
- Provide assistance and detailed feedback where students are asked to list questions or things they want (need) to know, such as in the KWL technique.
- Encourage students to use questions in pairs and group discussions.
- Encourage students to ask higher order questions (Bloom's taxonomy).

Importance of Questions

Questions are important in many different ways. Initially they are important because they allow teachers to get to know their students and their interests, backgrounds, and experiences. Similarly, students' questions give them an opportunity to get to know the teacher. Questions are important as tools to assess your students' existing knowledge and skills, thus helping you determine your lesson and course planning appropriately. Questions help students clarify their own thoughts and ideas and may lead to asking their own questions or to involvement in class discussions. Questions may lead students to challenge their own beliefs and values and help them to determine what things are really important for them. Questions are the natural outcome of the innate curiosity that we all possess to try and make sense of the world around us and our role in it. Indeed, "questions are the answer."

Note: For related support materials see:

- *Success for All Learners (SFAL)*, Chapter 7 "Questioning and Discussion Strategies"
- TN 11: Asking Geographic Questions