

Designing Effective Discussion Questions¹

TYPES OF EFFECTIVE QUESTIONS

Here are some types of questions that tend to facilitate thoughtful, sustained discussions:

Analysis

Questions beginning with “Why...” “How would you explain...” “What is the importance of...” “What is the meaning of”

- Example: What is the meaning of Madame X’s comment about Jacque’s activities the week before their encounter at the opera?

Compare and Contrast

“Compare...” “Contrast...” “What is the difference between...” “What is the similarity between...”

- Example: What is the difference between the mother and the father’s attitudes toward the daughter’s relationship with Philippe?

Cause and Effect

“What are the causes/results of...” “What connection is there between...”

- Example: What is the cause of Lea’s distress when she looks at herself in the mirror?

Clarification

“What is meant by...” “Explain how...”

¹ Adapted from Stanford Teaching Commons. *Designing Effective Discussion Questions*.

<https://teachingcommons.stanford.edu/resources/teaching/student-teacher-communication/designing-effective-discussion-questions>

TYPES OF INEFFECTIVE QUESTIONS

Here are some types of questions that you'll want to avoid and that can lead to dead ends in discussions:

Simple Yes-No

Produces little discussion and encourages guessing.

- Example: "Is the Aunt expressing a desire for Gigi to marry?"

Elliptical

Too vague; it is not clear what is being asked.

- Examples: "Well, what do you think about the Don Juan's values?"

Leading

Conveys the expected answer.

- Example: "Don't you think that Colette is condemning the Don Juan figure for his lack of caring?"

Slanted

Closes down student who may not agree with the implied assumption.

- Example: "Why are Colette's young women so corrupt?"

Finally - Leave sufficient wait time after asking a question before answering it yourself, repeating it, rephrasing it, or adding further information. Wait at least ten to fifteen seconds before making any change in your question.