

EFFECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR LEADING DISCUSSIONS

Effective questions are the key to an effective discussion. Analysis, synthesis, and evaluation questions generally lend themselves to more in-depth discussion of the topic. However, starting with a few knowledge-type questions is an excellent way to get students warmed-up. Then progressing through comprehension and application questions will ensure that they understand the topic before you get to the in-depth discussion.

Prepare questions of each type before class will ensure a smooth transition in the discussion. Also, being able to identify the sorts of questions students are asking can help you gauge their level of understanding.

Type of Question	Explanation	Example
Knowledge	Simple questions that test for content knowledge of subject matter	What is the purpose of the mitochondria? Describe ...? Who, what, where, how?
Comprehension	Explain, interpret, give examples, summarize concepts in own words	What was the contribution of ? Retell ... ?
Application	Requires application of knowledge (use of rules, facts, principles)	How is ... an example of? How is ... related to ...? Why is ... significant?
Analysis	Requires application of principles in new settings	Compare and contrast ... with ...? What are the parts or features of ? What evidence do you have for ... ? Outline/ diagram ...
Synthesis	Requires combining ideas	How would you design ... How would you suggest ...? What might happen if you combine X with Y ?
Evaluation	Requires making a judgement	Do you agree with ...? What criteria would you use to assess ...? What is the most important ... ? What do you think about ... ?

COMMON “NON-QUESTIONS” TO AVOID

We may all catch ourselves asking these sorts of questions from time to time but they should be avoided as much as possible. Below is a list of the typical non-questions and some discussion on why they are not effective questions and tips how to avoid them.

Non Question	Example	Discussion and Tips
Overly general opening question	So, what do you guys think about democracy?	This question is too general and it requires students to transition instantly to a discussion environment without any introduction or warm up.
Filler-questions	Do you have any questions? Did you understand? You already know all this, don't you? Shall I repeat this?	Usually gets no response because no one will want to admit to not understanding the material or “look stupid” in front of the class.
Unanswerable questions	Do you still believe in Santa Claus?	The double jeopardy question. Answering no means that you used to believe in Santa Claus even if you never did.
Fuzzy questions	Why is parliament set up that way? What should Thompson have done in that case?	Overly general and not clear what is being asked. Try to focus questions on a main issue or single topic.
Asking & answering questions	Who won the last federal election? It was Stephen Harper with a minority government, wasn't it?	Ask one question and avoid giving the answer. Wait at least 5 seconds before saying anything more. If necessary repeat or rephrase the first question to encourage response.
Yes or No questions or one-word answer questions.	Did Alexander Graham Bell invent the telephone? In what year did Canada patriate the constitution?	Of limited use in keeping discussions going but can be OK in some situations as a prelude to other questions or at the beginning of class.
Run-on Questions	How did Wayne Gretsky become the premier hockey play in the NHL, did he win any awards, what sort of a coach is he?	Too many parts in one question and it changes direction at the end. Ask one question at a time.

Suggested references for further reading on asking effective questions:

Brualdi, Amy C. (1998). Classroom questions. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, 6(6).
Morgan, N., and Saxton, J. (1991). *Teaching, Questioning, and Learning*. New York: Routledge.