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## Designing Effective Discussion Questions

### ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS OVERVIEW

A good question is both answerable and challenging. It will inspire analysis, synthesis, interpretation, and critical thinking. Below are several types of questions and suggestions about when to use which kind. You'll also find useful information on how to manage group dynamics.

### WHERE TO BEGIN?

Experienced instructors learn to prepare a mix of questions—those that are easily answered, slightly challenging, or highly complex—that they can draw on as the discussion develops.

- Begin with material students are familiar with or feel comfortable with. This might be a question that can be answered with information from general experience or from basic data in the subject area.
- Once students are warmed up, ask questions requiring students to explain relationships among the units of information and to form general concepts.
- Let the discussion peak by asking questions that require students to apply concepts and principles they have developed to new data and different situations.

### 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 Jacques'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?
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### **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...”

### **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: “What about the aunt’s sexual history?” “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?”
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## **Managing Group Dynamics**

Choosing what questions to ask is only half the battle, however. How and whom you ask can also influence their effectiveness with the group. Pay particular attention to the following aspects of group dynamics:

- Decide whether to ask questions of a particular individual or the whole group. Sometimes calling on an individual may help to get a slow class going, but it can release the other students from the responsibility of formulating answers for themselves. It also puts students on the spot, which can decrease goodwill and intellectual risk-taking. Directing questions to the entire class may mean waiting longer for an answer.
  - 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.
  - Avoid rapid reward for responding. Rapid reward means calling immediately on the first person who indicates an answer or approving immediately of a correct response that a student has given. This prevents other students from evaluating the response for themselves and interrupts their thinking process.
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