

Five Basic Types of Questions



What types of questions are you asking students? Mastering five basic types of questions.

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All educators, no matter what level, need to be able to craft and create at least 5 basic types of questions. The art of asking questions is an ancient part of good teaching and one of the rudimentary skills all teachers should be able to master. Socrates believed that knowledge and awareness were an intrinsic part of each learner. Thus, in exercising the craft of good pedagogy a skilled educator must reach into learners' hidden levels of knowing and awareness in order to help them reach new levels of thinking through thoughtfully developed questions.

As you examine the categories below, reflect on your own educational experiences and see if you can ascertain which types of questions were used most often by your different teachers. Hone your questioning skills by practicing asking different types of questions, and try to monitor your teaching so that you include varied levels of questioning skills. Specifically in the area of Socratic questioning techniques, there are a number of sites on the Web which might prove helpful, simply use *Socratic questioning* as a descriptor.

1. **Factual** – Soliciting reasonably simple, straight forward answers based on obvious facts or awareness. These are usually at the lowest level of cognitive (thinking) or affective (feeling) processes and answers are frequently either right or wrong.

Example: Name the Shakespeare play about the Prince of Denmark?

2. **Convergent** – Answers to these types of questions are usually within a very finite range of acceptable accuracy. These may be at several different levels of cognition — comprehension, application, analysis, or ones where the answerer makes inferences or conjectures based on personal awareness, or on material read, presented or known. While these types of questions are valuable in exercising mid-level cognitive thinking skills, it is quite easy to expand students' cognitive processes even higher by adding another layer to these questions whereby teachers ask students to justify their answers in light of the evidence offered or the inferences made.



Example: On reflecting over the entirety of the play Hamlet, what were the main reasons why Ophelia went mad? (This is not specifically stated in one direct statement in the text of Hamlet. Here the reader must make simple inferences as to why she committed suicide.)

3. **Divergent** – These questions allow students to explore different avenues and create many different variations and alternative answers or scenarios. Correctness may be based on logical projections, may be contextual, or arrived at through basic knowledge, conjecture, inference, projection, creation, intuition, or imagination. These types of questions often require students to analyze, evaluate, or synthesize a knowledge base and then project or predict different outcomes. Answering these types of questions may be aided by **higher levels of affective** thinking as well — such as valuing, organization, or characterization. Responses to these types of questions generally fall into a wide array of acceptability. Often correctness is determined subjectively based on the possibility or probability of the proposed answer. The intent of these types of questions is to stimulate imaginative, creative, or inventive thought, or investigate “cause and effect” relationships.

Example: In the love relationship of Hamlet and Ophelia, what might have happened to their relationship and their lives if Hamlet had not been so obsessed with the revenge of his father’s death?

4. **Evaluative** – These types of questions usually require sophisticated levels of cognitive and/or emotional (affective) judgment. In attempting to answer these types of questions, students may be combining multiple cognitive and/or affective processes or levels, frequently in comparative frameworks. Often an answer is analyzed at multiple levels and from different perspectives before the answerer arrives at newly synthesized information or conclusions.

Examples:

a. How are the deaths of Ophelia and Juliet the same and yet different? (Compare and contrast.)

b. What are the similarities and differences between Roman gladiatorial games and modern football?

c. Why and how might the concept of Piagetian schema be related to the concepts presented in Jungian personality theory, and why might this be important to consider in teaching and learning?

5. **Combinations** – These are questions that blend any combination of the above.

You can easily monitor what types of questions you are asking your students through simple tallies and examining degrees of difficulty. Or, if your students are older, then ask them to monitor the types of questions you ask, allowing them to identify the types. For those of you who might be a bit more collaborative or adventurous in your teaching and want to give students some ownership in their educational processes, challenge them to create course related questions to ask one another. In my many years of teaching I was always pleasantly surprised at what students came up with.