

Preparing to Lead Shared Inquiry Discussion

This part of the course prepares you to lead a Shared Inquiry discussion. You will learn the differences between the types of questions readers ask, and you will learn why Shared Inquiry focuses on interpretive questions. You will then follow the steps of discussion preparation, from close reading of a text to finalizing a set of questions for discussion.



Types of Questions in Shared Inquiry

Questions drive the Shared Inquiry process. Over the course of sustained interaction with a text, many different types of questions will arise. Shared Inquiry leaders learn how to identify question types and when to use them in the process. One way to distinguish question types is to think about the number of reasonable answers to the question and the source of those answers.

Factual Questions

Factual questions ask about information provided in the text. They have one correct answer that can be found in (or inferred from factual statements in) the text.

Background Questions

Background questions ask about a text's larger context, such as the setting or cultural details. They can be answered with information found outside the text (such as from maps or the internet).

Speculative Questions

Speculative questions ask about events that do not take place in the text. They have many possible answers, which come from readers' imaginations.

Vocabulary Questions

Vocabulary questions ask about the meaning of words. They may have more than one reasonable answer (depending on the word and the context). Vocabulary questions can be answered from context or with a dictionary or glossary.

Interpretive Questions

Interpretive questions ask about the meaning of a text. They have at least two reasonable answers that can be supported with evidence from the text. Interpretive questions form the core of Shared Inquiry.

Evaluative Questions

Evaluative questions ask for readers' judgment or opinion on the author's ideas or point of view in light of their own knowledge, values, or life experiences. Evaluative questions have more than one reasonable answer because readers have diverse experiences and beliefs. They are best introduced after a group has completed a thoughtful interpretive exploration of a text.

Why Focus on Interpretive Questions?

The goal of a Shared Inquiry discussion is for participants to explore the meaning of a text in depth and to develop their own interpretations of it. The Shared Inquiry method focuses on interpretive questions because they best enable students to practice and develop the ability to:

- ◆ Generate, clarify, and develop ideas
- ◆ Find and explain textual evidence that supports their ideas
- ◆ Agree and disagree constructively with others' ideas
- ◆ Consider different interpretations of the same evidence
- ◆ Add to or change their ideas in light of others' interpretations
- ◆ Develop a well-reasoned, well-supported claim

A factual question takes readers to the text to find a single answer, but there is no reason for conversation or debate after they find it. An evaluative question invites diverse answers, but leads participants into a discussion of their own values, beliefs, and experiences to support those answers. Interpretive questions yield multiple answers *and* keep participants focused on the text.

TYPE OF QUESTION	NUMBER OF REASONABLE ANSWERS	SOURCE OF ANSWER(S)
Factual	1	Text
Interpretive	2+	Text and self (inferences, synthesis)
Evaluative	2+	Personal values, beliefs, and experiences

Preparation Steps

While much of leading Shared Inquiry involves asking spontaneous follow-up questions as you listen to students, you decide on the central interpretive question (and several related questions) in advance. The process of choosing a question begins during your own reading of the text. Compare your own questions with the discussion questions provided in your teacher's materials. Then revise and finalize your questions as you work with your students and follow your own curiosity.

Steps to Prepare for Discussion

Before working with students:

- Step 1:** Read twice and take notes
- Step 2:** Draft and test questions
- Step 3:** Refine questions (consulting teacher's materials)

During prediscussion activities with students:

- Step 4:** Consider students' interests
- Step 5:** Finalize questions for discussion

WRITING YOUR OWN QUESTIONS

Learning how to develop interpretive questions about a text is an important skill for a Shared Inquiry leader. It helps you think deeply about a text's many aspects so that you can be open to the diverse perspectives of your students. Learning to write good interpretive questions also enables you to use inquiry-based learning across the curriculum.

Preparing with a Colleague

If you and a colleague are using the same Great Books program, consider collaborating to plan your unit activities or discussion questions. Working with a partner can help you:

- ◆ Become aware of different perspectives
- ◆ Generate and refine interpretive questions
- ◆ Decide which unit activities to do
- ◆ Feel more confident about leading a discussion

Step 1: Read Twice and Take Notes

Before introducing a selection to students, you will want to know it well. By reading twice and taking notes, you become familiar with a text's key ideas, as well as its details and nuances.

During the first reading, try to get a sense of the text as a whole. Use notes to:

- ◆ Identify the key characters
- ◆ Determine the plot sequence
- ◆ Record your reactions and questions

During the second reading, pay attention to passages you found puzzling or important during your first reading. Use notes to:

- ◆ Highlight details you missed during the first reading
- ◆ Comment on connections between characters and/or events
- ◆ Identify recurring images and themes
- ◆ Answer some of your initial questions
- ◆ Pose questions about your initial observations

On the page below, the teacher's first reading notes are gray, and the second reading notes are blue. Notice how the notes differ.

He knew, though no one had told him, that she was a moon goddess. And he knew, though no one had told him, that he must never try to touch her.

The next morning, before he went to work, he watched her, and the next morning, and the next.

As the days went by, his loneliness disappeared. He skipped to the fields in the morning and walked quickly home in the evening. His dinner was always waiting. The house was shining. The air was sweet. And his heart was full.

mustn't touch!

Watches

not lonely anymore

Full heart

Why must KM never try to touch WW?

Thinks she'll leave or can't believe his good fortune?

Thinks she'll stay forever or worried she might be gone?

LEADER'S NOTES
AND QUESTIONS

Step 2: Draft and Test Questions

In addition to the questions that spring to mind as you read, others will occur to you after you review your notes. Jot down all of your questions, without judgment; you will fine-tune them later.

The table below shows especially good sources of interpretive questions.

Character Motivation Find questions in your notes about characters and their: ♦ Statements ♦ Actions ♦ Thoughts	Sample question:
Language Find questions where you noted: ♦ Interesting word choice ♦ Literary elements (similes, alliteration, etc.) ♦ Unfamiliar vocabulary ♦ Words or phrases with multiple meanings	Sample question:
Prominent Details Find questions where you noted: ♦ A striking description ♦ An unusual amount of detail ♦ Ambiguous or puzzling details	Sample question:
Theme and Character Development Find questions where you noted: ♦ Repeating ideas or expressions ♦ Related actions or events ♦ Development of characters' feelings, thoughts, or relationships	Sample question:
Author's Craft or Purpose Find questions where you noted: ♦ An unusual structure or sequence of events ♦ A striking style or tone of writing ♦ A belief or point of view the author might be trying to convey	Sample question:

Draft Questions

Look over your notes and chat with a colleague about the things that puzzled you or made you curious. Use this space to brainstorm potential interpretive questions.

Some of your questions are likely to be similar or closely related—that is fine. The more questions you have, the easier it is to focus on what holds your interest.

Your Notes and Questions:

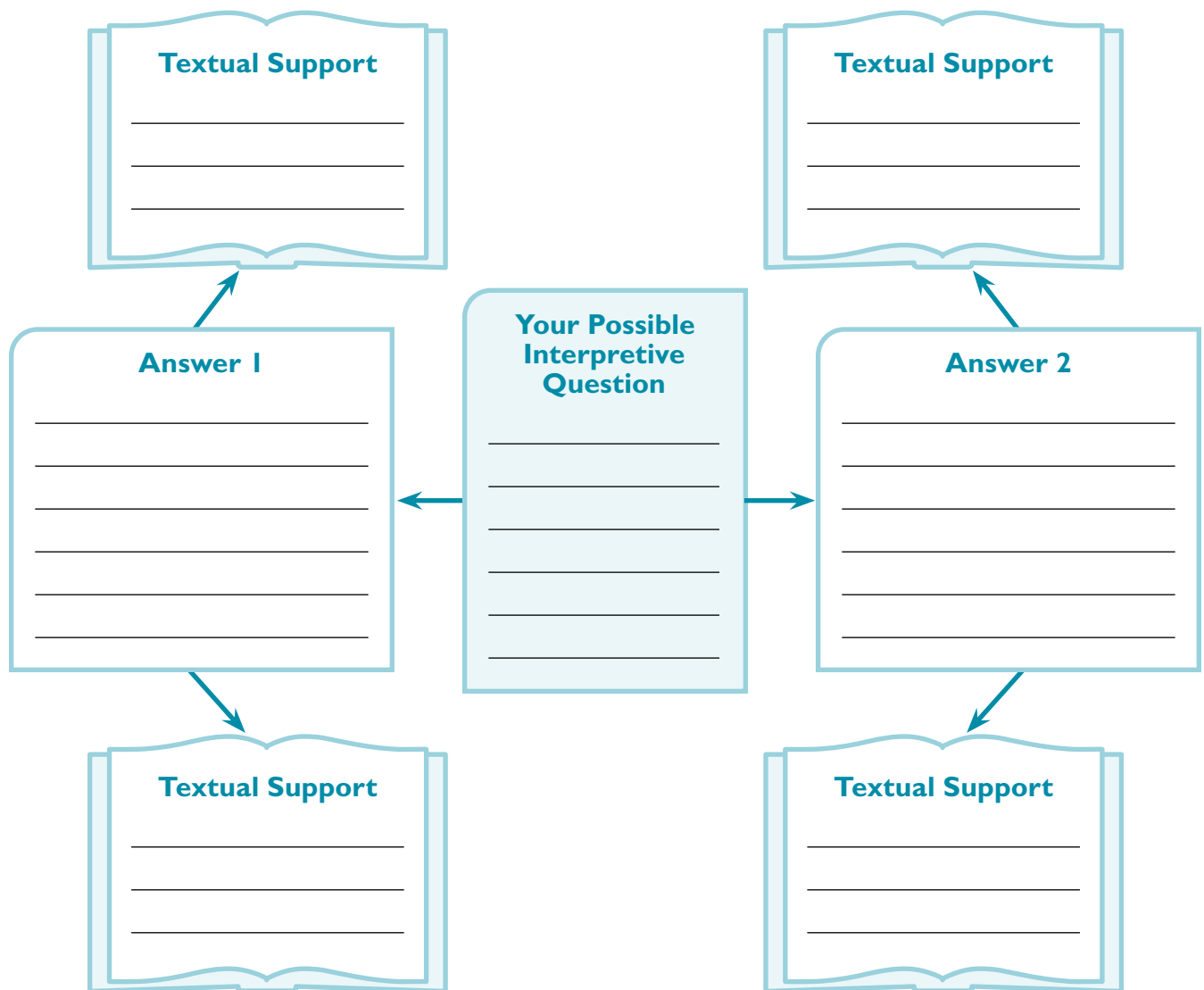
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Testing for an Interpretive Question

To be sure a question is interpretive and can sustain a Shared Inquiry discussion, test each one by asking:

1. Are there at least two reasonable answers?
2. Is there textual support for at least two answers?

If the answer to both questions is yes, your question is interpretive.



STUDENT-FRIENDLY QUESTIONS

Effective interpretive questions should not only sustain in-depth discussions, they should be written clearly and understandably so students can respond without hesitation. As soon as they hear a question, students should be able to:

- ♦ Grasp the issue they will explore
- ♦ Write or think of an initial response
- ♦ Launch into the discussion with little hesitation

Step 3: Refine Questions

After testing your questions to make sure they are interpretive, use the checklist below to see if they have the qualities that will make them effective. Do not discard questions that are missing a quality—consider them first drafts. You can almost always revise questions, as shown in the table to the right.

If you wish, compare your questions with the questions provided in your Great Books teacher's materials. You may see a question that captures your idea perfectly, or you may need to revise a question so that it better reflects your own curiosity and interest. As you gain experience with Shared Inquiry, you will develop the skill of crafting rewarding questions.

Qualities of Effective Interpretive Questions

QUALITIES	THIS MEANS:
Doubt	♦ I can see more than one good answer to the question. ♦ There is no single answer I want to lead students to.
Interest	♦ I am genuinely curious about the question. ♦ I want to listen to my students' ideas about this question.
Evidence	♦ There is textual support for at least two answers. ♦ The question will not lead students away from the text.
Clarity	♦ The wording is simple and direct, not overly complex. ♦ The question uses words my students will understand.
Specificity	♦ The question is not generic; it pertains only to this text. ♦ The question uses key words or quotes from the text.

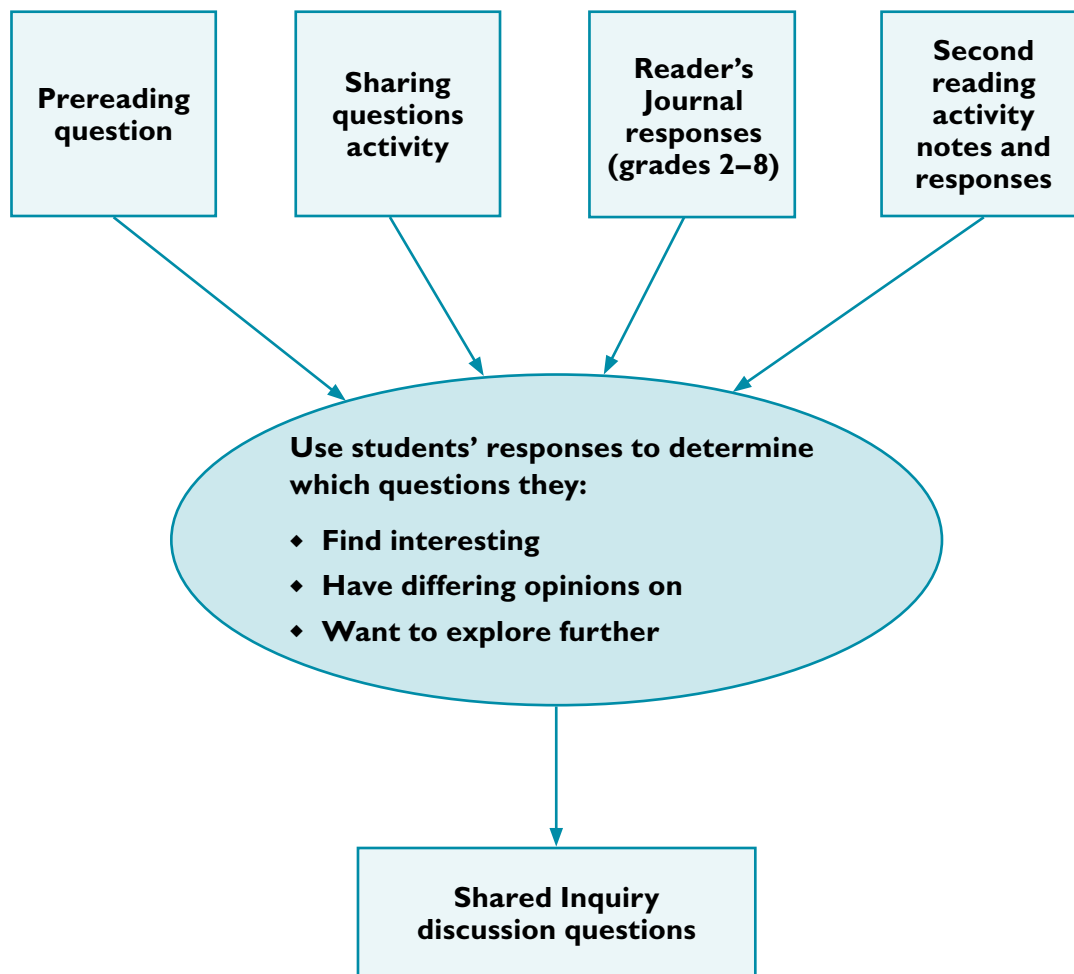
Revising Questions

	FIRST DRAFT QUESTION	REVISED QUESTION
DOUBT	<i>Does Mrs. Jones want to teach Roger right from wrong?</i> The text doesn't leave much doubt that the answer to this question is yes. To revise, return to the place in the text that first suggested your question.	<i>Why does Mrs. Jones say, "You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong"?</i> This question asks why Mrs. Jones wants to teach Roger right from wrong. Questions about character motivation frequently have several answers.
INTEREST	<i>How does Roger's time with Mrs. Jones change him?</i> This question asks participants to list ways in which Roger changes, which is not likely to inspire much discussion.	<i>Is Roger careful to sit where Mrs. Jones can see him because he is afraid of her or because he respects her?</i> This question focuses on a passage that could reveal a change in Roger. It also asks students to choose between two possible answers; this can help to spark debate if the choices are (roughly) equally compelling.
EVIDENCE	<i>What bad things do you think Mrs. Jones did when she was Roger's age?</i> This speculative question requires students to guess at an answer, as the text gives no information about Mrs. Jones's past.	<i>Why does Mrs. Jones tell Roger that she has "done things, too, which I would not tell you"?</i> This question asks about Mrs. Jones's motivation for sharing her past. Readers can find support for their ideas in the text.
CLARITY	<i>Why does Mrs. Jones adopt such an authoritative attitude toward Roger?</i> This question uses high-level vocabulary and is not clear about what part(s) of the text students should focus on.	<i>Why does Mrs. Jones tell Roger, "When I get through with you, sir, you are going to remember Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones"?</i> This question quotes the story. Students will comprehend the question and immediately know what passage it refers to.
SPECIFICITY	<i>What is the theme of this story?</i> This question can be used with any piece of literature. It is unlikely to engage students.	<i>Why can't Roger say thank you to Mrs. Jones?</i> This question explores a theme in the text—gratitude—through the lens of the puzzling final scene.

Step 4: Consider Students' Interests

After you refine one or two main questions you wish to explore with students, you are ready to begin the unit activities. Keep your questions in mind, but remain open to modifying them based on students' responses to the selection and their readiness for exploring particular issues.

In the Shared Inquiry sequence of activities, there are numerous ways to gauge students' interests (see the diagram below). As you lead the activities and review their work, pay attention to questions your students gravitate toward. Honoring students' genuine curiosity and interest, as well as your own, is one of the keys to an engaging, thought-provoking discussion.



Step 5: Finalize Questions for Discussion

The final step in preparing to lead Shared Inquiry discussion is to organize five or six interpretive questions into a focus and cluster question set. Question sources can include:

- ◆ Interpretive questions you crafted before beginning unit activities
- ◆ Questions students wrote or asked during unit activities
- ◆ Discussion questions provided in your teacher's materials

The Focus Question

The interpretive question you choose to begin Shared Inquiry discussion is called the *focus question*. The focus question:

- ◆ Addresses a central issue in the selection
- ◆ Requires examination of a number of passages
- ◆ Can sustain an in-depth discussion

Cluster Questions

Think about passages that are related to your focus questions, and notice any questions you wrote beside them. Those questions can be used as *cluster questions*. Cluster questions:

- ◆ Consider the focus question from different perspectives
- ◆ Examine different passages, incidents, and details
- ◆ Explore connections between incidents or between characters
- ◆ Encourage rereading and analysis of ambiguous passages

The diagram on the next page shows how cluster questions address passages related to the focus question.

Ask cluster questions when:

- ◆ Parts of the story relevant to the focus question have not yet been discussed.
- ◆ A passage that a cluster question addresses is cited as evidence.
- ◆ Students drift from the focus question or need to consider new ideas.

She still held him tightly. But she bent down enough to permit him to stoop and pick up her purse. Then she said, "Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

Firmly gripped by his shirt front, the boy said, "Yes'm."

CLUSTER QUESTION

Why does Roger agree with Mrs. Jones when she asks, "Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

"Then we'll eat," said the woman. "I believe you're hungry—or been hungry—to try to snatch my pocketbook!"

"I want a pair of blue suede shoes," said the boy.

"Well, you didn't have to snatch *my* pocketbook to get some suede shoes," said Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. "You could of asked me."

CLUSTER QUESTION

Why does Roger tell Mrs. Jones that he tried to rob her in order to buy blue suede shoes?

FOCUS QUESTION
Why doesn't Roger run away when Mrs. Jones turns him loose to wash his face?

CLUSTER QUESTION

Why does Roger take care to sit where he thinks Mrs. Jones "could easily see him out of the corner of her eye if she wanted to"?

The woman did not watch the boy to see if he was going to run now, nor did she watch her purse, which she left behind her on the daybed. But the boy took care to sit on the far side of the room, away from the purse, where he thought she could easily see him out of the corner of her eye if she wanted to. He did not trust the woman *not* to trust him. And he did not want to be mistrusted now.

CLUSTER QUESTION

Why can't Roger say thank you to Mrs. Jones?

The boy wanted to say something other than, "Thank you, m'am," to Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, but although his lips moved, he couldn't even say that as he turned at the foot of the barren stoop and looked up at the large woman in the door. Then she shut the door.