

Questioning That Deepens Comprehension

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Editor's note: This post is co-authored by [Nancy Frey](#), a Professor of Literacy in Educational Leadership at San Diego State University and a credentialed special educator, reading specialist, and administrator.

Questions are a common way for teachers to check for understanding, right? The answer we're looking for is "yes." Who hasn't questioned a group of students to determine whether or not they understood the content? Unfortunately, not all questions are created equally. We propose four over-arching questions that can be used to scaffold students' thinking about complex texts. You can tailor these questions to any book that your students are reading:

- What does the text say?
- How does the text work?
- What does the text mean?
- What does the text inspire you to do?

What does the text say?

The questions in this category require students to think literally about the text. These questions focus on the big ideas or general understandings as well as key details. We believe that understanding the text at the literal level is important in order for students to eventually understand a text at deeper levels. In fact, we think it's impossible for students to make logical inferences about a text that they don't understand literally.

The amount of time that teachers spend at the literal level will vary based on student responses. When we read over our students' shoulders, check on their annotations, and listen to their collaborative conversations, we know when they are ready to move on. Sometimes, we have to ask a lot of literal questions; other times, not so many. We have

learned that asking these questions is much more effective than telling students what to think about the text. To do so requires that we develop several questions, knowing that we might not use them all, depending on how students respond.

Questions at this level could include:

- What is the relationship between the narrator and the main character?
- Does the author use any symbols? What do they mean?
- What is the role of _____ in the book?

How does the text work?

When students have a grasp of the text at the literal level, we move to the structural level. These questions focus on vocabulary and word choice, text structures, author's craft (such as genre, narration, and literary devices), and author's purpose. Structural analysis requires that students think about the moves of this particular author and also about why writers make specific choices. Again, we linger as long as necessary at this phase, yet we try to move on as soon as possible. Understanding the internal structures of the text helps students think more deeply about the information contained within the text.

For example, questions at the structural level could include:

- What is the _____ referenced by the narrator?
- What words or phrases does the narrator repeat, and how does that affect the tone of this passage?
- Are there any analogies or metaphors? What do they mean?

What does the text mean?

The third level focuses on inferential analysis, and includes the logical inferences that students can make about a text. In addition, at this phase, students compare texts and the ideas in several texts as they come to understand the targeted text more deeply. In doing so, they form opinions and arguments about texts or related ideas. As we have noted, inferential analysis is predicated on students first understanding the text at the literal and structural levels. It's really hard for students to respond to these types of questions if they have no idea what the text says literally or how the author constructed the text.

Questions at the inferential level could include:

- What is the author's attitude toward _____? What is your evidence of this from the text?
- How does the narrator in this text reflect society and society's views toward _____?
- What can you tell us about the narrator? How do you know?

What does the text inspire you to do?

When students deeply understand a given text, they want to take action. They want to do something with the information that they've gained or the perspectives they've developed. This is when we know that students comprehend the text. Importantly, not every student will be inspired in the same way. Sometimes, students want to write about texts. Other times, they want to engage in research or further investigation. Some students may want to present their ideas and understandings, while others may choose to participate in a debate or Socratic seminar. And this is where the learning gets exciting. Students want to take action, based on a text they read and understood deeply, because now they are personally invested. In doing so, they become stewards of their own learning, and teachers can provide guidance about the types of products that can demonstrate deep understanding. Of course,

teachers should provide examples of quality work so that students will know what's expected of them for each of these acts of inspiration.

These questions include:

- Do you want to draw your own illustrations for the book?
- Do you want to write a letter to the author?
- Do you want to meet with a group of friends and talk about the book?
- Do you want to read other books by the author?

What questions do you ask your students to check for understanding? Please describe your process in the comments section of this post.