

Asking Questions: Some General "Tips" and Examples

A question is a tool, like a shovel, or an archaeologist's tweezers and brush. It is a prism through which you can shine a text, to see it break up into its constitutive colours--or to see that rainbow come together again. It is a flashlight in a dark cave. It is. . .well, you get the picture. The question is your most useful tool. Here are some things to look out for when constructing your questions, some things to work toward--and to avoid.

1. **"Accurate reading" or DESCRIPTIVE or WHAT questions.** I.e. questions that have a "right" or "wrong" answer, or which encourage you to "restate" or paraphrase the "message" or "argument of the text. These are *good starting points*, but you should try to *use them as a basis for more ANALYTICAL or SO WHAT questions.* *Always try to push the question further.*
2. **Details:** Ask questions that direct you to the details, the "nuts and bolts" of the text. These will produce CONCRETE answers ILLUSTRATED by the text and will keep you from relying on unsubstantiated generalizations.
3. **Debate:** Often questions that posit an "either/or" are helpful as they challenge you to look at the text from a variety of perspectives. "Test" out these options in discussion. Look to the details of the text to substantiate one or the other. Go further: ask if it really is an "either/or" situation. Could it be a "both/and?" Is the dichotomy a false one? Why? Why not?
4. **Patterns:** Ask questions that identify patterns of form, imagery, argument or issues in the text and that encourage you to see how these patterns function, how they interact, how they relate to a central idea or theme or strategy.
5. **Form/Content/Context:** Ask questions that encourage you to link these elements and to see how they work together, or against one another.
6. **Relationships:** Ask questions that encourage you to see the relationships between various aspects of the text: "What is the relationship between. . ." is a good way to start.

EG. Q: If "wild peaches" represent women's sexuality, then what is the relationship between "wild peaches" and "meager sheaves" of wheat? Or between "wild peaches" and the domestic images like "Homespun" and "knitted mufflers?"
7. **Question Chains:** Often questions will generate other questions. This is when you know you are on a roll. Each question will build on the one before, leading you "deeper" into the text, causing you to ask more and more fundamental questions, to make more significant connections, to come to more significant generalizations about the values, concerns, strategies etc. that shape the text.

EG. Q: Why does Wylie choose the title "Wild Peaches" for her poem?
A: --implies different stages: seed, flower, fruit, decay--all completed without human touch--wild

This sets off a question chain:

Q: (Why) does Wylie make a distinction between "human touch" and "wild?" Is one valued over the other? Why? Why not? What in the poem illustrates this value? How does this distinction relate to the form of the poem--the sonnet--which epitomizes structure, form, control etc.?

8. **"Hidden Questions" and "Buried Assumptions"**: Often a question will signal that you have "subliminally" apprehended a pattern or important issue, but you have not fully articulated it. This will turn up as a "hidden question" or "buried assumption." What are you assuming in your question? Are there any terms in your question that can themselves be questioned? Are you using a particular definition of a term that might have other associations?

EG. Q: ("Wild Peaches") Why [does the poem begin with]"You say?" Shouldn't it be "WE?"

"Buried Assumption": Why *should* it be "WE?" What's the difference between "You" and "WE?" Why *isn't* it "WE?" What in the poem--or your own experience/knowledge etc.--leads you to *expect* "WE?" Does the poem value "WE" over "You?" Illustrate this.

"Hidden Question": You've seen a *relationship* between "You" and "WE" in the poem. Ask a question that will help you to make this VISIBLE. What is the relationship between these two speakers? What else in the poem (those images of hunting, or the contrast of "lotus-eaters" and "Puritan marrow," perhaps) helps to clarify or characterize this relationship? Why does the poem *begin* with the 'voice' of someone 'else?' What is the effect of this?

(NOTE: Most of these examples are taken from student question assignments and instructor's comments. Thanks to all of you--both those quoted here and those as-of-yet-unsung--who are working so hard and getting sore brains.)