



The Art of the Dialogue Question Set

BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR FRAMING + SEQUENCING

WHAT IT IS

The series of questions or prompts that will support the main body of your dialogue process, whatever the format or mode.

HOW TO DO IT

Consider your purpose + objectives. What are you hoping participants will *think, know, feel* or *do* during or as a result of this dialogue? What do they need to do in order to get there? Think of each prompt as one step guiding participants to the next step towards your ultimate purpose. Don't try to get from A-Z in one question!

Consider your dialogue parameters. How many participants? How much time do you have? (Not counting the opening check-in, framing/norms, or final reflection and synthesis.) 3-6 questions is generally a good number.

Craft + sequence questions in light of your purpose + parameters, using the guidelines on this page and page 2.

Set priorities. Which questions are absolutely essential to address? Which are "flex" questions that can be dropped or adapted in response to the dialogue as it is emerging and taking shape? Be prepared to adapt + add.

AN EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE QUESTION SET...

PROMOTES

Curious, humble, self-reflective DIALOGUE	NOT	Competitive, arrogant, critique-oriented DEBATE
Localized, text-based and/or personal reflections and questions on the topic	NOT	Depersonalized generalizations, sweeping claims, and broad judgments related to the topic

INCORPORATES

Participants' identities, interests, and goals	WITHOUT	Forcing people to speak for their communities or reveal identities or experiences they aren't ready to
Facilitator's desired focus for the session	WITHOUT	Coercing participants towards particular answers + viewpoints

BUILDS LOGICALLY

LESS high-stakes + vulnerable (acknowledging different comfort levels)	TO	MORE high-stakes + vulnerable (building trust and community as the dialogue progresses)
Foundational UNDERSTANDING (comprehend, define, identify...)	TO	Complex MEANING-MAKING (analyze, evaluate, synthesize, create...)
LOCAL (text, self, classroom, campus)	TO	GLOBAL (community, state, nation, world)





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STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING BASIC PRINCIPLES

TO ACHIEVE

Dialogue, not debate

Localized, text-based, personal reflection

Foundational understanding that builds to complex meaning-making

Less to more vulnerable sharing + risk-taking

Local to global reflection

Content tailored to participants (without targeting)

Facilitator's goals (without coercion)

TRY THIS

- Avoid questions that promote binary or absolutist ways of thinking (e.g. "Do you think X or Y?" "What's the best/worst...?"). Instead: "What do you think about X? Why? How did you get there?"
- Avoid "Do you agree/disagree" and "Should...?" question stems. Instead: "Under what circumstances would X be true/not true?" (from *Try to Love the Questions* by Lara Schwartz)
- Encourage participants to speak from a position of not-knowing rather than (only) authority (e.g. "What are you unsure about regarding X?" or "What do you wonder about X?")
- Encourage participants to reflect on + respond to others' comments as much as share their own

- Ask "What have you observed about X?" to emphasize personal perspective vs. essential(ized) truth
- Direct questions to "you" as a pronoun instead of "we" or "one"
- Ask "Who do you mean by 'we'?" as a follow-up to generalizing comments
- In text-based questions, ask "What stands out?" or "How do you understand X?" or "How do you think the author understands X?" rather than "What does X mean?" (+ ask for citation of the text!)

- Refer to Bloom's Taxonomy (https://www.apu.edu/files/blooms_taxonomy_action_verbs.pdf).
- Take time to define key terms + concepts together, even if you believe they are/should be familiar
- Start with questions that focus on defining, comprehension, identification, comparing/contrasting (more concrete, more "objective," more problems-oriented)
- Build to questions that ask for analysis, application, critique, recommendation, synthesis (more abstract, more judgment-based, more solutions-oriented)

- Initiate dialogue with a "springboard" text or piece of media to respond to. Have participants discuss what happens to the people in the text first and then invite connections to their own lives.
- Ask participants to reflect on schooling or community environments instead of family/home life
- Ask participants to reflect on personal questions in writing, then make sharing in dialogue voluntary
- Frame questions in a way that allows people to choose the level of personal disclosure they feel ready for, e.g. "Reflect on a time you experienced, witnessed, or became aware of X"

- Ask participants to respond through this sequence of frameworks: text → self → classroom → campus → community → city → state → regional → national → international (not trying to fit all of these contexts in a single conversation!)

- Use what you know about participants' interests to select texts and determine focus for questions
- Avoid questions directed to specific individuals or social groups (e.g. "As a woman, when have you experienced sexual harassment?" Ask all: "When are you most aware of your gender expression?")

- Refer to your objectives while crafting prompts. Align questions to those action verbs clearly + explicitly (e.g. if the objective is "apply X theory," frame question through theory: "How might a virtue ethicist view this issue?")
- Avoid leading questions that make your own position obvious. Instead: "How would you respond to someone who thought X?" or "Under what circumstances might you believe X?"