



LEAP Online

Learning Excellence Achievement Pathway Online Tutorial



How to Ask Better Questions for Critical Thinking

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Introduction

“Why do we eat vegetables? How do fish breathe underwater? What would happen if...?”

Cindy, 4 years old

The case for questioning

Kids ask a lot of questions. Studies show that the average curious tot asks over a hundred questions a day. Yet that number declines the older we get.

As adults, we value answers over questions. We want others to see us as knowledgeable, and we feel proud when we provide solutions. Answers get all of the glory, but they shouldn't.

Thoughtful questions spur discussion, surface new information, and challenge us to examine assumptions and think critically.

The bottom line

Behind every smart decision is a wise question. And in this tutorial, you'll learn how to ask better questions to reach informed conclusions.

The Value of Good Questions

Good questions solicit useful information. They reveal new ideas, observations, and evidence. The best questions also probe assumptions, expose faulty thinking, and explore alternative perspectives.

Explore the areas below to conceptualise how good questions advance critical thinking:

A dark night

Navigating complex decisions or problems is like exploring an unfamiliar landscape on a dark night.

A torch

In this metaphor, asking targeted questions is like shining a torch. Each question spotlights a new landscape feature, helping you orient and see things more clearly.

“To ask the right question is already half the solution to a problem.”

Carl Jung

6 Socratic Question Types for Critical Thinking



But with so many possible questions, how do you identify the most beneficial? Scholars often use the disciplined questioning techniques of ancient Greek philosopher Socrates as a framework. Read below to explore six types of Socratic questions for critical thinking.

Clarify thinking

First, you might ask questions to clarify your own or others' thinking. Increase understanding by pressing for details with prompts like:

- What's the problem or question?
- What are our goals or priorities?
- Can you give an example?
- Can you explain further?
- What do you mean by...?
- How do you define...?
- Are you saying...?

Challenge assumptions

Great questions reveal and challenge assumptions, or predispositions and beliefs a person holds true. Ask these questions to yourself. Here are examples of how you might phrase them in a group setting:

- What are we assuming, and why?
- Is the assumption that...?

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- Is that always the case? What are some exceptions?
- What might we assume instead?
- How can we verify or disprove these assumptions?
- What information do we need/are we missing?
- What would happen if...?

Examine reasoning and evidence

Critical thinking also involves questioning evidence or reasoning. You can examine the rationale behind an argument with questions like:

- Why do we think/say that?
- How do we know?
- What led us to this conclusion, belief, or answer?
- What is the supporting and refuting evidence?
- Why do we think the evidence is valid? Is there reason to doubt it? How can we find out if this is true?

Explore alternative perspectives

Include questions that explore alternative perspectives. Consider different views, and analyse a problem or decision from different standpoints by asking:

- What's the counter-argument?
- What's another way to look at it?
- What are some alternative ideas, options, or explanations?
- Who might see this differently? Why?
- Who else is affected by this decision/problem? How might they perceive it? What are the pros and cons of...?
- Why is...best?
- What else are we missing?

Consider the consequences or implications

Another Socratic question type that will help you to zoom out and consider the consequences or implications of a problem, decision, or action. Ask these questions for a bird's-eye view:

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- What are the larger implications of this problem or decision?
- What are the potential consequences of...?
- How does...affect...?
- How does...tie in with...?
- What does our experience tell us will happen?

Question the question

Finally, the last set of questions examines the issue or inquiry itself. Don't be afraid to get meta with questions like:

- What is the point or purpose of...?
- Why are we asking, solving, or considering this now?
- How might we reframe the question/decision/problem?

A Real-World Scenario



Let's apply Socratic questioning to a real-world scenario. In this example, Camilla is tasked with an assignment that requires her to critically evaluate the effectiveness of a new healthcare policy aimed at reducing hospital-acquired infections. As she delves into the assignment, she realises the importance of applying Socratic questioning to address various aspects of the problem.

Clarifying the question

Camilla begins by clarifying her thinking about the healthcare policy and its intended outcomes. She asks herself:

1. "What are the specific goals of this healthcare policy in terms of reducing hospital-acquired infections?"
2. "How does this policy aim to achieve these goals, and what evidence supports its effectiveness?"
3. "Are there any ambiguities or inconsistencies in the policy that need further clarification?"

Assumptions question

Next, Camilla challenges her assumptions about the effectiveness of the policy by examining the underlying reasoning and evidence:

1. "What assumptions underlie the belief that implementing this policy will lead to a significant reduction in hospital-acquired infections?"

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2. “Are there alternative explanations or factors that could also contribute to changes in infection rates?”

Examining reasoning or evidence

To explore alternative perspectives, Camilla considers the viewpoints of various stakeholders involved in healthcare delivery:

1. “What empirical evidence supports these assumptions, and are there any potential biases or limitations in the research?”
2. “How do healthcare professionals, patients, and stakeholders perceive the potential benefits of this policy?”
3. “What insights can be gained from considering the perspectives of different healthcare settings or regions with varying infection control practices?”

Implications question

Camilla then evaluates the potential consequences or implications of implementing the policy:

1. “What are the short-term and long-term consequences of implementing this policy on healthcare delivery, patient outcomes and resource allocation?”
2. “Are there any unintended consequences or ethical considerations that need to be addressed?”

Questioning the question

Finally, returning the learning outcome to evaluate the effectiveness of a new healthcare policy aimed at reducing hospital-acquired infections, Camilla asks herself:

1. “Does the assignment accurately capture the complexity of evaluating healthcare policies, or are there additional factors that should be considered?”
2. “How might reframing the learning outcome lead to a more comprehensive evaluation of the issue?”

The results

By applying Socratic questioning, Camilla is able to approach the assignment with a critical mindset, systematically evaluating the healthcare policy from multiple angles and considering its implications for healthcare practice and patient care.

Final Tips



As the example with Camilla shows, you can adapt Socratic questions to your situation. Rephrase questions, or come up with entirely new questions, depending on the situation. While there may be no “right” or “wrong” question, there are more and less effective questioning techniques. Follow these final tips to improve your art of inquiry:

- Ask open-ended questions over those that elicit a “yes” or “no” response. Open-ended questions typically begin with Who, What, When, Where, Why, or How. They’re better at encouraging critical thinking.
- Be clear. People must understand the question before they can provide a useful response. Keep questions specific, simple, and precise. Avoid overly wordy, ambiguous, or confusing phrasing. Reword questions as needed to aid understanding.
- Leave room for follow-up questions. Prepare your main questions in advance to give meetings structure and direction, but leave room for follow-up questions that emerge.

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- Give yourself and others time to think and respond. Critical thinking requires significant brainpower. Don't rush it. Allow yourself and others time to reflect before responding.

“By doubting we are led to question, by questioning we arrive at the truth.”

Peter Abelard

Summary

The moment you stop questioning is the moment you stop thinking critically. Good questions help us avoid “auto-pilot” and clarify, examine, debate, analyse, probe, and surface information or ideas. They push us to challenge the obvious and discover weaknesses in our logic. So, the next time you face a complex decision or problem, avoid jumping to conclusions. Instead, ask questions to inform the best response.



Practice makes habits. Asking questions may not come naturally to you initially. Practice brainstorming and asking questions anyway to exercise your brain’s curiosity and critical thinking skills.