

# Critical Questioning Method of Engaging with Texts

The critical questioning method invites students to engage with a text by generating a series of questions about it, beginning with simple questions of recall and moving to deeper questions of analysis, application, and synthesis. This method can be used with any text, although it yields its richest results when used with complex, primary sources.

## Three Ways of Engaging with a Text<sup>1</sup>

Students may have difficulty with the vocabulary and style of formal writings or historical documents. Some students may become overwhelmed and give up. Others read along, understanding each word, but find that when they reach the end of the paragraph, they don't know what they've read. Engaging with a text requires, first of all, that the reader identify key ideas, and look for relationships among ideas. What points does the text present? What explanations does it offer? Does it identify any causal relationships, or does it break an idea into its component parts? By carefully crafting level-one questions, the kind of questions that require students to explain what is explicitly stated in the text, the teacher can help students with basic comprehension of challenging texts.

Students may also need help finding the deeper meaning in complex texts. Some students may glide over metaphors, images, and literary allusions, looking for the “meat” in the reading. Others are baffled by seemingly unrelated images and get bogged down in literal interpretations of content that is essentially symbolic. Beyond the comprehension of explicit content, engaging with a text also requires that the reader interpret what the text implies. What assumption does the text make about what is important, or significant? What does the use of a metaphor or biblical reference reveal about the topic? By means of level-two questions, those that require students to interpret the meaning of the text, teachers can help students analyze difficult texts.

Finally, students may need help in translating ideas from a previous era to modern times or from an unfamiliar context to a familiar one. Some students may wonder, “So what?” while reading about a historical controversy; others may be intrigued by historical facts but see no connection to an analogous modern issue. The ability to use knowledge effectively in new situations is one of the goals of education and it can be an outcome of engaging a primary source document. How do people apply this idea in the larger world? How can we use this knowledge today? By challenging the students with Level Three questions, the teacher can help them apply what they have learned.

## Teaching Students to Ask Questions

Creating questions of any type—level-one, level-two, or level-three—requires the same thinking skills needed for answering the questions. Close reading and genuine engagement with the text are the basis for effective and provocative questions. Students find teacher-generated questions of all three types helpful as they grapple with difficult primary source texts, but asking students to create questions for their peers is also helpful. The process of crafting questions for one or more levels engages students more deeply with the text and actively involves them in the learning process.

In teaching students this method, it helps to have them practice with a text they are familiar with. Then they can move on to work with a text that is new to them and directly relevant to the course content.



## Learning by Doing with “Cinderella”

The following example uses the story of Cinderella. If you don't think all students in your group know this story, provide a different practice story, but be sure it is one that everyone knows. Or, catch the students' attention by assigning “Cinderella,” or another story, for homework, without providing an explanation!

### Level One: What Does the Reading Say?

**Target reading** comprehension and recall skills.

**Ask about** facts and arguments stated clearly and unambiguously in the reading.

**Try questions** that begin with “who,” “what,” “when,” or “where.”

**Examples** for “Cinderella” include:

- What were Cinderella's slippers made of?
- Who helped Cinderella to get ready for the ball?

### Level Two: What Does the Reading Mean?

**Target analysis** and interpretation skills.

**Ask about** what is implied, but not directly stated, regarding characters, symbolism, and literary references.

**Try questions** that begin with “why,” or “how.”

**Examples** for “Cinderella” include:

- Why do Cinderella's stepsisters treat her badly?
- How does Cinderella's name illustrate her role in the family?

### Level Three: Why Does the Reading Matter Today?

**Target application** and synthesis skills.

**Ask about** larger, more universal issues and their implications, even though these may not be found in the text.

**Try questions** that begin with “why” or “to what extent.”

**Examples** for “Cinderella” include:

- Why are older women often portrayed as evil in fairy tales?
- To what extent is “happily ever after” a realistic goal for married couples?

Teaching students to generate questions on the three levels not only engages them more deeply in the shared learning process but also helps them to be conscious of critical thinking skills to use across the curriculum.



Endnote

1. Further information on these three types of questions may be found in *Understanding by Design: Professional Development Workbook*, by Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2004).

