



# RETHINKING QUESTIONS

A GUIDE



**TOPIC:**  
Questions

**PURPOSE:**  
This resource walks through how to create dialogic questions for the classroom and good questions for a classroom dialogue.

## Designing Good Questions

### 1. Think of the purpose first. Will asking this question achieve its intended purpose?

Be intentional about asking questions that impact the person, the relationship and the response in the way you intend.

- The purpose of our dialogue questions is to move away from analytical thinking, focusing instead on breaking stereotypes and inspiring curiosity, empathy and greater understanding of others.

### 2. What's new? Does it offer new information, understanding or meaning?

Dialogue questions help people get unstuck from the old conversation and go deeper into meaning—inviting new possibility. They move people from speaking about action to speaking about meaning.

- Good dialogue questions stay away from black and white answers, inviting people to share the complexities of their experiences and thinking about issues normally discussed in pro and con terms.

### 3. Does it have any implicit assumptions about what is right or wrong?

Many questions aren't actually questions; they are statements veiled as questions, carrying implied judgment or rhetorical advice.

- Good dialogue questions ask about that which we don't already know the answer.
- Good dialogue questions don't leave anyone guessing about what the right answer is because there is not one.
- Good dialogue questions avoid labels and assumptions that put people in boxes. They expand the conversation—sometimes even asking people to speak to two or more sides of their perspective.



#### 4. Can people answer the question for themselves from their experience?

If people don't feel they are equipped to answer a question, they won't feel welcome to join in the conversation. Additionally, if questions use language that participants cannot easily understand, they will not feel able to respond.

- Good dialogue questions invite speaking about deep fundamental concerns and hopes related to dignity, security and identity in such a way that even those who do not share those same concerns or hopes can understand. Everybody should be able to answer the question; there should be multiple doorways into the question.

#### 5. How will this question impact your relationship with those responding?

Dialogue questions can either encourage connection or separation. Some questions reinforce power dynamics, assumptions about others or negative patterns of communication.

- Good dialogue questions allow people to see commonality where they once saw difference and/or difference where they once saw commonality. Asking questions intended to build understanding supports and strengthens relationship regardless of where people stand on an issue.

## What Makes a Good Dialogue Question?

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**Good questions for a dialogue often have these features:**

- They invite people to reflect on, and share something about, themselves—usually in the form of a **vivid story about a life experience**. This is likely to break a stereotype and inspire curiosity, empathy, and greater understanding of how that person came to have their particular perspective(s).
- They invite speaking about deep and fundamental concerns and dreams related to dignity, security and identity—that can be understood by others, even if they don't share them.
- They invite people to share the complexities of their thinking about issues that are normally discussed in pro and con terms.
- They avoid asking people to analyze, hypothesize, or try to find the right answer.
- They avoid labels that put people in boxes.
- They use language that is easily understood.
- They allow all participants to speak about something meaningful in their lives—not simply facts about them.
- They sometimes ask for the two sides of something in people e.g. asking for hopes and fears, what's appreciated and what's troubling. Such questions allow people to see commonality where they once saw difference and difference where they once saw commonality.

**In sum, a good question for dialogue will allow people to be known for:**

- Who they are, as opposed to as a stereotype
- What they truly care about, their deep hopes or fears
- What in their life has shaped who they are and what they care most about
- What aspects of their views are more complex than one would guess from a typical pro and con way of presenting their views.



# Categories of Questions

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## Dialogue questions often generally fall into three broad categories:

1. *Peeling the Onion Questions* that unpack the context and impact of experiences.
2. *Bivalent Questions* that ask for two sides of a coin – e.g. what works or doesn't work.
3. *Progression Questions* that progress from asking about an experience that informs a belief, to the values at the heart of the matter, to places of complexity.

### ***Peeling the Onion Questions***

These questions that ask for an experience and, then, ask people to go deeper into the impact and context of that experience.

#### **Examples**

##### Question 1:

Describe a time when you experienced yourself as different---or believed that others *assumed* you might be different--- where you did not feel an "in-group" member. What took place? What did you believe others assumed about you at that time? How do you think this experience created, challenged or deepened any beliefs or ideas you had about yourself?

##### Question 2:

When this event happened:

- What would have felt *OK to say* at that time?
- What would *not have felt OK* to say at that time?
- What community forces or beliefs encouraged you to speak or be silent?
- How did your silence and/or your speaking about these things affect you?

### ***Bivalent Questions***

These questions ask for two different sides of a similar experience to allow people to think of themselves in both positions, even though being on one side or the other is likely to be more salient for some participants. They invite stories about life experiences and avoid a view of the people in the room as two opposing groups with no commonality across groups.

#### **Examples**

##### Question 1:

Share a gender expectation that you feel in this community that aligns with your own authentic sense of your gender.

##### Question 2:

Share a gender expectation that you feel in this community that runs counter to your own authentic sense of your gender.

### ***Progression Questions***

This progression of questions begins by inviting people to share where their own beliefs and values come from by grounding them in a specific experience. Then, they ask for the values that are at the heart of their belief. Finally, they ask them to examine ways in which this is more complicated than the way we usually speak about it. They allow people to share their own questions about their own thinking before being challenged by others.

- a. Please share a story from your life experience that might help others understand how you came to have the perspectives, concerns or values you have related to immigration.
- b. What is at the heart of the matter for you when you think about immigration?
- c. As you think about your perspectives and experiences with this issue, can you speak about any ways you might be pulled in different directions?