Question Matrix

What
A matrix of question starters to help students formulate all levels of questions, from recall to analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

Why
The ability to question, it could be argued, is the very essence of learning; an essential skill for both students and teachers and a key characteristic of a growth mindset. A questioning student is a learning one; he or she is, in the moment of questioning, a self-motivated learner and researcher—the very skill teaching is meant to foster. The questions students ask are a magnifying glass through which a teacher can analyze understandings, misconceptions and thought processes.

How
When it comes to asking “better” questions, not all words are considered equal; “why” and “how” are often considered superior to, say, “what.” The question matrix moves beyond this basic concept, by providing the framework to pair any question with an array of increasingly powerful verbs. As users move from top-left to bottom-right of the matrix, questions, and the accompanying thinking, increase in complexity. Success with the matrix will increase as students begin to identify the types of questions they should be able to generate for a given purpose—literal to inferential. The matrix can help deepen thinking and enhance discussion for virtually any type of material: written, verbal, or visual (infographics or art work such as paintings or photographs). In addition to simply asking students to formulate questions about what they read, saw or heard, asking them to think, as Kelly Gallagher suggests, about what was not said will elicit a different, and likely even deeper, level of thinking.

For young or struggling students, you can scaffold their use of the matrix by breaking it down into 2 or 3 smaller matrices to help focus/limit their question choices and more readily differentiate between different levels and types of questions. For example, if you are trying to have them find answers in the text, you might create a smaller matrix with what, where, when, who, why and how on the left side, and is/does and has/did/was across the top, before moving on to more complex questions that venture into opinion, probability or prediction.

Important note: It is not essential that students pair from the left and top columns; many good questions start with words from either. The point is to spark the ability to ask questions that spark students’ interest and make learning relevant, not to adhere to a process for the sake of a process.

Food for Thought
“I don’t pretend we have all the answers. But the questions are certainly worth thinking about.” ~Arthur C. Clarke

“The wise man doesn’t give the right answers; he poses the right questions.” ~Levi Strauss

“I never learn anything taking, I only learn when I listen.” ~Lou Holtz

“The important thing is not to stop questioning.” ~Albert Einstein

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