

# Asking Good Questions

**Why do we care about asking a “good” question? Why is this skill important?**

Asking good questions lies at the heart of critical thinking—if you don’t have a good question, then the answer doesn’t matter. In all work contexts (law, business, medicine, academia), the person who asks the most relevant, engaging, and insightful question is the person most important to the organization.

Asking good questions is a crucial critical skill, one you will have the opportunity to practice in your participation game posts. When writing a discussion question, work hard to make it a “real” question, in other words, *a question you don’t have answers to*.

You should strive to make your questions focused (tied to particular paragraphs from the readings) and significant (tied to larger themes and to the meaning of the work as a whole). I recommend including quotations and examples from the text in order to make your questions as clear and concrete as possible.

Learning how to ask good questions is a skill that takes time, and may be frustrating at first. Perhaps you’re used to someone else giving you the important questions to ask of a text, or you may even be used to someone summarizing the key points for you—if so, then figuring out what to notice, think about, and ask questions of will seem like very new territory. Don’t worry—you’ll get better at it over time. Over time, you should notice a shift in the quality and kind of your questions.

**Helpful tips for formulating a good question:**

1. First, look at your reading closely, at several passages even. Jot down some notes for yourself, summarizing the reading in your own words. Are there any lasting thoughts you have when you are finished summarizing? A point you are confused about? Do you disagree with the steps the author took or the argument they are making? Again, a good question is *one you do not know the answer to*. This process may feel uncomfortable—it should. You’ll get better at it. Try to notice something about a specific passage, a shift in argument, or the tone of the piece.
2. The hallmarks of a good question in the humanities are that it is: **debatable, supportable, precise, and significant**.
  - a. **Debatable:** If your question is easily answerable, then it is not debatable (meaning, “yes or no” questions, questions asking about a certain fact of the text i.e. “When was this piece written?”).
  - b. **Supportable:** This is when you give evidence to support your question in the response. Cite any gaps the author makes that add to confusion about their

argument, or a contradiction you notice within the text. Basically, give context to your question within the broader piece.

- c. **Precise:** Use quotes within your question if you want, or include them in your response. Be specific—what sections of the text are you examining? This will also help you make your question supportable and relevant. You can use MLA citation for these questions, meaning, cite the page number in parenthesis after the quote.
  - d. **Significant:** Why should we care about this question? Why is this question relevant to the topics in lectures and readings? How might this inform our broader understanding of the topic? Might it change the way we look at a specific text?
3. Then reflect on the question and explain why this question is important (how can you justify it to your interpretive community? Why should we ask this question? How might it clarify the author's argument?)