

How to Design a Primary Source QFocus

A **Question Focus (QFocus for short)** is the stimulus or prompt about which students ask questions during the Question Formulation Technique (QFT).

The QFocus is often the most challenging part of designing a QFT lesson. It is also an essential piece to get right. Though it gets much easier with practice, there is always a bit of delicacy and iteration involved. As one participant in a training in Kyoto, Japan reflected, “designing a QFocus is like writing a haiku.” Like poetry, you’re distilling down complex ideas from your content and lesson objectives into a short, simple package: the QFocus.

A QFocus might be:

- A phrase, statement, or quotation
- An image or video
- A podcast or speech
- A hands-on experience or experiment
- An equation or data set
- A primary source
- A combination of the above

The one thing a QFocus is not: a question!

The QFocus is *not* a question

The core philosophy of the QFT is about turning the intellectual work of questioning over to those who may not be used to doing that work themselves. Students are wired to answer questions asked by the teacher. Even adults tend not to ask new questions when answering a question someone else has asked. The QFT intentionally disrupts this paradigm. But using a question as a QFocus limits the directions students may go with their questioning, in other words, limits their divergent thinking. It also sets up a teacher question as a model question, as a “good” or ideal question, which can become a barrier for some students in asking any question at all if they feel their questions do not measure up.

So, what *does* work as a strong QFocus that will work well for your students and your objectives? As with all teaching, there’s always a certain amount of artful experimentation and tailoring involved. Here are some basic guiding principles we’ve learned from teachers:

An effective QFocus is:

1. Directly tied to the main idea or teaching and learning objectives of the lesson
2. Simple...but not too simple
3. Interesting or provocative to the people in the room...but not heavy-handed or leading
4. Open for many possible avenues of questioning

1. Directly tied to the main idea or teaching and learning objectives of the lesson

Because the role of the teacher during the QFT is to design and facilitate the process, but not to interfere or participate in it, the QFocus is one of the key pieces that allows the teacher to set the agenda and objectives to ensure that student questions will cover the ground that needs to be covered. It is essential to pick a QFocus that you feel *directly* leads to the main ideas, themes, or teaching and learning objectives.

Students are often surprisingly literal and detail-oriented; they will go in the direction suggested by the QFocus, even if that means asking about each and every visual detail of the background of an image. They may not intuitively ask about an implied connection between the QFocus and the lesson objective, even if it seems obvious to you.

For example, adults typically assume an implicit connection between a primary source and the historical era it represents. Students may not. One QFocus, a primary source image of children working in a coal mine, elicited questions like “Who is that boy?” “Why is his face dirty?” rather than ones the teacher expected like “What is the Industrial Revolution?” “How did the Industrial Revolution impact child labor?” If the two words “Industrial Revolution” do not appear somewhere in the QFocus, it’s unlikely they will appear in the questions. Adding a statement, caption, or phrase can help make that implicit connection explicit.

2. Simple...but not too simple

As Henry David Thoreau wrote, “simplify, simplify, simplify!” In general, a QFocus should be simple enough that students can begin asking questions without additional information or explanation. Look for words, terms, or graphics that may trip students up and consider alternatives (unless the objective is for students to ask about the terms they don’t know and need to better understand, which is a great form of formative assessment!).

There is no “one size fits all” QFocus. “Too simple” varies depending on the age group of your learners, the objectives of the lesson, where learners are in a unit and their background knowledge, and a host of other factors. In general, a one word QFocus may be too simple, and may not give students enough different paths for questioning.

For a group of first graders, the phrase “people, animals, and friends” was probably too simple. Children asked about people, animals, and friends individually, rather than the relationships between people and animals (the main objective). They may have benefited from more connective tissue between each noun or perhaps a picture of an animal helping a person that accompanied the phrase.

Images and videos in particular are information-dense and complex, and students can get very involved in examining details that may be tangential. Picking a short clip to play on a loop a few times, having students jot down observations while listening to a video or podcast, cropping an image, or pairing a concise phrase with an image or video may help students focus.

3. Interesting and provocative to the people asking questions but not heavy-handed or leading

Interest and provocativity are relative and subjective. Ideally, a QFocus will be relevant and appropriately challenging to the people asking questions about it. College students in a marketing course began asking some pretty silly questions about a Michael Jordan advertisement (“How are his hands so big? Where did he get those sweet short shorts?”). They may not have perceived the advertisement as relevant to their ongoing work on designing a marketing campaign for a real client. A statement like, “the most lucrative marketing campaign of all time” may have been more provocative in this case.

Some teachers find that a juxtaposition of two primary sources (for example, two starkly different representations of Abraham Lincoln, between [a savior of the enslaved](#) and [the devil in disguise](#)) easily provokes interest by setting up an instinctual compare and contrast.

Occasionally, in the attempt to design an interesting QFocus, we can sometimes “show our hand” as the designer a bit too much. This sets students up to disagree with the teacher, which may dampen authentic engagement and limit questioning. For instance, an English teacher using the QFocus “governments should ban certain books,” or a science teacher using “There is no need for lab safety rules” or any adult at all using “the dangers of teen technology use,” may find that students suspect they already know what the teacher believes and therefore feel disinclined to participate fully or productively in the process.

4. Open for many possible avenues of questioning

We’ve found that sometimes 1 word can completely change how likely a QFocus is to lead to diverse and divergent questions. For example, RQI co-director Luz Santana found that an initial QFocus she was using with a group of parents, “your child will be held back a year,” caused defensiveness and stymied questioning. Participants asked who was to blame but had trouble moving past that. Whereas her revised QFocus, “your child *may* be held back a year,” opened up questioning about process and how parents could play an active role in supporting their child.

One fourth grade teacher realized that her Hoover Dam QFocus (a picture of a town flooded by the Dam) would corner students into a single line of questioning--the controversy of Dam construction --too quickly. A photograph of the Dam itself, with several interesting details they could zoom in on, provided more opportunities for wide-ranging “how” and “why” questions the students were genuinely curious about.

Considerations for Designing a Primary Source QFocus

Primary sources are a natural choice for a QFocus. As artifacts plucked out of their original context, they are full of mystery and ripe for exploration. By the same token, they can be particularly information-dense and context-dependent: each detail becomes significant, a clue to understanding the circumstances in which they were created.

A teacher who is using a primary source as a QFocus has to be intentional about 1) *selecting* the right primary source(s) as the QFocus and 2) how they *present* it to students.

We talked above about how to *select* the right primary source that is provocative, not too complex, open for many questions, and directly aligned with your objectives. Step 2 is to decide if there are any additional primary source specific considerations you need to make in how you *present* the QFocus to students, or if the QFocus stands on its own.

Considerations for Presenting a Primary Source QFocus:

- Adding a short caption or citation
- Adding an anchoring word or phrase
- Allowing time for observation before questioning
- Cropping a primary source
- Zooming in and out on different parts of a primary source
- Layering in one piece of the QFocus at a time
- Juxtaposing two very different primary sources
- Offering typed/transcribed text for a primary source that is difficult to read

Note: It is perfectly fine not to add anything beyond one primary source and in fact, it is good to be cautious of over-complicating the process. A lone primary source, with no changes to it, may very well be the best option to achieve your objectives. Always consider your objectives and err on the side of the most minimal design interventions possible to maximize the space for students to do divergent thinking and questioning. Here are a couple examples of when one of the tips above enhanced the lesson:

1. Zooming in and out on different parts of a primary source

In the Hoover Dam lesson mentioned above, the teacher not only picked a primary source that had 3-4 details that could serve as “hooks” to elicit a few different lines of questioning, she also drew students’ attention to them by having them [zoom in and out on the photograph using Prezi](#).

2. Layering in one piece of the QFocus at a time

Rather than show [the full photograph of a 1961 civil rights protest](#) up front, a history teacher revealed it piece by piece. First she showed the man at the center of the photo holding a sign that reads “Can’t eat; don’t buy,” then the police and dogs looking on, and finally the caption at the bottom, stopping after each reveal to have students ask questions. Not only did it allow students to laser focus on details they might have otherwise overlooked, it also allowed them to see how their thinking evolved over time as they gained contextual information and applied it to their understanding.

3. Allowing time for observation before questioning

An ELA teacher helped make a handwritten letter from 1692 accessible as a QFocus by giving students time to observe it individually before starting the questioning. She provided each student with a link so they could look at it on their own devices, read it aloud to them twice while they examined it carefully, and then gave them time to ask a couple practice questions on their own before getting into small groups for the QFT.

Testing and Revising

By now, you’ve seen that QFocus design demands a lot of planning and a little flexibility and experimentation. Every teacher and every QFT trainer has had a QFocus that went a little off track once or twice. This is a normal part of the iterative, organic, even messy nature of risk-taking and question-asking that we’re asking students to be open to during the QFT.

The best way to test a QFocus is to give it to someone (a relative, friend, colleague, or neighbor) and have them ask the first few questions that come to mind about it. Try to test it out on at least one or two people who don’t have your depth of knowledge in the subject matter and therefore might give you a better idea of where students may go with their questioning.

It is very rare for a QFT to go completely off the rails. Even an “imperfect” QFocus elicits some insightful, relevant questions that can be refined and reworked in subsequent lessons. You’ll learn a great deal about who your students are and how they think no matter what you use as a QFocus! Ultimately, you are the best person to decide on your QFocus; your expertise with your students and content area should guide the design and development of each QFocus. Experiment a bit and enjoy!



- Your existing pre-reading, activators, or start of unit engagement activities may have a phrase or image to repurpose as a QFocus
- Skim some of the educator-written blogs or classroom examples organized by subject at rightquestion.org
- For geographic topics, search National Geographic's [resource bank](#) or [geographic topic list](#)
- For scientific phenomena, check out [The Wonder of Science](#), [OpenSciEd](#), or [nextgenstorylines.org](#).
- Scan the [primary source sets](#) or search the [teacher's blog](#) at the Library of Congress
- Review your existing essential questions for a lesson or unit--is there a way to rewrite one as a statement that could be used as a QFocus?
- Current events related to your topic
- Review your existing formative assessments to see if an equation or problem set also lends itself to a QFocus

What's next?: Check out the [Lesson Planning Workbook](#) for even more information about QFocus design and planning the rest of your lesson.