

Question Formulation Technique: FAQ



By Lauren Carlton and Dana Huff

1 What should I do with the students' questions after the QFT?

Dana Huff: "This is a great opportunity for students to formulate their own essay topics (the thesis is the answer to the question!). Also, students can use the questions as the basis for a Socratic seminar or Harkness discussion. Students can use them as the basis for a research project as well."

Lauren Carlton: "I've used the QFT as an activator-- in which case, we might not do much with the student questions at all. But in those cases, I will usually keep the questions and go back to them at the end of the unit/lesson, and ask the students to see how many questions they could now answer. I've also used it before an essay prompt with my AP Literature class to preview the language and themes they'll encounter. Other times, I've used student questions to make focus groups, to write exit tickets, or as short (paragraph) responses. You really can do so much with them-- or nothing at all. The process itself is worthwhile, even if it doesn't lead to some big assignment/project/essay. This was something I had to learn as I used it more and more; at first, I felt pressure to have the questions lead to something major, but I pretty quickly saw how powerful the process was without a huge end product in mind."

2 How do I come up with a good Question Focus?

Lauren Carlton: "I think of developing a Question Focus in the same way that I approach an activator question, an essay topic, a driving question-- I just try to think of something remotely compelling or universal in the text/unit. I love using quotes from the text, though I always make sure the quotes are relatively short. I also like to have variety in my Question Focus. Sometimes I'll use a quote; other times, I'll use a picture or a painting. I've used political cartoons (with or without the caption). I've also used single words and simple statements."

Dana Huff: "I find a really good quotation from the text or elements of the theme of a literary work both make good question foci. For example, my Song of Solomon example, "Everybody wants the life of a black man" (222) is open-ended and can be interpreted in a variety of ways. I was really stuck with a QFocus once, so I ran my ideas past a history teacher colleague. I realized through our conversation that I was drawn to a QFocus because it made me wonder, but I was hesitating to use it because I was concerned the students wouldn't understand. It was based on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story." My QFocus idea was "Stereotypes are incomplete." My colleague talked me through my concerns about the QFocus, and I ultimately wound up using it. Other times I have gone for thematic ideas. For example, my QFocus for a discussion of our summer reading of Rebecca by Daphne Du Maurier was "Gender and class in Rebecca." It was very bare-bones, but the students came up with some good questions."

3 What happens if students ask silly questions?

Dana Huff: “This hasn’t happened too often, but when it has, I just roll with it and capture them as if they are serious. After a few minutes, the students settle down and start taking it as seriously as I am taking it. I think the secret here is to come up with a QFocus that interests the students so they will be engaged in designing questions.”

Lauren Carlton: “In my experience, this doesn’t happen very often, but it does from time to time. The same rules apply as when a student asks a silly (and by “silly”, I’m assuming we mean irrelevant, or that the student is obviously not taking the process seriously) question in class. It depends on the situation-- I usually try not to give the question too much attention or weight, and if it starts to derail other students, I take a minute to ask the students to remind us why we are doing this. It usually doesn’t take much to get them back on track. I also almost always include group shares as part of the process. I have each group circulate around the room, choosing their favorite (best, most interesting, most important, etc.) questions from other groups. Knowing that this work is going to be seen by their peers is often motivation enough for students to come up with serious questions.”