

3.2 Lesson Plan: Asking Questions That Make a Difference

Overview

Students learn to think like journalists whose purpose is to ask good questions. Students use the Ask Your Lawmaker Web site (www.askyourlawmaker.com) to learn about effective and ineffective questioning. They examine different types of questions, identify examples of these types, and then rewrite ineffective questions to be more direct and effective. Finally, they submit original questions on the Ask Your Lawmaker site.

Key Skills

NCSS Civic Ideas and Practices Expectations: Practice forms of civil, civic participation consistent with the ideals of citizens in a democratic republic

McREL Language Arts Standards: use prior knowledge and experience to understand and respond to new information; use new information to adjust and extend personal knowledge base; draw conclusions and make inferences based on explicit and implicit information in texts; differentiate between fact and opinion in informational texts politicians.

ISTE NETS Standard: 3c: Research and Information Fluency: evaluate and select information sources and digital tools based on the appropriateness to specific tasks

Grades 7–12

Time Estimate One to two 45-minute periods, or one period plus homework

Required Resources Computers with Internet access

Preparation

Prior to teaching this lesson, bookmark all of the Web sites used in the lesson on each computer in your classroom, or upload all links to an online bookmarking tool such as del.icio.us (del.icio.us). Preview all of the Web sites used in the lesson to make certain that they are appropriate for your students. Make copies of Worksheet 3.2 for all students.

Procedure

- 1. Grab interest.** Ask: What is a trick question? Find out what students know about trick questions. Explain that a trick question makes you believe you should answer it in one way, when the question you are really meant to answer is hidden within it. The classic example is: "When did you stop beating your dog?" See if students are familiar with other kinds of trick questions.
- 2. Discuss the importance of asking good questions to politicians.** Skeptical citizens often point out that politicians only answer the questions they wish they were asked in order to stay "on-message." However, when a journalist poses a good question, a politician's response often speaks volumes, whether it addresses the question directly or not. Journalists who understand how to craft good questions are also prepared to pose substantive follow-up questions to learn as much as possible about the issues or people under investigation.

Talk with the class about how being an engaged citizen involves asking questions to lawmakers about where they stand on issues. Explain that we often do not think that how we ask a question may influence the type of response we get. There are many different ways to ask a question. You can be indirect or direct, dance around the issue or lead someone to answer in a particular way. When it comes to asking politicians questions, you want to be sure that you ask something that elicits a direct and complete answer.

- 3. Review types of questions.** Hand out and review copies of Worksheet 3.2. Explain that students will be visiting Ask Your Lawmaker (www.askyourlawmaker.com), a Web site where people can pose questions to specific members of Congress. Visitors to the site can vote on the questions that they like most. Capitol News Connection journalists pose the best and most popular questions to legislators and post the responses on the site.

As a class, review the definitions for different types of questions on the worksheet. Provide the following examples to clarify the meaning of each question type:

A. Multi-barreled Question example: "Why do you think Americans and your constituents prefer our two-party system over a legislature with multiple parties as in many other nations around the world?" (www.askyourlawmaker.com/questions/why-do-you-think-americans-and-your-constituents-prefer-our-two-party-system-over-legislat)

This question is multi-barreled because each part asks two different things.

B. Leading Question example: "Do you agree that our liberties are being lost due to a predilection for secrecy, excessive police power and for withholding information to avoid embarrassment or exposure of malfeasance or incompetence?" (www.askyourlawmaker.com/search/node#keys=polic%20power)

This question is leading because it starts out with "Do you agree that..."

C. Hypothetical Question example: "Would McCain try to reinstitute the draft if there are not enough volunteers for Iraq? Is military victory in Iraq that important to U.S. security?"

(www.askyourlawmaker.com/questions/would-mccain-try-reinstitute-draft-if-there-are-not-enough-volunteers-iraq%3Fmilitary-victo)

This question is hypothetical because it hinges on a what-if scenario that is not a current reality.

D. Closed Question example: "Do you think a border fence is the answer to our immigration problems?"

(www.askyourlawmaker.com/questions/do-you-think-border-fence-answer-our-immigration-problems%3F)

This question is closed because the answer is either "Yes" or "No" and does not provoke expansion on the issue.

E. Direct and Open example: "What do you think of the Patent Reform Act of 2007 and why is it not moving through Congress?"

(www.askyourlawmaker.com/questions/do-you-think-our-patent-system-needs-reform%3F-what-do-you-think-patent-reform-act-2007-and-)

Although it includes two questions, this phrasing is open and direct because it asks about the specific issue of Patent Reform Act of 2007 and invites the interview subject to elaborate on what s/he thinks about this Act and why it is not moving through Congress.



Featured Widget/Web Site
Ask Your Lawmaker

4. **Student partner teams search for question examples.** Once they have an understanding of the different types of questions, pair up students and have them visit the Ask Your Lawmaker Web site. Students should find one example of each type of question and record it on their worksheets.
5. **Discuss findings together.** Bring students back together to discuss what they found, asking them to explain why they identified questions as these specific types. You can expand this discussion to talk about the kinds of issues they noticed being addressed in the questions.
6. **Students rewrite questions to be more open and direct.** Ask students to rewrite the examples they found of multi-barreled, leading, hypothetical and closed questions so that they are more direct and open. Ask them to see if they can rewrite the one direct and open question they found to be even more direct and clear.
7. **Discuss.** Ask: Can ineffective questions be effective? Discuss some of the situations where multi-barreled, leading, hypothetical, and closed questions can be useful depending on one's purpose and goals. In what types of situations or contexts is it useful to use a leading question, for instance? What about a closed question?
8. **BLOG THIS!** Students create and post a list of 5-10 questions that they would like to ask one or both of the presidential candidates. Each student reads at least two other students' posts and comments on the best question(s).
9. **Post original questions on Ask Your Lawmaker.** After reviewing peer feedback, students select a question to post on the Ask Your Lawmaker Web site. They can check back intermittently to see how many votes their question gets and ultimately to see if it gets answered. (**Note:** Users must be 18 years-old or have the consent of a parent or guardian to post content on the *Ask Your Lawmaker* site. You may post questions for students in your own name or ask parents/guardians to grant permission for their students to post. The individual who posts the questions will need to register on the site.)

Assessment

Use students' responses on Worksheet 3.2 to assess their ability to differentiate types of questions and their understanding of what constitutes an effective question. Use their blog posts and submissions on Ask Your Lawmaker to assess their ability to navigate a Web site, their communication and collaboration skills, and their understanding of the rights and responsibilities of digital citizenship.

Extension

Watch a Debate. As a class or for homework, ask students to critique a recent televised debate or interview with a politician or presidential candidate. With knowledge of the five types of questions, students watch a video or read the transcript to analyze the effectiveness of the questions asked by the interviewer(s) or moderator(s) and consider how/whether the politician answered the questions. You may wish to use the democratic presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama hosted on ABC by Charlie Gibson and George Stephanopoulos on April 16, 2008, for which the hosts were sharply criticized (abcnews.go.com/Politics/DemocraticDebate). Another option is to watch one or both of the All-American Presidential Forums on PBS hosted by Tavis Smiley (www.pbs.org/kcet/tavissmiley/special/forums).



Name:

Date:

Class:

Worksheet 3.2 Asking Questions That Make a Difference

Instructions: Read the definitions of the types of questions below. Browse through questions on AskYourLawmaker.org and find examples of each of the following types (be sure to include the URL, or link, for each sample question). Then, improve the questions by rewriting them to be more open and direct.

Multi-barreled question: Asks more than one question about the same topic, but each question may ask something slightly different.

Original Question:

Source:

Your Rewrite:

Leading question: Leads the person answering to agree with the person asking the question or think a certain way about the issue. May include phrases such as “Don’t you agree . . .” or “Isn’t it true that . . .”

Original Question:

Source:

Your Rewrite:

Hypothetical question: Offers a “what if” scenario or story that asks someone to speculate.

Original Question:

Source:

Your Rewrite:

Closed question: Only allows for a “Yes” or “No” answer and does not provoke elaboration. Closed questions are not helpful in encouraging someone to provide a thorough answer.

Original Question:

Source:

Your Rewrite:

Direct and Open question: Addresses a specific issue and gets to the core of what you want to know. Being open means inviting the addressee to elaborate and expand.

Original Question:

Source:

Your Rewrite: