# Center for Teaching and Learning
## Stanford University, Stanford CA

## Designing Effective Discussion Questions

A good question is both a question that your fellow students can answer *and* a question that requires analysis, synthesis, interpretation, and critical thinking in order to answer it. Your questions based on a particular passage should both encourage and challenge us to articulate and uncover meaning in the text. You don't necessarily have to have an answer to your question (indeed the most interesting questions often don't have a definitive answer), but you should think in advance about the kinds of answers your question may elicit in class.

Here are some types of questions that tend to facilitate thoughtful, sustained discussions: (Note: the sample questions are taken from a French Literature class! Please feel free to design your own sample questions appropriate to your discipline for your students.)

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| Analysis | Questions beginning with "Why…" "How would you explain…" "What is the importance of…" "What is the meaning of" Example: What is the meaning of Madame X's comment about Jacque's activities the week before their encounter at the opera? |
| Compare and Contrast | "Compare…" "Contrast…" "What is the difference between…" "What is the similarity between…" Example: What is the difference between the mother and the father's attitudes toward the daughter's relationship with Philippe? |
| Cause and Effect | "What are the causes/results of…" "What connection is there between…" Example: What is the cause of Lea's distress when she looks at herself in the mirror? |
| Clarification | "What is meant by…" "Explain how…" |

Here are some types of questions that you'll want to avoid and that can lead to dead ends in discussions:

| Simple Yes-No | "Is the Aunt expressing a desire for Gigi to marry?" Produces little discussion and encourages guessing. |
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| Elliptical | "What about the aunt's sexual history?" "Well, what do you think about the Don Juan's values?" Too vague; it is not clear what is being asked. |
| Leading | "Don't you think that Colette is condemning the Don Juan figure for his lack of caring?" Conveys the expected answer. |
| Slanted | "Why are Colette's young women so corrupt?" |