Questions of Fact, Interpretation, and Evaluation

During discussion, three kinds of questions can be raised about a reading selection: questions of fact, questions of interpretation, and questions of evaluation.

QUESTIONS OF FACT ask students to recall a factual detail in the selection by citing or paraphrasing the author’s words. A disagreement over facts can be resolved quickly if participants simply turn to the passage in question and reread it. A question of fact has only one correct answer. (From The Great Books Reading and Discussion Program Reader Aid)

QUESTIONS OF INTERPRETATION ask students to make inferences about the meaning of a selection. More than one valid answer to an interpretive question is necessary. Answers to interpretive questions must be supported by evidence in the selection. (From The Great Books Reading and Discussion Program Reader Aid)

QUESTIONS OF EVALUATION ask students to compare the authors’ ideas and written words with their own. Answers to evaluative questions are as individual and as varied as the students themselves. (From The Great Books Reading and Discussion Program Reader Aid)

Interpretation is the main purpose of a Great Books discussion, so most questions raised including the opening question—will be interpretive. Factual questions can be used to bring to light evidence in support of interpretations and can clear up misunderstandings. Questions of evaluation can introduce a personal dimension to discussion once interpretive issues have been resolved. (From The Great Books Reading and Discussion Program Reader Aid)

Writing Interpretive Questions
Writing questions is the best preparation for discussion because it forces the student to engage with the work and form some preliminary ideas about its meaning. When students as well as tutors bring their own written interpretive questions to the discussion, they are much better able to learn from and contribute to each other’s ideas, and to develop a stimulating discussion.

What You Don’t Understand
Students should use their own uncertainty as the starting point for questions. Some questions will occur spontaneously as the student reads. Some questions will be only half-formed—a question mark or an exclamation point that students have scribbled in the margin. By the end of the second reading, students will have eliminated some of the questions as factual and will be ready to pursue the others further.

What Seems Important
Students should trust their own sense of what is significant in a selection. The phrases, sentences, and passages that students have underlined are likely to lead to issues of interpretation that students will care about. In fiction, students should think about beginnings; moments of crisis or decisive change; endings; and passages in which the characters reflect on their situation. In nonfiction, students should focus on statements of the author’s aims and the issues to be dealt with; on definitions of terms; on summaries; and on conclusions. Authors may repeat the ideas that are most important to them by drawing parallels; developing contrasts or variations on a theme; and making restatements or summaries.
Complexity and Apparent Contradiction
In fiction, a conflict of motives in a character or an intricate chain of events in the plot often calls for interpretation. The author’s attitude toward characters, if it is ambivalent or unclear, may also raise interpretive questions. Finally, the narrator may be a source of questions if the narrative point of view is complex: Does the narrator speak for the author, or does he speak for himself? Are the narrator’s statements accurate and reliable? In nonfiction, steps in the argument that students do not follow, examples that seem inappropriate, and passages in which the author presents an opposing view can bring the issue into focus so that the student can formulate questions. If points in an argument seem to contradict each other, students should try first to resolve the contradiction. If they cannot, express this puzzlement in a question.

Agreement and Disagreement
Students’ immediate, subjective response to a work can identify important interpretive issues. Students should trust their response if they feel intensely sympathetic toward a character, if they instinctively reject a character, or if they feel gratified or annoyed by an event in a story or a statement in an argument. The student’s reaction suggests that the author has raised an issue that is important to the student. Students should step back and try to understand just what that issue is and how it is developed throughout the work.

Students should appreciate and try to justify the opposing view. When students can see the other side of the issue clearly, they can pose an interpretive question. Challenge and argue with the author—but keep an open mind and continue to focus on the text.

Characteristics of Interpretive Questions
An interpretive question calls for a careful assessment of what the author means in a work. To decide whether a question is interpretive, students should try to write two different answers to it, supporting each answer with evidence from the selection. The question should express genuine doubt and curiosity. Students may have several answers in mind which seem equally compelling or students may believe that satisfying answers will be found through discussion, though the student may have been unable to discover it on their own.

A student’s honest doubt encourages others to take the question seriously.

The question should be specific to the work. If the question can be asked, with only minor changes, about several selections, then it is too general. For example, the question, “Why does Antigone have a sad ending?” is not sufficiently specific. But “Is Antigone doomed because she is the daughter of Oedipus, or does she determine her own fate?” is more specific. It is therefore easier to address.

The question should also be clear, easy for another person to grasp immediately. Use simple and direct language. If the question is hard to understand, the student should rephrase it or retrace the thinking that led to the question.

A good interpretive question is one that the student really cares about—one that has arisen from their own response to the work and curiosity about it. Genuine interest is contagious. (From The Great Books Reading and Discussion Program Reader Aid)