

# Question Stems

## Questioning to Discover Main Ideas

Once you have identified those initial topics on which to focus, a next step is to think about the points you would like to make about each. A guide for strategic questioning can help you not only discover these points and construct effective topic sentences – those that make a meaningful assertion or generalization – but also uncover the *relationships* between these points.

## Question Stems

Question stems help writers tease out main ideas, identify the relationships among the ideas, and logically sequence the idea within a larger argument.

### Questions that help DEFINE

- \* What is the meaning of \_\_\_\_\_?
- \* What are the various features of \_\_\_\_\_?
- \* What are some concrete examples of \_\_\_\_\_?
- \* When is the meaning of \_\_\_\_\_ misunderstood?

### Questions that help understand VARIATION

- \* How is \_\_\_\_\_ changing?
- \* What are the different varieties/types of \_\_\_\_\_?

### Questions that help COMPARE AND CONTRAST

- \* What is the most important difference between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_?
- \* What is the most important similarity between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_?

### Questions that help understand RELATIONSHIPS

- \* What causes \_\_\_\_\_?
- \* What are the effects of \_\_\_\_\_?
- \* What is the purpose of \_\_\_\_\_?
- \* What are the consequences of \_\_\_\_\_?
- \* How is \_\_\_\_\_ related to \_\_\_\_\_?

### Questions that help understand CIRCUMSTANCE

- \* Is \_\_\_\_\_ possible or impossible?
- \* What qualities, conditions, or circumstances make \_\_\_\_\_ possible or impossible?
- \* What would it take for \_\_\_\_\_ to happen?
- \* What would prevent \_\_\_\_\_ from happening?

### Questions that understand RELEVANCE

- \* What is the significance of \_\_\_\_\_?
- \* What is the value of \_\_\_\_\_?
- \* What case can be made for or against \_\_\_\_\_?

### Questions that help define and solve PROBLEMS

- \* What is the problem of \_\_\_\_\_?
- \* What are possible solutions for the problem of \_\_\_\_\_?

## Using Questioning to Develop Main Points

At the paragraph level, writers may discover main points by using a three-step process:

1. Identify a topic (or issue)
2. Develop a topic question (or question at issue) to answer
3. Provide an answer to the topic question

For example, let's say a writer wants to focus on the topic of EQUAL OPPORTUNITY relative to the larger issue of education. S/he may think that it is important to have equal opportunity and develop an initial question using one of the stems above:

*What is the purpose or value of **equal opportunity** in education?*

This question helps the writer move beyond a main point that is overly broad (e.g., *equal opportunity is important*) to articulate a main point that is focused and specific (e.g., Equal opportunity is necessary to ensure that \_\_\_\_\_).

Once the writer has considered this question and identified an initial answer, s/he might develop a follow-up question, again using the stems above:

*What qualities, conditions, circumstances make **equal opportunity** possible or impossible?*

Again, framing the question in this way helps the writer move beyond the overly simplistic (e.g., Equal opportunity is not possible) to the focused/explicit (Equal opportunity is only possible if \_\_\_\_\_). The writer's response to this question helps him/her make qualifying assertions, potentially leading to another topic entirely.

***NOTE!*** An effective topic sentence will make a generalization or assertion. So while a good question can help in the writing process, strong topic sentences typically are not in the form of a question, but rather your response to the question.