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 _____?

<u>Using Questioning to Develop Main Points</u>

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.

<u>*NOTE*</u>*!* 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.