

A Simple Method for Creating Good Discussion Prompts

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Good discussion prompts (DPs) are notoriously hard to formulate. Often the only instruction given to instructors trying to create them is to make them “open-ended.” While this is good advice, it is insufficient to insure that the DP will prompt a good discussion.

For example, the following question is “open-ended,” but it would be unlikely to generate much discussion (except to Civil War buffs)

✗ *What were the causes of the American Civil War?*

(Note: the examples in this paper will use “✗” to indicate a poor example, and a “✓” to show good examples.)

The problem with using this question as a DP is that, even though there is not a single correct answer, no discussion has been prompted. (This question is really an *essay question*, not a *discussion prompt*.)

What follows is a simple way to make DPs that will be more likely to generate discussion. It is **not** the only way to prompt a discussion. It may not even be the best way, but it is straightforward enough that most subject matter experts can use it to generate good DPs with only a knowledge of the subject to guide them. I call this three-step process the 1-2-3 approach. The steps are

- 1—The Set-up
- 2—The Commitment Question
- 3—The Follow-up Question

Step 1—The Set-up

One thing volleyball, jokes, and financial scams all have in common is a **set-up**. For a good DP it is often (though not always) helpful to provide a set-up that reminds students of background information or frames the question. For example, in our previous essay question, it might be good to give students a frame of reference or a reminder where they have seen or can find the information the question is going to be about.

✓ *Review the parts of chapter 11 that discussed the different causes of the American Civil War.*

This is a good start! But it could be an even better set-up if it related more to the *content* than to the *textbook*.

The following set-up is essentially the same information, but with some details about the content that might make it even better:

✓ *In chapter 11, three historians each offered different opinions about the causes of the American Civil War. In addition to these three viewpoints, there are other opinions about the causes of the Civil War.*

Notice that, even though discussion prompts are often called discussion *questions*, we haven't asked a question yet! That is next. The set-up is usually made up of one or more statements.

One common set-up is a brief situation, scenario, or micro-case-study. This set-up may start with the word "Imagine..."

- ✓ *Imagine that you're having a discussion with a British friend about the differences between the American Civil War and the English civil war of the mid-1600s.*

This kind of set-up can make the question much more interesting and relevant.

Step 2—The Commitment Question

At this point the advice often given is that you ask an "open-ended," question (that is, one that does *not* have a "yes-or-no" answer). For this method you should do the opposite: ask the student a question with a closed, definite answer.

Just because you're asking for a definite answer, the question shouldn't generate a commonly held right or wrong answer—the answer should be debatable, that is, different reasonable people may answer it differently.

The purpose of this "closed-but-open" question to encourage them take a stand. For example, it *might* be a yes-or-no question:

- ✓ *Was slavery the cause of the Civil War?*

This question asks the student to commit him or herself to the proposition that slavery was the cause of the Civil War—or was not. Now that they're committed, they'll be more likely to feel compelled to defend their position—thus starting the discussion (more on that later).

There are several ways to structure a commitment question. Here are a few:

Make it a Thought or Opinion

It is always a good idea to make the question less absolute and more personal by asking it as what the student *thinks, believes or feels*:

- ✓ *Do you think slavery was the cause of the Civil War?*
- ✓ *In your opinion, was slavery the cause of the Civil War?*

Ask a Superlative.

In addition to a straight "yes-or-no," you can ask which of a number of given options are the "best," "most important," "least likely," and so forth.

- ✓ *In your opinion, what was the principal cause of the Civil War?*

Notice that opinions on this matter differ—even among profession historians. There cannot be a right or wrong answer for the commitment question to work its magic.

Ask a Dilemma or Multiple-choice

Sometimes another pair of opposites besides “yes-or-no” can be used to set-up a question that will force a student to take a stand. (Because you’re setting up a dilemma, it may also include a superlative which helps push the opposites further apart.)

✓ *Do you think the main causes of Civil War were moral or political?*

Your commitment question could also involve more than two things.

✓ *Do you think the causes of Civil War were primarily moral, historical, or political?*

Remember that the purpose of the question is to get the student to commit to a response that you will then ask them to defend with the follow-up question, next.

Here are a couple of question formulations you should **avoid**:

Avoid Commitment Questions which are Obvious or Definitely Right or Wrong

The commitment question should have an answer that is debatable, that is, there are differing opinions about the answer. If you ask a question that has a generally considered right answer, or one where the answer is too obvious, there’s nothing to discuss.

✗ *Was Abraham Lincoln the Civil War president?*

No matter how you ask this question, the answer will be “yes.” So, there’s nothing to discuss. But, it could be changed! Here’s one way:

✓ *Do you think Northerners would have considered Abraham Lincoln a good War president at the beginning of the Civil War?*

By introducing the concept of “goodness,” there is now something to discuss or debate.

Avoid Commitment Question that are Rhetorical

One definition of a rhetorical question is that it begs the answer—it frames the question with an implied correct answer. This is often done by starting the question with a negative verb:

✗ *Don't you think the Civil War was the only way that slavery in the US could have been ended?*

The negative word “don’t” would lead one to assume that there is one correct answer, so there’s nothing to debate. Changing the sentence so that it is not rhetorical fixes this problem:

✓ *Do you think the Civil War was the only way that slavery in the US could have been ended?*

Step 3—The Follow-up Question

If you have appropriately set-up the commitment question, asked the commitment question, and the student has felt committed to his or her answer, the final step may be the easiest. Simply ask

✓ *Why?*

In other words, **follow-up** by asking them to defend their position.

Additional words may add some clarity to the question:

✓ *Why do you think so?*

✓ *Why do you feel that is the case?*

Naturally, the follow-up is best asked as part of a dialogue, immediately *after* the student has answered the commitment question. Then your follow-up can be more specific to their response on the commitment question. But often that isn't possible, such as in an online discussion forum. When that is the case, the follow-up question can be part of "discussion prompt," immediately following the commitment question. Sometimes it also helps to ask students to defend their response according to the options in the commitment question, like this:

✓ *If you said 'yes,' why do you think so? If you said 'no,' why not?*

Sometimes the follow-up question may be "How?" instead of "Why?" Or, it may ask the student to provide details with their justification.

Note: it is tempting sometimes to make the follow-up a statement rather than a question, like this:

✗ *Provide detailed personal examples of your thinking about this subject.*

Generally, whenever possible, frame the follow-up as a *question*, not a statement. If framing all or parts of the follow-up as a question creates awkward phrasing, keep the statement part as short as possible.

✓ *Why do you think so? (Provide examples.)*

Notice that we've not only kept the statement short, we've minimized it compared to the question part by putting it in parentheses

That's It

Seeing 1-2-3 In Action

That's all there is to it.

1. **Set-up** the commitment with relevant information that frames the argument.
2. Ask a **commitment question**, one that will cause the student to commit to a position.
3. Ask a **follow-up question** that allows the student to defend her or his commitment.

Here's our Civil War example as a complete DP, with a (1) set-up, (2) commitment question, and (3) follow-up question:

Of course, it wouldn't be broken up as we have here. It would be a short paragraph, like this:

*(1) In chapter 11, three historians gave three different opinions about the causes of the American Civil War. In addition to these three viewpoints, there are other opinions about the causes of the Civil War.
(2) Which, of all the reasons, do you think was the principal cause of the Civil War? (3) Why?*

Now try it yourself. Think about a topic you'll like to have students discuss and try to come up with a good 1-2-3 DP that get the discussion started.