Prompts to Elevate Students’ Questioning Skills

How do we get students thinking about the kind of work they want their question to perform? Below is a list of questions grouped according to the kinds of knowledge-generating work needed to answer them. This list is by no means definitive. It was developed for students interrogating primary texts in an Introduction to Humanities course and a first-year honors seminar, but it could be adapted to other courses and disciplines. Its aim was to provide them models for designing their own questions.

Level One
Contextuals
How was X (event, text, work, etc.) shaped by its time?
Where did X originate and why?
Who was the originator of X and what was he or she like?
Definitions and clarifications
How do you define X (word, term, idea, etc.)?
What does this passage, concept, etc., mean?
What would be a specific, concrete example of X?
Analyzers
What parts or features make up the whole and what does each part do?
How do the parts contribute to the whole?
How is X organized and why is it organized this way?

Level Two
Comparatives
How is X the same as that?
How is X different than that?
How are these more or less similar?
What is the opposite of X?
Causals
What factors caused X to happen?
Which of these factors is sufficient? Which contributing or probable?
On what grounds can we eliminate possible causes or explanations?

A supplement to “A Practical Approach for Increasing Students’ In-Class Questions.”
**Evaluatives**
What are the most important features of X?
Why do you like or dislike X (or agree or disagree with this)?
How strong is the case that X is correct?
What criteria are best for judging X?
What is the best order or priority for these things and why?
What is the strongest argument against X?

**Level Three**
**Counterfactuals**
How would X change if this happened?
How would things be different if X had not happened?
How would things be different if X happened to a greater (or lesser) degree?

**Extenders (Synthesizers)**
How can we apply X to this set of circumstances?
What can we predict if X is correct?
What ideas should be added to X?
What might happen if you added this to X?

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