

The Thinker's Guide to

The Art of

ASKING ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Based on Critical Thinking
Concepts and Socratic Principles

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Introduction:

The Power of Essential Questions

It is not possible to be a good thinker and a poor questioner.

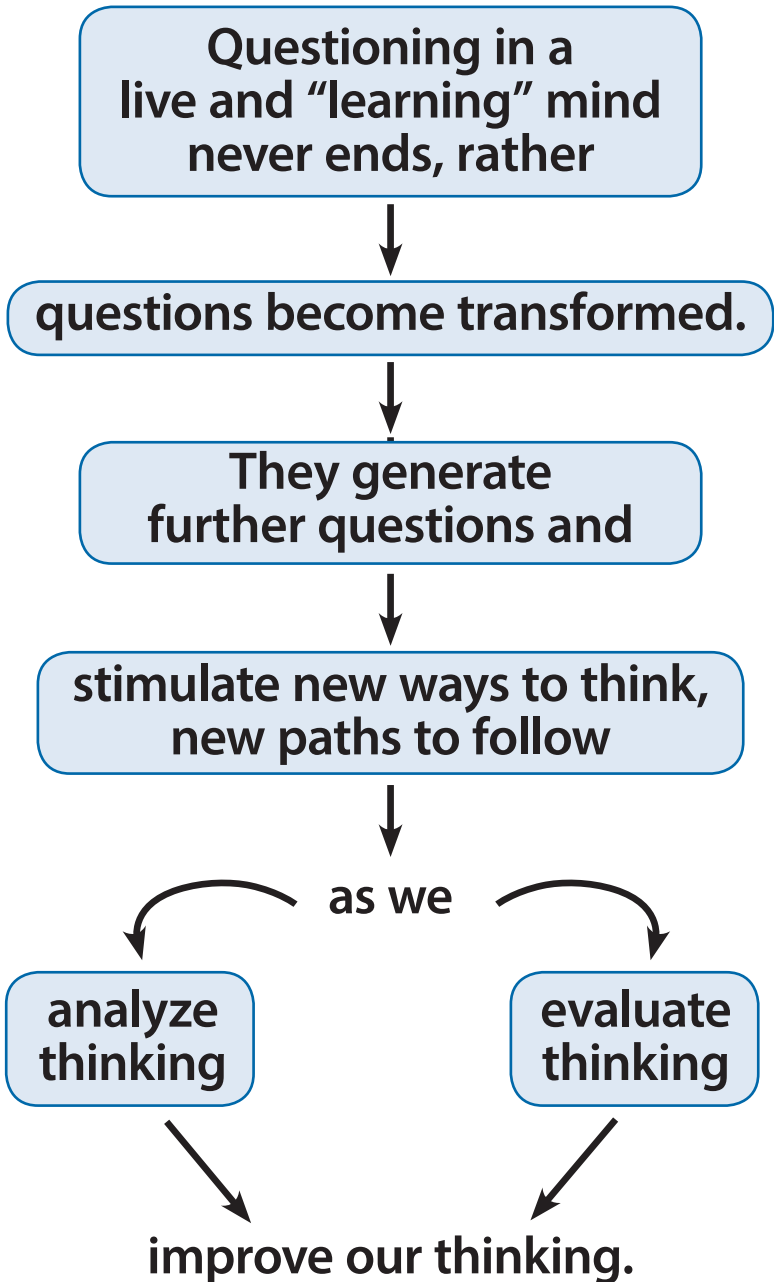
Questions define tasks, express problems, and delineate issues. They drive thinking forward. Answers, on the other hand, often signal a full stop in thought. Only when an answer generates further questions does thought continue as inquiry. A mind with no questions is a mind that is not intellectually alive. No questions (asked) equals no understanding (achieved). Superficial questions equal superficial understanding, unclear questions equal unclear understanding. If your mind is not actively generating questions, you are not engaged in substantive learning.

Thinking within disciplines is driven, not by answers, but by essential questions. Had no basic questions been asked by those who laid the foundation for a field — for example, physics or biology — the field would not have been developed in the first place. Every intellectual field is born out of a cluster of essential questions that drive the mind to pursue particular facts and understandings. Biology was born when some humans pursued answers to the questions: “What are the characteristics of living systems? What structures exist in them? What functions do these structures serve?” Biochemistry was born when biologists began to ask questions such as: “What chemical processes underlie living things? How and why do chemical processes within living things interact and change?”

Every field stays alive only to the extent that fresh questions are generated and taken seriously as the driving force in thinking. When a field of study is no longer pursuing significant answers to essential questions, it dies as a field. To think through or rethink anything, one must ask the questions necessary to thinking through the logic of that thing, clearly and precisely.

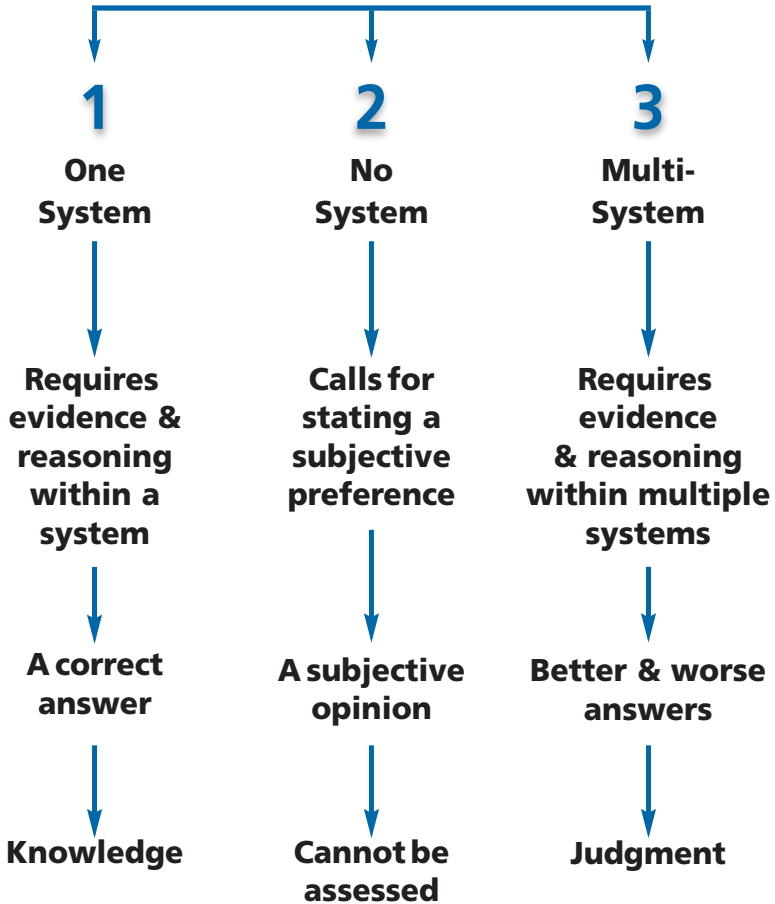
In this miniature guide, we introduce essential questions as indispensable intellectual tools. We focus on principles essential to formulating, analyzing, assessing, and settling primary questions. You will notice that our categories of question types are not exclusive. There is a great deal of overlap between them. Deciding what category of question to ask at any point in thinking is a matter of judgment. Having a range of powerful questions to choose from is a matter of knowledge.

Because we cannot be skilled at thinking unless we are skilled at questioning, we strive for a state of mind in which essential questions become second nature. They are the keys to productive thinking, deep learning, and effective living.



Three Kinds of Questions

In approaching a question, it is useful to figure out what type it is. Is it a question with one definitive answer? Is it a question that calls for a subjective choice? Or does the question require us to consider competing answers?



Questioning Questions: Identifying Prior Questions

Whenever we are dealing with complex questions, one tool useful in disciplining our thinking is that of identifying questions presupposed in a question that is our direct concern. In other words, because questions often presuppose other questions having been answered, it is often useful to question a question by figuring out what “prior” questions it assumes, or, alternatively, what other questions it would be helpful for us to answer first, before we try to answer the immediate question at issue. This is especially important when dealing with complex questions. We can often approach a complex question through simpler questions.

Hence, to answer the question “What is multiculturalism?” it would be helpful to first settle the question, “What is culture?” And to settle that question, it would be helpful to answer the question, “What are the factors about a person (nationality, religion, ideology, place of birth...) that determine what culture he or she belongs to?”

To construct a list of prior questions, begin by writing down the main question you are focused on. Then formulate as many questions as you can think of that you would have to answer, or it would be helpful to answer, before answering the first. Then take this list and determine what question or questions you would have to answer, or it would be helpful to answer, prior to answering these questions. Continue, following the same procedure for every new set of questions on your list.

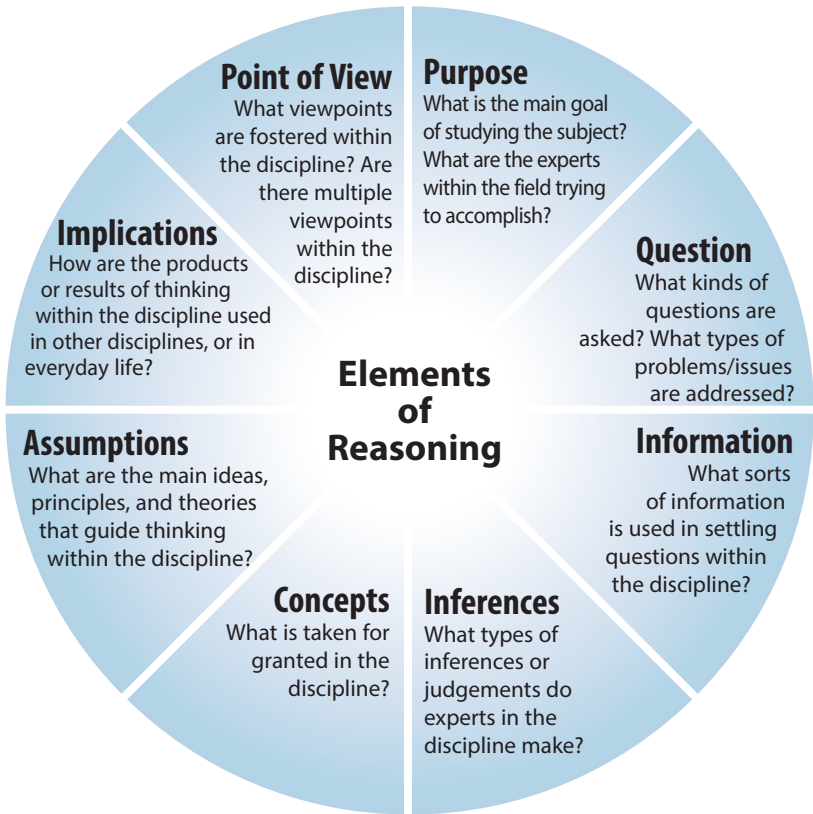
As you proceed to construct your list, keep your attention focused on the first question on the list as well as on the last. If you do this well, you should end up with a list of questions that shed light on the logic of the first question.

Main question: What is history?

Prior questions:

- To what extent do all historians share the same goal?
- Is it possible to include all relevant facts of the past in a history book?
- How many of the events during a given time period are left out in a history of that time period?
- Is more left out than is included?
- How does a historian know what to emphasize?
- Can historical value judgements be objective?
- What variables might influence a historian's viewpoint?
- Is it possible to simply list facts in a history book or does all history writing involve interpretations as well as facts?
- Is it possible to decide what to include and exclude and how to interpret facts without adopting a historical point of view?
- How can we begin to evaluate a historical interpretation?
- How can we begin to evaluate a historical point of view?

Applying the Elements of Reasoning to Questioning Within a Discipline



Formulating Questions that Target Egocentrism

By focusing on the two motives of egocentric thinking, we can formulate questions that target our own egocentrism, questions specifically designed to uncover selfishness and self-validation. Here are some examples:

- Do I usually consider the views of those who disagree with me? Do I tend to assume that those who disagree with me are wrong?
- Do I tend to place my needs and desires over the needs and desires of others?
- When I have something personal to gain, does my fairness to others diminish?
- Will I personally gain something for myself in this situation if I ignore or distort some information or viewpoint?
- Am I usually willing to consider that I might be wrong?
- Do I tend to ignore information that would require me to rethink my position?
- Do I tend to assume that I know more than I actually do?
- Do I assert information to be true when I don't know for sure that it is?

We can also question the motives of others, through questions such as:

- Is this other person considering my rights and needs, or the rights and needs of others?
- Is he using me to serve his selfish interest?
- Is she distorting what I am saying? If so, why? Does she have something to gain by doing so?
- Is he trying to manipulate me?
- Is she honestly trying to understand what I am saying? Is she able to accurately state what I am trying to say?
- Is she willing to admit she might be wrong?
- Is he open to reason? Or is he close-minded?
- Is she refusing to consider relevant information in order to maintain her viewpoint?
- Is he assuming that he knows more than he does?
- Is she asserting something as true that may not be?

Egocentrism and Power

One of the natural motives of the human mind is the desire for power. All of us need some power. If we are powerless, we are unable to satisfy our needs. Without power, we are at the mercy of others. Hence, the acquisition of power is essential for human life. But we can pursue power through either rational or irrational means, and we can use power to serve rational or irrational ends. Power used irrationally is typically justified egocentrically.