

THE POWER OF QUESTIONING

Practical Questioning Techniques for
Effective Teaching and Learning



FOREWORD



Unlocking the Power of Every Learner

A classroom is more than a place where knowledge is shared. It is a place where learners learn to think, communicate, solve problems and discover their potential. At the heart of this process is one of the simplest yet most powerful tools a teacher has: the question.

Effective questioning is not simply about asking learners to recall information or give the right answer. A well-crafted question can make a learner pause, think deeply, explain an idea, connect what they know to something new, and learn from the ideas of others.

Research highlights questioning as an important feature of effective teaching. But it is not the number of questions a teacher asks that matters most. It is the quality of the questions, how they are asked, and how teachers respond to learners' answers.

Dr. Margo O'Sullivan

Director Programmes and co-founder of Power Teachers Africa

At Power Teachers Africa, we believe that empowered teachers create opportunities for every learner to participate, think and grow.

This booklet provides practical, research-informed techniques to help teachers strengthen their questioning practice from formulating clear and purposeful questions, to giving learners time to think, to using their answers to deepen learning.

Our hope is that this resource will encourage teachers to experiment, reflect and discover new ways of engaging every learner. Because a good question does more than seek an answer; It opens a door to thinking, learning and possibility.

Power Teachers Africa

Motivated and empowered teachers providing high quality education for all children across Africa.



How to Use This Booklet

01 - FORMULATE

How teachers design purposeful, clear and appropriately challenging questions.

02 - ASK

How teachers deliver questions in ways that maximise learner participation and thinking.

03 - RESPOND

How teachers use learners' answers and questions to deepen learning.



Table of Contents

Foreword	02
Formulating effective questions	05
Asking questions effectively	10
Responding to learners' answers and questions	16
The Power Teacher questioning toolkit	20
Activity	21
A Power Teacher's commitment	22



01

Formulating effective questions

Technique 1: Use a questioning matrix to formulate questions.

A questioning matrix is a simple tool that can help you to formulate different types of questions. Use it to plan questions that check learners' knowledge and understanding, as well as questions that encourage deeper thinking. Display the questioning matrix in your classroom and explain to learners how it can be used to ask different kinds of questions. Refer to it regularly during lessons. Encourage learners to use the matrix to create questions of their own and to ask questions of their peers. This helps to develop curiosity, critical thinking, and active participation in learning.

TRY IT

Choose a topic you will teach this week. Use the matrix to write:

2 questions that check understanding

2 questions that require explanation

1 question that requires deeper thinking



Technique 2: Keep Questions Brief and Simple

Clear questions make it easier for learners to understand exactly what is being asked.

The best questions are brief and simple. Focus on getting the language of your questions right and choosing the words carefully. With practice, this will become easier. Phrase your questions so that the answer required is clear to students. **"What about the rain?"**, for example, is not clear. Anticipating possible student answers will help you to realise if the phrasing in your question is right.



TIP

Say less. Ask clearly. Give learners something worth thinking about.

Technique 3: Use Yes/No Questions Sparingly

Generally, avoid questions that only require a yes/no answer, for example, “Did the girl meet her friend? Is today Tuesday?” These do not require the children to think and do not develop their language as they are not required to formulate full sentence answers. They can be used at times to encourage all children to answer questions.

TRY IT

Instead of:

“Is the character angry?”

Try:

“What makes you think the character is angry?”



YES/NO QUESTION

Quick response

Limited explanation

Limited opportunity for language development

Technique 4: Avoid Echo Questions

Explain what echo questions are and why asking essentially the same question twice can confuse learners.

Echo questions involve asking two similar questions, which confuses the children. For example, instead of asking these two questions one after another - “why are there more natural disasters happening around the world”, “what are the reasons do you think for more natural disasters”, just ask one of these questions

TIP

One question.
One clear purpose.



Technique 5: Avoid Leading Questions

Leading questions guide students to the answer by telling them significant pieces of information, often by your tone of voice or by actions, that give major clues to the answer. Such questions do not encourage students to explain or talk. They do not even encourage students to think for themselves. For example, “Is a frog a reptile or amphibian” (emphasising amphibian with your tone of voice), or “which is the bigger number” pointing to the answer.

TRY IT

Are you asking — or giving away the answer?

- tone of voice
- gestures
- emphasis
- clues

REFLECT

Do my voice, facial expressions or gestures sometimes tell learners what answer I expect?

Technique 6: Ask Questions That Develop Life Skills

Always ask as many open higher order questions as possible, the why, what/when/where/how do you think, could/would questions. These questions, which require students to think and give their opinion are critical to preparing them for the future, as they develop their 21st century soft skills, such as critical thinking, negotiation, explaining, comparing, predicting, seeking out evidence, and so on. Use the questioning matrix in Technique 1. For example, “what makes you think that?”, “how does this compare to that”?,



Then connect questioning to:

- critical thinking
- explaining
- comparing
- predicting
- negotiation
- seeking evidence.

CHALLENGE

During your next lesson, replace three simple recall questions with questions that require learners to explain why or how.

Technique 7: Formulate Probability Questions

Using the modal verbs such as ‘could’, ‘should’, ‘might’, and ‘would’ encourages students to share their opinions and is incredibly powerful in encouraging more students to think and put up their hands.

Technique 8: Question for Different Abilities

Formulate questions that stretch children with stronger cognitive abilities, as well as questions that children with lower abilities can answer.

One classroom. Different learners. Different questions.

Questions should:

- stretch learners with stronger cognitive abilities
- remain accessible to learners who need more support.

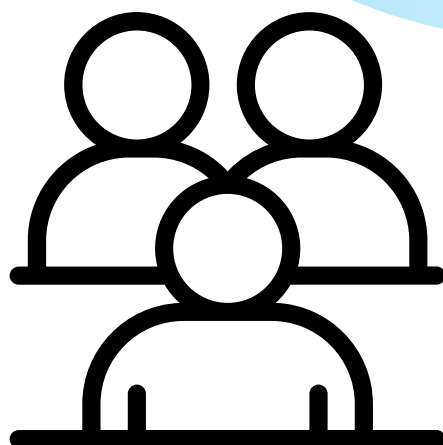
REFLECT

1. Who gets the easiest questions in my classroom?
2. Who gets the most challenging questions?
3. How can I distribute challenge more fairly?



02

Asking questions effectively



How you ask matters as much as what you ask.

Technique 1: WAIT TIME

- Once you ask a question, pause before you ask a child to answer. This gives all children a chance to process the question and formulate a response. (“I’m going to give you time to think before I ask anyone to answer the next question”; “Now think for a minute before you put up your hands”; “Think carefully before you put up your hand”; “Take your time in thinking out your answer to this next question”). Sustained use of this approach will elicit more thoughtful responses from the pupils.
- Once the pupils become familiar with this procedure, a silent pause after you ask a question may suffice. You could count to three before you choose a child to answer.
- You may need to provide more time for children to think about their answers for higher-order questions, with a higher cognitive load, such as ‘what would you have done if you were Emmanuel’?

STOP. WAIT. THINK.

REMEMBER TO

- ask the question
- pause
- give learners time to process
- then select someone to respond.



TIP

A pause is not wasted time. It is thinking time.

Technique 2: No Shouting Out Answers



It's important to always;

- Ask the question
- Allow learners to raise their hands
- Give everyone time to think
- Select a learner to respond.

When children have their answer, they raise their hand and wait for you to choose a child to answer. This ensures that all children have time to think of an answer. If you name a student and then ask a question, the other students may not bother to try to think of answers, and thus are not engaged in the learning that answering questions enables.

Technique 3: Use Choral Responses Sparingly

While it is considered best practice to ask a question, wait, and then nominate one student to answer, there are times when choral responses that allow all children to respond can be useful. They can effectively energise and engage all students. Use phrases such as “all class answer” or “class, one two three (class, on three, if the boys eats three apples a day how many will he eat in a week)” or a physical cue such as moving your arms out in front as if embracing the class or turning your palms up, so that students know they can call out the response.

TIP

- REMEMBER TO**
- energising the class
 - engaging everyone
 - checking quick responses.



Technique 4: NON-VERBAL RESPONSES

Use the following techniques to allow all children the opportunity to provide an answer.



o **For yes/no and agree/disagree/unsure answers, for example, “should Marie have given all of her food to the beggar”?**

- Children use thumbs up if you agree, thumbs down if you disagree, and thumbs on the table if you are not sure
- Nod or shake your head
- Clap three times if you agree
- Stand up if you agree with Marie
- Put your hand up if you agree, on your head if you disagree and on the desk if you neither agree nor disagree.
- Smile if you agree, frown if you disagree
- Fist of five. This is for questions on children’s opinions where they can share the extent of their agreement or disagreement e.g., an open fist means they completely agree, one finger means they agree a little, four fingers, they agree a lot, and a closed fist means they fully disagree.

o **Children can move to designated parts of the classroom for higher-level questions with different possible responses.** For example, “if you think that Marie should have told her sister and mother, walk to this corner”, “if you think Marie should have only told her mother, move to this corner”, etc.

o **Students write answers.**

WHY IT WORKS

It gives more learners an opportunity to respond — not just the learner whose hand goes up first.

Technique 5: Spread your questions.

Don't build a classroom where only a few voices are heard.

Refrain from asking the same child(ren) too many questions. Try to ensure that every student gets an opportunity to answer at least one question in each lesson. This ensures that all children engage fully in formulating answers; they know they will be given an opportunity to answer at least one question.

TEACHER CHECK

- ☐ I ask different learners
- ☐ I include quieter learners
- ☐ I challenge stronger learners
- ☐ I don't rely on the same volunteers

Technique 6: Think-pair-share questions



You pose a question, give pupils sufficient time to think, have them pair up to discuss their answer, and then select individuals to share their answers with the class. This provides both an opportunity for all children to answer questions, as well as engage with other students in discussing and exploring answers.

TRY IT TOMORROW

Give teachers a small lesson-planning box:

My question: _____

Think time: _____

Pair discussion: _____

Share: _____

Technique 7: LET CHILDREN ASK QUESTIONS

Don't build a classroom where only a few voices are heard.



Ask children to devise questions alone, in pairs, or in groups. Guide them on using the Questioning matrix from Formulating questions – technique 1. They can then ask their questions to their partner, a group, or the whole class. This provides children with the opportunity to develop their questioning, communication, teamwork, negotiation, and critical thinking skills.





03

Responding to learners' answers and questions

Every learner answer is an opportunity for the next question.

Technique 1: Listen carefully to children's answers



- Show interest in all answers.
- Encourage students when they are offering answers by nodding, looking at them, and using facial expressions that show you are listening.
- Do not look down at your notes while they are speaking.
- Thank students who respond to your questions.
- As you listen, you will be able to formulate the most effective response, such as accepting, prompting, probing, and so on, see Techniques 3-5.

LOOK. LISTEN. RESPOND.

Technique 2 : Acknowledge students' answers.

- Create a supportive environment in which your pupils feel encouraged to answer your questions by acknowledging and commenting positively on their answers and, at times, providing them with genuine praise.
- A simple “thank you” can often suffice for acknowledgement.
- When a student gets an answer incorrect, you can add “thank you for trying” and then move into prompting and probing. This highlights that you appreciate children’s efforts, and they learn that you will never negatively respond to a wrong answer, which will deter children from answering questions.
- Avoid chastising students or spending much time on wrong answers.
- When praising children’s answers, try to highlight what you appreciate about the answer, for example, “that is a very interesting analysis” or “I had not thought of that”.

Technique 3: Prompting- guiding wrong answers towards a correct one.

- Prompting questions involve using hints or asking a series of questions to lead the student to the correct or a more complete response, should the pupil's response be incorrect or partially correct. For example, if the student leaves out the most important conclusion of the study you asked him about, then ask that same student to try to recall what that conclusion is. If he or she does not recall the conclusion, open this question up to the class.
- Frequently, part of a response by a pupil is correct, and by prompting, it is possible to focus on this and avoid being negative while correcting the response.
- Also it is important not to discourage a student; you can say something along the lines of “I think I know what you are talking about”, “You're in the right area”, “That's about 50% right”, “You've got most/some of this right, but something is missing”.
- If, having prompted a student, the correct response is still not forthcoming, the following phrases may be used to move on sensitively and elicit a response from other members of the class. For example, “Think a little more, and I'll come back to you later”. Or “Listen to some of the other answers, and I'm sure that you will come up with ideas yourself.”

PROMPTING PHRASES



Technique 4: PROBING

Probing questions ask students encourage students to think more deeply, express their ideas, to explain or elaborate on their thinking; to use prior knowledge and apply it to a current problem or idea, or ask students to justify or prove their ideas. Probing questions, unlike prompting, do not involve giving additional information. They also show students that teachers are interested in and value what they think.

Technique 5: Engaging other students

To further develop students' learning, engage students with each other's answers. Ask the rest of the class:

- to respond to a response that one student has just presented;
- to build on or add to a previous student's answer;
- to compare their answer with the previous student.



For some answers, a teacher can incorporate the answer into another question that is directed to other students. (Who can add to Amel's answer? Who can build upon what was said? Is there something extra that can be added? Does anyone else have a different answer?)

By calling upon multiple students to contribute, you are allowing the students to build upon the previous answers of other students. Questioning students in this manner creates a 'snowball effect' in which more students will be willing to take a risk and contribute to the classroom discussion.

Technique 6: Check for understanding

If you fail to elicit the correct answer to a question through prompting and by asking several other children of different abilities, this highlights that children have not understood, and you need to use a different strategy to teach it again, either during the lesson or in the next lesson. (I think we're struggling when we get to remainders. I think the term denominator is giving us some trouble). Or if you notice that a number of children have not understood, you can work with them separately when the other children are doing an activity.

Read each question. Decide whether the technique is a 'do', 'don't', or 'depends' technique, then explain why.

Technique or question	Do, don't or depends?	Why?
Formulating and asking questions		
Ask lower-order (closed) questions first then higher-order (open) questions		
Ask yes or no questions		
Ask echo questions		
Pitch the language and content of questions at the cognitive and language level of the class		
Ask a child who has not put up his/her hand to answer a question		
Ask a question of the class but tell students not to put their hands up and then choose a student to answer		
Ask the first person who raises their hand to answer the question		
Encourage children to raise their hands to answer and then choose one student to answer		
Distribute questions around the class targeting children of different abilities		

Technique or question	Do, don't or depends?	Why?
Encouraging students to talk in pairs and/or groups sometimes to discuss the answers before choosing a student to answer		
Ask students to write their answers		
Repeat the question		
Call the name of a student before asking a question		
Allow sufficient time for all students to think of an answer before you choose a person to answer		
Dealing with responses to questions		
If a student gives an incorrect answer, tell him/her the right answer		
Repeat the answers given by pupils		
Allow choral responses (the whole class respond together)		
Ask a student to repeat or rephrase the answer of another student		



THE POWER TEACHER QUESTIONING TOOLKIT

ACTIVITY

When formulating questions, ask:

- ☐ Is my question clear?
- ☐ Is it brief?
- ☐ Does it require thinking?
- ☐ Am I giving away the answer?
- ☐ Is it appropriate for this learner?
- ☐ Can I make it more open?

When asking questions:

- ☐ Did I give enough wait time?
- ☐ Am I involving different learners?
- ☐ Am I allowing learners to think before answering?
- ☐ Could think-pair-share help?
- ☐ Could a non-verbal response involve everyone?

When responding:

- ☐ Did I listen carefully?
- ☐ Did I acknowledge the learner?
- ☐ Can I prompt rather than give the answer?
- ☐ Can I probe more deeply?
- ☐ Can another learner build on the answer?
- ☐ What does the answer tell me about understanding?

When responding:

- ☐ Did I listen carefully?
- ☐ Did I acknowledge the learner?
- ☐ Can I prompt rather than give the answer?
- ☐ Can I probe more deeply?
- ☐ Can another learner build on the answer?
- ☐ What does the answer tell me about understanding?

A POWER TEACHER'S COMMITMENT

My Questioning Commitment

I will not simply ask questions to get answers.

I will ask questions that make learners think.

I will give them time to think.

I will listen to what they say.

I will use their answers to take learning further.

And I will create a classroom where every learner has a voice.

What is one questioning practice I will strengthen this week?

.....

.....

.....

Name: _____

Date: _____

Every question is an opportunity.

Think. Explain. Explore. Challenge. Connect. Learn.

© 2026 Power Teachers Africa. All rights reserved.

The Power of Questioning: Practical Questioning Techniques for Effective Teaching and Learning.

This publication is the property of Power Teachers Africa. No part of this booklet may be reproduced, distributed, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, without prior written permission from Power Teachers Africa, except for brief quotations used for educational, research or review purposes with appropriate acknowledgement.

This resource has been developed for educational and professional development purposes and is intended to support teachers in strengthening their classroom questioning practices.

Power Teachers Africa

www.powerteachersafrica.org

When sharing or referencing this resource, please acknowledge Power Teachers Africa as the source.