



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

ASKING EFFECTIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

"It's better to know some of the questions than all of the answers."

—James Thurber

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will play a warm-up game to help them understand the difference between open and closed questions. Then, students will write their own interview questions in preparation for an oral history interview.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- As part of classroom meeting or advisory focused on developing social awareness, empathy, listening, and/or perspective-taking skills
- As an introductory lesson for an oral history project or unit
- To build more positive, brave and safe spaces for interviews and storytelling
- To create a stronger sense of relational trust

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 1 hour

LEVEL

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

MATERIALS

- Pen or pencil
- [Writing Effective Interview Questions Handout](#)

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Differentiate between open and closed questions
- Use the 'three levels of inquiry' model, writing a sequence of increasingly open-ended questions in preparation for an oral history interview

RELATED CURRICULUM STANDARDS

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4, W.11-12.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1, SL.11-12.1

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What can I learn from asking questions?
- What types of questions lead to great stories?

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Empathy
- Curiosity
- Humility

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-awareness
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open Awareness
- Focused Attention

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Can you recall some of the most deep and meaningful questions you have been asked? Why were they meaningful to you?
- What do you wish you could learn about your students, colleagues, and/or your students' caregivers? (What kinds of questions do you typically ask them?)
- Brainstorm a list of several questions (at different levels of inquiry) related to the topics listed in the lesson below. Keep that list available—and share some personal examples with your students, as needed.

INSTRUCTIONS

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This lesson is intended to be used in preparation for a larger oral history interview project. Before teaching this lesson, we recommend making sure that students have already chosen a narrator who they would like to interview for the project. This way, students will be able to write interview questions tailored for the specific person during this lesson.

QUESTION GAME (15 MINUTES)

1. Have students write down three questions they might like to ask you, the teacher. Draw a T chart on the board, with "class" listed above one side, and your name written above the other.
2. Say: "We're going to play a game today in which you can ask me questions, and I'll answer them (within reason). Now, I'm looking for certain types of questions. If you ask me the type of question I'm looking for, you get a point. If you don't, I get a point. I'm not going to tell you anymore about what I'm looking for in the questions. You will start to see what the 'winning' questions have in common."
3. Call on different students, listening to and answering their questions. If they ask questions that require only a yes/no or factual answer, put a point in your column. If they ask a question that requires an opinion, some thoughtfulness, a description, etc., put a point in their column. It can be helpful to exaggerate this some, really going into a story with the first few open questions volunteered. As the game progresses, students will probably continue to ask closed questions. As they do, ask their classmates what could be added to their questions so that the class gets a point. Usually they will start adding "why" and "how" and "could you explain" to their peers' questions.
4. Once students feel they can guess the pattern, stop and have students explain how you got points (what those questions had in common) and then how they got points (what those questions had in common). Write these ideas down on the board and have students recall how they changed some questions with a few words to give the class points.
5. Label the questions "open" and "closed." Tell students they want to ask mostly open questions in their interview so that their interviewee will tell stories, not just give facts. But also let them know that a few closed questions at the beginning (to get the interviewee comfortable and to get some basics, like name spellings and place of birth) can be really helpful.

THREE LEVELS OF INQUIRY (5 MINUTES)

This portion of the lesson requires the [Writing Effective Interview Questions Handout](#). Print one copy for each student and distribute it to the class.

1. Review the three levels of questions with the class, noting that level 1 are 'closed' questions from the question game, and level 2 are 'open' questions. Explain that level 3 questions are also 'open' questions, but ones that build further on the previous question. Level 3 questions ask for more details, reflections, or examples.

QUESTION WRITING (30 MINUTES)

This portion of the lesson requires the reverse side of the [Writing Effective Interview Questions Handout](#). Ensure all students have writing utensils to write their questions.

1. Give students time to write four sets of questions, each set including a Level 1, Level 2, and a Level 3 question. If needed, you may provide topics to guide students' questions. Common topics include:
 - Identity and Culture
 - Home / 'Where I'm From'
 - Journeys and Migrations
 - Family, Friends, and Important Relationships
 - Community
 - Important Life Events
 - Important Decisions
 - Education
 - Work & Career
 - Hobbies & Passions
 - Growth & Change
 - Hardship & Adversity
 - Living Through a Historic Moment
2. Circulate to answer questions and provide feedback as students are working. You may also choose to have students work in partner pairs or small groups to provide peer feedback on each other's questions.

NEXT STEPS

During your next class session, have students bring in their revised question list. Then, they will reach out to their narrators to schedule an interview time (if they have not done this already), and will record their interview.

CLOSURE

- What did you learn from this lesson about how to ask more effective, thoughtful, and/or meaningful questions?

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did your students' (or colleagues) respond to this lesson? How might you adapt it?
- Are there other ways to incorporate these deeper lines of inquiry into your academic lessons? Oral history projects? Mathematical problem solving? Inferencing in literature? Sharing scientific observations?
- What role does deep, active listening play in perspective-taking and/or perspective-receiving?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

If we want to learn more about others' lived experiences, we need to ask them. Based on [25 experimental studies](#), a research team determined that we can understand others best by *getting* their perspective rather than "taking" (or imagining) their perspective through cognitive empathy. In fact, [research](#) suggests that people from traditionally marginalized groups benefit most from being *heard*.

Our language—including the thoughtfully constructed questions we ask—can significantly influence our [curiosity and attitudes about learning](#). Studies show that students' curiosity is linked to their [life satisfaction, positive emotions, hope, and purpose in life](#).

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

In this lesson, students draw on questions as powerful tools to foster a sense of open [exploration](#) while also channeling their curiosity in ways that honor others' stories and experiences. To truly understand another person, we can't just project our ideas of what they are thinking or feeling—as we are still biased by our own points of view. We need to take the time to [listen and receive](#) the perspectives that others are willing to share with us.

This lesson, as an entry point to an oral history project, privileges future interviewees as "narrators" of their experiences. As students develop open-ended questions and learn to deepen their level of inquiry, they create questions and an interview process where they can hold space for listening and honoring others' experiences.

SOURCE

Adapted from a lesson created by [Voice of Witness](#), an oral history nonprofit that amplifies the stories of people impacted by—and fighting against—injustice. Voice of Witness works with communities to document and center unheard voices, teach ethics-driven storytelling, and develop educational resources.