

The Question Formulation Technique (QFT)

The QFT was [first developed](#) nearly 30 years ago through work with parents in a low-income community. Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana, co-directors of the Right Question Institute, introduced the strategy to the world of education in [Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions](#), published by Harvard Education Press in 2011. At the time, only a few teachers around the country were using the QFT in their classrooms. Now, in just over seven years, the QFT is used in more than 1 million classrooms worldwide. This growth is thanks to a grassroots movement of teachers who, through their own initiative and with no mandate, have embraced the QFT and shared it with others, simply because it helps their students become more curious and fully engaged learners.

A QFT lesson begins by sharing four rules for generating questions:

- 1) Ask as many questions as you can.
- 2) Do not stop to discuss, judge, or answer any of the questions.
- 3) Write down every question exactly as it was stated.
- 4) Change any statements into questions.

Educators tell us these rules help foster an open and judgment-free environment where all students feel comfortable participating. Often, students who are normally quiet find a voice.

- After explaining these four rules, the teacher leads a discussion in which students think about what might be challenging about following them.
- The teacher then presents students with a prompt to stimulate student questions. This could be a statement, a quote, a photo, a scientific phenomenon, a video clip, a historical document, or anything else tied to an intended learning goal. We call this prompt a Question Focus, or QFocus for short.
- Students work in groups to generate as many questions about the QFocus as possible, following the four rules. When done, the teacher leads students through the rest of the QFT process.

Discuss the difference between open- and closed-ended questions.

- Revise and improve questions.
- Prioritize questions.
- Determine next steps for how to use questions.
- Reflect about what they've learned.

At each of these points, the teacher has an opportunity to control and steer the process toward a pre-established learning goal. In the days and weeks after the QFT, the teacher also determines what next steps, if any, to take with students' questions. Sometimes, teachers use student questions as formative assessment and simply tailor subsequent instructions accordingly. Other times, students may conduct research or experiments to answer questions, interview a guest expert, write blog or journal entries about a question, answer a question as an "exit ticket," or use their questions as a review activity.

What happens when students ask their own questions?

Educators across the country who have used the QFT describe the unmistakable transformation they see in students. It becomes a powerful engine for learning and engagement. Classrooms become lively places, educators tell us, where students nurture curiosity, develop a sense of ownership over their own learning, and feel classroom work is more relevant to their lives.

- *Students agree! "I just feel so refreshed," an elementary school teacher in Ohio once told us about the joy she felt watching her students get excited about learning. "The engagement and curiosity from this just explodes into every other aspect of the classroom."*
- *"Asking questions may not always lead to answers, but it leads to curiosity," said one ninth-grader. "Question-asking helps us guide our own adventure and helps us find new interests."*
- *"I felt like my brain was expanding more by asking questions and as I asked more questions I came up with new ones," a fourth-grader once told us. Her classmate said, "It felt good to let all my questions out of my brain."*

Insights from Innovative Educators

We're deeply indebted to teachers around the country and beyond for taking the QFT, innovating and experimenting with it, and demonstrating the power of the strategy to enhance student engagement, student voice, and deeper learning. From rural districts in Minnesota and eastern Kentucky to major urban districts in Chicago and Los Angeles and small independent schools in New England, it is teachers who have led the way. As an organization, some of our most important work is learning from educators and sharing their insights and innovations with new audiences.