



Question 8: What makes a good question good?

Empowering Christian leaders and organizations to close the rhetoric/reality gap

What makes a good question good?

In Christian education, your students' objective is to increase their understanding and use of a biblical perspective of course content. You can help them achieve their objective by asking good questions. **So, what make a good question good?**

Short answer: GRACES. For the long answer, keep reading.

Your turn: What are 3 characteristics of a good question? Please stop reading. Identify 3 characteristics of a good question right now.

Good. Now that you've identified 3 characteristics of a good question, keep reading.

Pick a question: You want to help your students increase their understanding and use of a biblical perspective of course content. For each of the 6 pairs of questions below, choose the question you think will best help your students.

1. **(A)** In the following Japanese short story set in the 1600s, what is the key issue the author addresses? **or (B)** What's wrong with the world?
2. **(A)** What are the 3 ways to reduce water consumption that we talked about in class? **or (B)** How can I be a wise steward?
3. **(A)** Did God create humans in his image? **or (B)** Who am I?
4. **(A)** What is mass media? **or (B)** How can I respond effectively to mass media?
5. **(A)** What am I going to do Friday night? **or (B)** Who is God?
6. **(A)** How can I use what I have learned about the three Christian approaches to culture (separation, identification, and transformation) to serve God and others? **or (B)** How can I use my learning to serve?

Explain your choices: For each of the 6 pairs of questions, identify why you think your selection (A or B) would best help your students increase their understanding and use of a biblical perspective. Refer to your 3 characteristics of a good question as appropriate.

Now that you've identified why you think each of your 6 selections would best help your students, keep reading.

Secret: For all 6 pairs of questions, I picked "B." Why? Because I believe a good question **GRACES** understanding. A good question:

- **G**rabs attention
- **R**equires upper-level thinking
- **A**llows for a variety of acceptable answers
- **C**onnects course content, students' lives, and a biblical perspective
- Is **E**ssential—universal, timeless, at the heart of learning
- Is **S**tudent-friendly—10 words or less, with developmentally appropriate vocabulary

A good question **GRACES** your students' understanding.

Hint: These are 6 characteristics of a good question, and these are not the only characteristics of a good question. Using these 6 characteristics will work, and if you want to find more characteristics, google "essential question."

Memory Check 1: Memorize 1 or more of the 6 characteristics of a good question (**GRACES**). Take 1-2 minutes. Do this right now.

Got 1 or more characteristics memorized? Good.

Explore the 6 characteristics (GRACES) of a good question. Read the text below to identify 1 of the 6 characteristics you find helpful:

1. **A good question *Grabs attention*.** “What’s wrong with the world?” grabs my attention. I’ll bet it will grab your students’ attention. It will certainly grab your attention more than “In the following Japanese short story set in the 1600s, what is the key issue the author addresses?” Remember, you must have your students’ attention to help them increase their understanding and use of a biblical perspective.
2. **A good question *Requires upper-level thinking*.** “How can I be a wise steward?” requires your students to recall course content and a biblical perspective, analyze the situation, and evaluate options in order to choose the wisest course of action. “What are the 3 ways to reduce water consumption that we talked about in class?” requires your students to recall course content. Since using a biblical perspective involves upper-level thinking, ask questions that require upper-level thinking.
3. **A good question *Allows for a variety of acceptable responses*.** “Who am I?” allows for a variety of acceptable answers—image bearer of God, Christian/non-Christian, citizen of a given country, member of a given culture or ethnic group, member of a family, personality, gifting. “Who am I?” allows for so many appropriate answers that your students will have some answers you don’t have! On the other hand, “Did God create humans in His image?” has one answer: yes. You know the answer. Your students know you know the answer. So your students rely on you for the right answer, knowing they don’t have to think. Not good.

Ask questions that are open-ended. Ask questions that allow for a variety of acceptable answers, meaning (1) that there is more than one acceptable answer and (2) that some answers are unacceptable, are unbiblical, are wrong.

And remember, unless you plan to be available 24/7 for your students now and for the rest of their lives, be sure to ask questions that help them use a biblical perspective on their own *right now* so that they’ll be able to use a biblical perspective throughout their lives.

4. **A good question *Connects course content, students’ lives, and a biblical perspective*.** “How can I respond effectively to mass media?” involves students in connecting course content (“mass media”), their lives (“I”), and a biblical perspective (“effectively”). When students make these connections, they increase their understanding and use of a biblical perspective. “What is mass media?” addresses the definition of “mass media.” When asked to give definitions, I think “course content,” not connections of course content with my life or a biblical perspective.
5. **A good question is *Essential—universal, timeless, at the heart of learning*.** “Who is God?” is essential. “What am I going to do Friday night?” is not, though depending on what is happening Friday night, the question might seem more interesting. In the short term. It doesn’t promote sustained reflection; “Who is God?” does.
6. **A good question is *Student-friendly—10 words or less, with developmentally appropriate vocabulary*.** “How can I use my learning to serve?” is student-friendly. It’s short (8 words) and uses appropriate vocabulary. It’s easy for students to understand, recall, and use. Imagine students asking each other, “How can we use our learning to serve?” When you ask questions that aren’t 10 words or less and that don’t use developmentally appropriate vocabulary, you decrease the likelihood that students will understand and use the question. Not good.

Memory Check 2: Memorize 2 or more of the 6 characteristics of a good question (**GRACES**). Take 1-2 minutes. Do this right now.

Got 2 or more characteristics memorized? Good.

Personal note: I dislike being asked leading questions like “Don’t you think we should ask students questions?” I dislike being asked leading questions because the person asking already knows the answer (we should ask students questions), just wants me agree, and isn’t really interested in what I think.

I also dislike being asked closed questions like “Should we use questions?” Why do I dislike being asked closed questions? Because the person asking has already decided range of acceptable answers (yes or no). And because I can answer closed questions quickly. Closed questions don’t require sustained reflection.

What type of questions do I like being asked? Open-ended questions like “How can we help students use a biblical perspective?”

Check your understanding: Which of the 6 characteristics of a good question (**GRACES**) does each of the following 4 questions have? (Suggested answers are at the end of this article. Answers may vary, depending on who your students are and what you intend to do with a question.)

1. What’s true?
2. What’s mass media?
3. Why did God create the world, and what is our responsibility for it?
4. Who is Abraham?

What if you don’t ask good questions?

1. **Your students will focus on something else that grabs their attention.** And as we both know, there are a lot of things competing for your students’ attention: another class, a movie they want to watch, what they are going to eat for lunch. Ask a question that doesn’t grab your students’ attention, and you’ll get inattentive students.
2. **Your students won’t get enough practice using upper-level thinking skills.** They’ll get sufficient practice with recall and comprehension, but not enough practice with analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. This isn’t good education. This isn’t engaging instruction. This won’t prepare them to think through complex situations in order to impact the world for Christ.
3. **Your students will rely on you for the right answers.** They’ll become dependent thinkers instead of independent thinkers. Is this what you want?
4. **Your students won’t connect a biblical perspective with their lives and learning.** They might connect what they learned in two different classes. They might even connect what they are learning with something they experienced over the summer. But they won’t connect a biblical perspective to their lives and their learning.
5. **Your students won’t spend sufficient time considering universals.** They’ll consider things that are important, urgent, and intriguing. Good. But remember, “good” things are the enemy of “best” things, of essential things that help your students get wisdom.
6. **Your students won’t understand what you are asking.** And they’ll do what you do when you don’t understand—tune out.

Use your learning by doing 1 (or more) of the following:

- Use the 6 characteristics of a good question (**GRACES**) to develop 1 good question.
- Use the 6 characteristics of a good question (**GRACES**) to assess a question you have already developed, making changes as necessary.

So, what’s the real question? Well, it’s not “What makes a good question good?” Instead, it’s “How will I use a good question today to help my students increase their understanding and use a biblical perspective?”

Remember: Success is your students increasing their understanding and use of a biblical perspective by responding sincerely to a good question you ask. Success is *not* you developing a good question or even you asking your students a good question. But remember, you have to develop and ask a good question before your students can sincerely respond to it.

Also remember: A good question **GRACES** your students’ understanding.

Memory Check 3: Memorize 6 of the 6 characteristics of a good question (**GRACES**). Do this right now.

Got 6 characteristics memorized? Good.

What do you do now? Ask your students your question.

Answers to “Check your understanding”: Please remember that answers may vary, depending on who your students are and what you intend to do with a question. Here are my answers:

1. What’s true?: **GRACES**
2. What’s mass media?: **GRACES**
3. Why did God create the world, and what is our responsibility for it?: **GRACES**
4. Who is Abraham?: **GRACES**

Bonus: Be a servant leader. How? By asking your colleagues good questions—questions that grab attention, require upper-level thinking, allow for a variety of acceptable answers, and are user-friendly. (Sound familiar?)

For example, ask:

1. In one sentence, what’s your goal?
2. If you could accomplish 1 thing this year/month/week, what would it be?
3. How can you increase student use of a biblical perspective?
4. How is this problem an opportunity?
5. What’s the ideal?

Use questions to serve. Don’t use self-serving questions. Use questions to lead. Don’t use leading questions.