Types of Questions

According to Daniel Lindley in *This Rough Magic*, there are five basic types of questions in use in the classroom.

1. **Factual questions**: questions that have a clearly defined right and wrong answer based on obvious facts or awareness.

   Examples: What does the word *duplicitous* mean? For whose will is Oedipa Maas the executor? What is Scrooge's motivation for changing his behavior [when it is stated directly by the text of *A Christmas Carol* with very little room for disagreement]?

   Comments: Lazy, lazy, lazy: turn in questions like this and expect little or no credit. These are the sorts of questions that one could generate without reading at all, skimming the text, or picking out passages at random. They certainly don't help with grappling with the larger issues in the text.

2. **Convergent questions**: questions that have a finite number of possible answers, determined by the finite number of reasonable inferences that one could make about a text.

   Example: Aside from the obvious promise to his wife, what are the chief reasons that Anse Bundren is so determined to bury Addie in Jefferson?

   Comments: These are more productive than factual questions because they require an actual inference to answer. They can be either very good or very poor questions depending on how they are asked. In general, the more specific and detailed the wording, the more credit you are likely to receive. For instance, the example question above is fine, able to generate some interesting discussion, and helps us approach the larger questions in the text. However, it is not outstanding. Consider how much better it is if phrased this way:

   > Addie Bundren has solicited a promise from Anse to bury her in Jefferson, yet there is little indication that Anse is motivated by love or duty. Despite accusing others of having "no affection nor gentleness" (5) for her memory, when Anses' thoughts are revealed, he is consumed with selfish and mundane concerns-- such as his resentment at having to settle a doctor bill, as revealed through the obsessive repetition of the phrase "got to pay for" in his interior monologue (9). Nonetheless, he makes the difficult journey with the corpse, even when there are very legitimate reasons to abandon it (e.g., the bridge is revealed to be washed out in section 23). Assuming that Anse's desire to purchase false teeth in Jefferson (28) is only part of the story, what best explains his persistence in the face of adversity?

3. **Divergent questions**: questions whose answers involve counter-factual alternatives-- essentially "What if?" questions-- or (more broadly) require inferences not found in the text.

   Example: When Sethe reveals to Paul D what really happened in the toolshed, Paul D condemns her love as "too thick," to the point that Sethe cannot distinguish between protecting her offspring and not allowing them to experience harm. Rather than possessing enough empathy to understand Sethe's point of view or, alternatively, being able to help Sethe understand why what she did to her child was wrong Paul D compares her to an animal and leaves, saying "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (18). If Paul D had stayed and the status quo in 124 Bluestone Road maintained, would it have

been possible for Denver and Sethe to exorcize the demons of the past? Put another way, would Paul D's continued presence in the household have been enough of a counterbalance to overcome the destructive influence of Beloved?

Comments: I wrote a good divergent question, but most of the time, when students attempt to do this, it's a wee bit crap. I'd stick to convergent and evaluative questions for the most part.

4. **Evaluative questions**: questions that establish a comparative framework between different ideas.

    Example: In response to Gabriel Conroy's desire to be "master of her strange mood" (148), Gretta tells him the story of her (former?) love for the deceased Michael Furey. Gabriel's response to her narration is to feel a "vague terror" (150). In context, what does this mean, and how does it compare to Gabriel's earlier outlook. Specifically, in what way does it help to establish the break between how Gabriel had previously viewed the world and how he views it in the closing pages of the story?

    Comments: I like these; I really do. However, it is much more difficult to make these specific enough to earn full credit. If you are able to provide the sort of focus that doesn't just generate random lists of characteristics or details, you'll be fine.

5. **Combination questions**: some combination of the above types.

For what is Mr. Davidson looking in these questions I will be writing?

1. **Uniqueness**: different perspectives earn more credit than obvious insights that everyone shares.
2. **Specificity** (including specific references to portions or passages in the text): detail is good, and, generally speaking, the more the better; I expect context and set-up before the question proper.
3. **Evidence from the text**: This is not just a good idea, it's a requirement. You should be blending very specific paraphrase along with snippet quotes. Both should have parenthetical references.
4. **Complexity**: questions that uncover ambiguities or have no easy yes/no answers are strongly encouraged; look for puzzles and contradictions in the text, framing your question around ways to reconcile the problems you have uncovered.
5. **Evidence of understanding**: this is not the time for clearing up things you don't understand about the text; save that for class or (better yet) tutorials (since my reading quizzes assume you have understood the reading).
6. **Evidence of engagement**: I'm looking for proof that you've done more than just read for superficial meaning; I want to see that you've thought long and hard about the text and what it means.
7. **Engagement with the bigger ideas in the text**: questions that focus on the larger thematic questions tend to earn more credit than ones focused on (mostly) irrelevant details.

Decide what big idea in the text you will be engaging. → Identify a specific portion of the text that illustrates this larger concern. → Start writing. Set up your question with the context in which the problem occurs. Pretend that the reader needs to be reminded what is happening at that point. → Identify the problem and develop its scope. This is where it is easiest to integrate evidence. Oftentimes, this step can be combined with the previous one. → Ask the question at the end. If it is too generalized, find a way to narrow its scope. → By answering your question, I should learn something important about how the text functions.