

**Some Notes On How To Ask A Good Question About Theory That Will Provoke
Conversation And Further Discussion From Your Colleagues**

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Some Notes On How To Ask A Good Question About Theory That Will Provoke Conversation And Further Discussion From Your Colleagues

- Read theory three times: once to get a mental map of the article/chapter/paper; once to get the gist of the argument; and once to find your questions.
- Take notes in the margins: mess with the text. Underline, star, jot down questions.
- Take a break.
- Think about the pieces of the text, phrases, expressions, moments that tweak your instincts, that bother and harass you. These intuitions and “feelings” are the ends of intellectual threads that you may want to excavate.
- Linger over passages that are unclear or that strike you as particularly helpful or that don’t jar well with you. Why do those passages set off your instincts?
- Relate those passages to the whole text: how is this piece of the text part of a larger context?
- Contextualize the writing. You should know, and your handout should provide, the following information: who wrote the essay/chapter; what is their discipline, or interdisciplinary nexus; what else have they written; what is the/are the central arguments; who is the writer in conversation with; what are some key passages; what are some key terms; what did you not understand? Make your discussion question(s) simple, straightforward and jargon-free.
- Proofread your questions so that you catch grammar and spelling mistakes.
- Make your questions open-ended, i.e. not answerable with fact or by direct and immediate reference to the text.
- Make sure your question doesn’t rely on information the rest of the class doesn’t have, OR give the class enough information and background to be able to engage the question. Make sure the question is answerable to start with, i.e., is not vague and does not rely on facts or assumptions not addressable within the confines of our class conversation.
- Make reference to the text with quotes or page numbers: direct the class to look at a relevant passage, read it together out loud, and drill down into the writing and sentence structure itself to get at the problem you are looking at. Sometimes I refer to this model of reading theory as Talmudic. What I am trying to say is that we need not reserve close-reading practices to literature, particularly if we are interested in the refractive effects of language itself.
- A good discussion question reframes some of the problems of the text and then tries to get at internal logical problems and paradoxes or to think through the consequences, implications and applications of the theory.
- As such, questions about “experience” or “responses” or “feelings” tend not to be helpful questions – try to step back from personal responses and instead focus on the intellectual shape of the ideas and argument.
- Often we are tempted to ask the “what about” question: e.g., what about the people who are excluded from this theory? Although not an unreasonable question, asked in this manner this is not really a sophisticated question

because it doesn't open up conversation. The only answer to "what about" is: they aren't there. More productive is to ask: how do the exclusions at the heart of this work facilitate certain conclusions, problems or paradigms, what are these paradigms and what happens when we consider this theory in a broader context? What would this theory look like if re-written from a different point in history, different assumptions about political economy, etc.?

- It's not the worst idea to make sure you have some thoughts about how to answer your questions before sending them on to your colleagues. However, sometimes you are just really stumped and need to work through this question with your classmates. That's okay too.
- Which brings me to: it is often smart and productive to write a preamble to a question. That preamble might be a short intellectual history of your questions, it might contextualize the text you are working with, it might scaffold the question you want to ask by referring to other texts or many points in the same text. Don't make this preamble so long that no-one can excavate the original question, however. Also....
- If you can answer your question while you are writing it, you probably need to just state your point of view and move on to another, related, question.
- Sometimes the question you write is simply the jumping-off point for more developed questions on the part of the class. That is fine! The point is to catalyze inquiry, not perform mastery: good pedagogy means letting go of your ego-investments in your own ideas.
- Sometimes you are stuck with an instinct, a hunch, a nagging feeling and a half-formed question and you simply can't move forward without thinking about it out loud. Bring those seemingly half-formed thoughts to the class: we will figure the direction or shape of your question together.
- Finally: when you don't get it, you don't get it. Ask for help from the professor or your classmates, and feel free and supported in bringing your "I Don't Get It" questions to class. We will all profit from these acts of intellectual humility and generosity.