

# Self-Questioning Taxonomy

**G**rover Cleveland. The answer is, *Grover Cleveland*. But what is the question? Students have become well conditioned to answering questions, especially those that feature expected responses like *Grover Cleveland*. The questions may vary: Who was the only U.S. President whose two terms in office were not consecutive? or Who was the only Democrat to serve as President in the over 50 years between the American Civil War and World War I? or even Who was one of the pudgiest fellows to occupy the highest office in the United States?

Students know how such questions “work.” Often, they merely need to undertake minimal surface sampling of a text in order to derive an acceptable answer. Questions like these are rarely much of a challenge. Students can answer them rather quickly, and even struggling readers can frequently get through them with little assistance. But literal, fact-level questions—like the ones outlined above—have little to do with the comprehension of written texts. Researchers have long cautioned us that these questions can in many cases be answered even if a student is confused about a text’s meaning. In other words, questions asked ostensibly to help students “get the facts” rarely help students to construct an understanding of an author’s message. Students can find answers, but they miss the important questions—the questions they should pose to themselves to guide their reading and learning.

Instead of searching for answers, students need to be able to find the questions. The answer, in fact, is not *Grover Cleveland*. *Grover Cleveland* is the *question*. Grover Cleveland? Why Grover Cleveland? What’s the significance of his Presidency? What is it about Grover Cleveland that is important to know? In what ways did his actions change the United States? How did Cleveland’s solutions to the country’s problems compare with those of other Presidents? What are we to conclude about Cleveland—is he worthy of extended study or should he be relegated to a cursory glance before we move on to more compelling topics?

Of course, the questions in the previous paragraph sound very much like the questions history teachers ask themselves as they grapple with setting priorities for instructional emphasis. Okay, the textbook has a section on Cleveland. Do the students need to read it? And for what purpose? Why is it truly worth their

time as learners to zero in on this President? These are excellent questions, too good to be asked solely by teachers. Students also need to be asking *themselves* such questions, and attempting to answer them.

## Using the Strategies

Most educators are well familiar with Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, which argued that teachers need to prompt more complex thinking from their students (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956). Often the taxonomy is employed to help teachers ask better and deeper questions, but the other side of this dynamic is for teachers to model self-questioning strategies so that students themselves begin to generate increasingly more sophisticated questions as they engage with written texts. Bloom’s Taxonomy, updated by Anderson and Krathwohl in 2001, presents an excellent framework for guiding comprehension instruction as students read and learn during classroom lessons (see Bloom’s Taxonomy, Revised). To illustrate a more extended application of this strategy, the Self-Questioning Taxonomy for Literary Fiction is presented to guide comprehension instruction when working with fiction texts specifically.

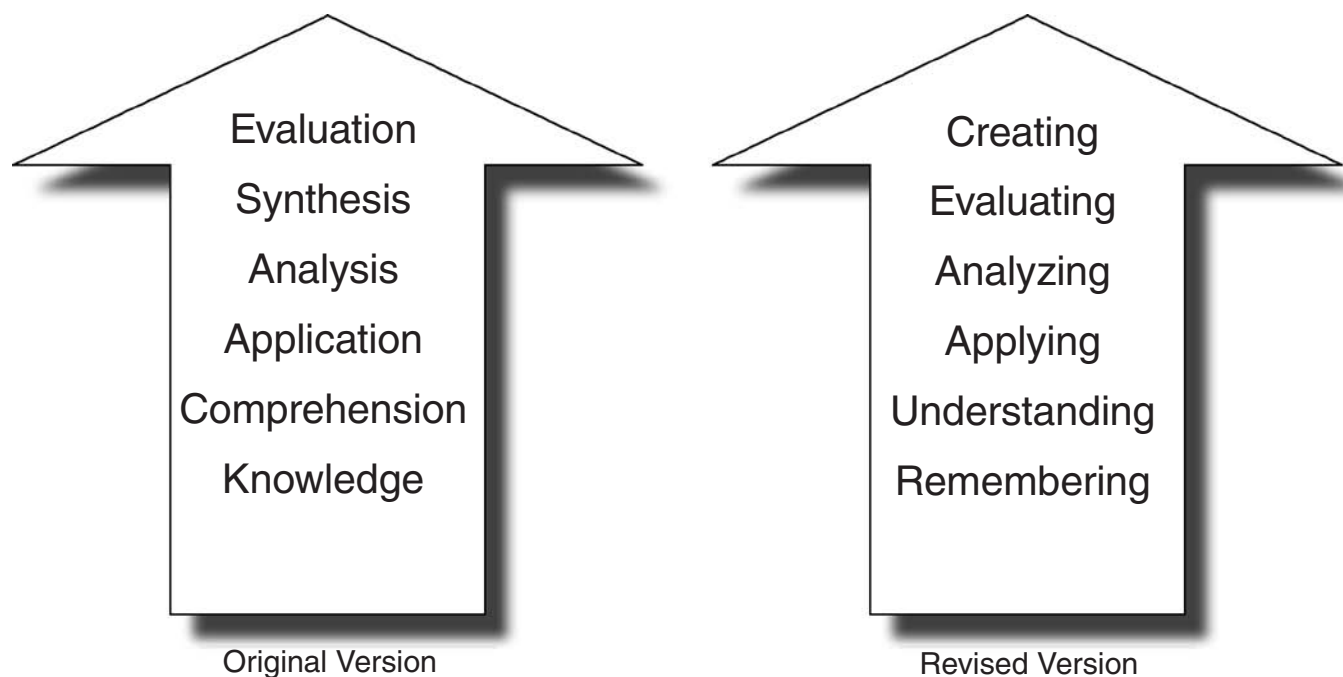
Using this strategy involves the following steps:

**1** Walk students through the different levels of thinking in the revised taxonomy. Notice that the revised version emphasizes strong verbs as cues for thinking: *remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating*. Model as a think-aloud how these different levels of thinking influence your comprehension. For example, the following think-aloud based on an article on the Great Wall of China demonstrates these different levels of thinking:

Strategy Index
Instructional Focus
Frontloading Learning
Guiding Comprehension
Consolidating Understanding
Text Frames
Cause/Effect
Concept/Definition
Problem/Solution
Compare/Contrast
Proposition/Support
Goal/Action/Outcome
Comprehension Processes
Making Connections
Generating Questions
Creating Mental Images
Making Inferences
Determining Importance
Synthesizing

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## Bloom's Taxonomy, Revised by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001)



Hmmm. What does this author want me to understand about the Great Wall? Large sections are being eroded by sandstorms. Why does the author argue this is happening? Let's see...farming practices that have drained underwater reservoirs have led to ecological change, leading to sandstorms, which cause the wall to crumble. What crucial information should I remember? Predictions are that parts of the wall will disappear in only 20 years. How can I use this knowledge? Perhaps we need to be more careful in how we use natural resources, or we may suffer similar climate changes that can destroy features that have lasted for centuries? Does this information seem reliable? The author supports these conclusions with lots of convincing data and quotes an esteemed museum director. How has my understanding changed? I realize that even long-standing treasures like the Great Wall can quickly fall victim to climatic change.

**2** Introduce the Taxonomy of Self-Questioning Chart (Buehl, 2007, September). Relate each level of thinking to a statement a reader can make to assess comprehension of a text (see the Taxonomy of Self-Questioning Chart). Emphasize that a deep comprehension—rather than surface-level comprehension—will include understanding at all six of these levels. For example, *evaluating* asks a reader to view a text through a critical lens: “I can critically examine this author’s message.” Each statement reflects an expectation of a level of thinking that a reader should factor in to construct an in-depth comprehension of

a text. In addition, walk students through how the comprehension strategies of proficient readers are also cued by the thinking at each level.

**3** Each statement of the taxonomy is aligned with a focus question. Emphasize that proficient readers constantly check their comprehension through self-questioning. For example, when readers ask themselves, “How has the author’s perspective influenced what he or she tells me?” they are *evaluating* a message. These focus questions should be modeled extensively with a variety of materials so that they become a “habit of mind” for students as readers. Developing a wall poster or bookmarks of the Taxonomy of Self-Questioning Chart can serve as a daily reminder of this array of questions to guide comprehension.

**4** As students become practiced with eliciting focusing questions on their own, they can be provided with additional examples. *Analyzing* could also include questions like, How does the author support these ideas? Companion questions for *Evaluating* might be, Does the author adequately support the viewpoints or conclusions? Is the argument convincing? Did the author omit or overlook other possible arguments or evidence?

### Self-Questioning for Literary Fiction

Our students encounter stories as an ongoing facet of their education. From their earliest years in school, as

## Taxonomy of Self-Questioning Chart

Level of thinking	Comprehension self-assessment	Focusing question	Comprehension process
Creating	I have created new knowledge.	How has this author changed what I understand?	Synthesizing
Evaluating	I can critically examine this author's message.	How has the author's perspective influenced what he or she tells me?	Inferring
Analyzing	I can take my understanding to a deeper level.	How is this similar to (or different from) other material I've read?	Making connections Determining importance
Applying	I can use my understanding in some meaningful way.	How can I connect what this author is telling me to understand something better?	Making connections Inferring
Understanding	I can understand what the author is telling me.	What does this author want me to understand?	Determining importance Inferring Creating visual/sensory images
Remembering	I can recall specific details, information, and ideas from this text.	What do I need to remember to make sense of this text?	Determining importance

*Source:* Buehl, D. (2007, September). Modeling self-questioning on Bloom's Taxonomy. *OnWEAC*. Retrieved from [www.weac.org/News/2007-08/sept07/readingroom.htm](http://www.weac.org/News/2007-08/sept07/readingroom.htm)

beginning readers, through high school and beyond, students transition into reading longer and more complex works of literature. And while they are often held accountable for relating what exactly transpired in a story, many times students scratch their heads and think to themselves, Why are you telling me this? What are we to make of this story? What does this story mean to its author? And what might this story mean to us? What's the point of this story? Providing students with tools that help them use questions such as these to "crack open" literary prose is essential for improving comprehension of this genre of written text. The Self-Questioning Taxonomy for Literary Fiction (Buehl, 2007, November) guides students into building meaningful interpretations of fictional works. Using this strategy involves the following steps:

**1** Begin by differentiating between stories that are narrative nonfiction and stories that are literary fiction. Narrative nonfiction—such as biographies, autobiographies, and historical recountings—share many elements with literary fiction: characters, actions, a

flow of events. However, narrative nonfiction generally presents a straightforward storyline, perhaps interspersed with author commentary, interpretation, and conclusions. Literary fiction, in contrast, may feature storylines that are less open and obvious. Authors of literary fiction tend to rely on the reader to make interpretations and draw conclusions, to construct a meaning of their message that is more implicit rather than explicitly stated.

A key difference, then, is author intent. Authors of narrative nonfiction usually attempt to directly tell what happened in a clearly outlined narration, often in order to support an interpretation of what these events mean to them. Authors of literary fiction create stories from their imagination that can help readers reflect upon and understand their lives in some way. But authors of literary fiction typically do not reveal everything; readers may need to infer some of what is going on in the story. As a result, readers are expected to develop their own interpretations of what a story might mean, both to an author and especially to themselves.

## Taxonomy Self-Questioning Chart for Literary Fiction

Level of thinking	Comprehension self-assessment	Focusing questions
Creating	I have developed an interpretation of what this story means.	<p>Why is the author telling me this story?</p> <p>What theme or idea might the author be exploring in this story?</p> <p>What does this story mean to me?</p>
Evaluating	I can critically examine this author's story.	<p>Who is the author and how has author perspective influenced the telling of this story?</p> <p>What does the author's choice of words indicate about what the author might be thinking?</p> <p>What emotions is the author eliciting?</p> <p>Does the author have an "attitude," and if so, about what?</p>
Analyzing	I can take my understanding to a deeper level.	<p>What literary devices does the author use?</p> <p>What seems to be the purpose for using these literary devices?</p>
Applying	I can use my understanding in some meaningful way.	<p>How can I connect this story to my life and experiences?</p> <p>Why might the author have the characters say or do this?</p> <p>What point might the author be making about the characters' actions?</p> <p>Why might the author place the story in this setting?</p>
Understanding	I can understand what the author is telling me.	<p>How does the author have the characters interact with one another?</p> <p>How do the characters feel about one another?</p> <p>How do character feelings and interactions change?</p> <p>How does the author use conflict in this story?</p> <p>How does the author resolve this conflict?</p>
Remembering	I can follow what happens in this story.	<p>Who are the characters?</p> <p>Where does the story take place?</p> <p>What are the major events of the story?</p> <p>What is the sequence of these events?</p> <p>What event initiates the action of the story?</p>

Source: Buehl, D. (2007, November). Questioning literary fiction. *OnWEAC*. Retrieved from [www.weac.org/News/2007-08/nov07/readingroom.htm](http://www.weac.org/News/2007-08/nov07/readingroom.htm)

**2** Introduce the focusing questions to be used for guiding the students' understanding of short stories, novels, and other works of fiction (see the Taxonomy of Self-Questioning for Literary Fiction). Comprehension

of literary works begins with a series of questions readers ask to monitor if they have grasped the basic story grammar of a fictional work: characters, setting, and plot (see Story Mapping beginning on page 166).

Because authors of literary fiction may place demands on readers to infer some of the key elements of a story, initially students need to check whether they can follow what is occurring in the story. These focusing questions correspond to the level of *remembering*.

**3** In addition, literary fiction will examine conflict of some dimension: within a character, between characters, and in conjunction with larger forces, such as a struggle against some aspect of nature. Understanding literary fiction necessitates tracking how these conflicts unfold and are resolved. Furthermore, the dynamics between characters are very important for readers to perceive: how the characters feel about one another and how they interact, and whether these feelings and interactions change in any way. These focusing questions are represented on the level of *understanding*.

**4** As students clarify the basic story components, they transition to posing questions that help them interpret a fictional work as a form of communication. Focusing questions at the *applying* level let students delve into using their own life experiences to connect to the work and to speculate why an author chooses to have characters behave in a certain way. At the *analyzing* level, students are encouraged to notice the author's craft and to ponder how the author's use of literary devices—such as symbolism, an unreliable narrator, or figurative language—provides clues to what the story means to the author.

**5** As students consider author “moves” in writing this story, students are cued to factor in author identity at the *evaluating* level. Who is telling them this story, and are there any indicators embedded in the text that suggest the perspective the author may be bringing to the work? In particular, sensitivity to emotional content

of the selection is important, especially if the author signals personal attitudes about topics and events mentioned in the story (see Reading With Attitude on page 64).

**6** Finally, the culminating questions at the *creating* level emphasize the following: What is the point of this story? Why is the author telling me this? and What sense can I make of this story?

## Advantages

- Students use focusing questions that cue them to use increasingly more complex thinking as they become more sophisticated readers and learners.
- Students expect to generate their own questions about literary works rather than respond to questions developed by someone else.
- Students' comprehension of a text factors in both their “read” of what an author is saying, as well as their personal interpretations of the meaning of a work.

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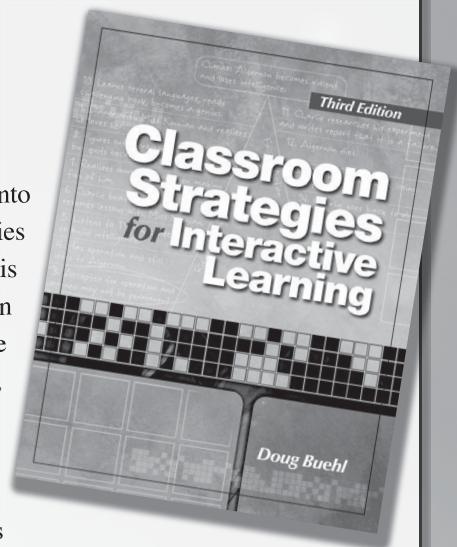
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