



## Professional Development Webinar #7: Writing Interpretive Questions

### Principles

Some definition and distinctions:

An *Interpretive question* asks for the *meaning* of some aspect of a work about which there may be *multiple* textually supportable opinions. This definition has two parts: meaning, and multiple.

*Meaning* – an interpretive question always asks about the thematic significance of the text. It asks, “what is the author doing here?” rather than simply, “what does he say?”

*Multiple* – an interpretive question can be answered more than one way from the text. By focusing on ambiguity, complexity, confusion, wonderment, or uncertainty – the ways and places that a work points beyond itself, asking questions rather than giving answers – an interpretive question works with the story to engage the reader with the author’s chosen ideas.

Interpretive questions are distinct from *Factual questions*, which ask no more than what the author says. Questions about details of character, plot, and setting are often factual only, while others invite and require interpretation.

Factual: “What is the climax of this story?”

Interpretive: “How does the resolution presented by the climax emphasize a key theme of this story?”

Interpretive questions are distinct from *Evaluative questions*, which ask whether and how the author’s work is Good, True, and Beautiful. Some questions in the Worldview Detective Socratic List are evaluative.

Evaluative: “Is this story racist?”

Interpretive: “What do racial attitudes depicted in the story suggest about the source of true happiness?”

### Practices

Uses for interpretive questions

- Essay prompts – at the upper grammar level and above
- Discussion prep – at all levels
- Daily assignment templates involving 3-sentence quotations

Sources of good interpretive questions within a text

- Genuine doubt
  - Letting Swift River Go
  - Scarlet Letter – individual or community?
- Significant Themes
  - G21.1
  - L1.5
  - R6.3
- Complexity and apparent contradiction: Frankenstein protagonist question?
  - G9.2
  - L2.3
  - R19.2
- Subjective reader response
  - Huck Finn
- Literary devices
  - L7.1
  - R7.2

Sources of good “interpretive question templates” – general versions that can be quickly modified to adapt to a particular story

- The Socratic List!

For more information about interpretive questions, consult the *Shared Inquiry Handbook* (Chicago: The Great Books Foundation, 2007).