

Asking Questions

Questions can be categorized in two ways:

DESCRIPTIVE (what): These ask you to **identify** and **concretize** patterns with **examples**.

ANALYTICAL (so what): These ask you to consider how the pattern you've observed

- * fits into or enables an overall strategy or contributes to the communication of a goal or argument
- * reveals an underlying system of values or ideas that shapes the work and that helps the author/speaker/text **make sense of the world** (or topic, or issue etc.)
- * leads you to larger themes, ideas, positions, contexts etc.

Asking Research Questions Sample Question

Coburn Freer, *The Poetics of Jacobean Drama*

OBSERVATION: Vindice's great speeches all occur by Act 3, scene 5, after this he "speaks a much larger proportion of his lines in prose, and he seldom speaks more than three or four lines of verse at a time" (62).

SUMMARY/PRELIMINARY HYPOTHESIS: "In short, something goes out of Vindice *as a poet* after he has killed the Duke. . . . The kind of verse he spoke at first, which critics have all rightly admired, is no longer an adequate mirror of his self" (62).

RESEARCH QUESTION: "What is there in Vindice's great verse that leads us to accept his dropping it later? And how is this later style a truer image of his changing self?" (62)

THESE QUESTIONS

- *arise from and build on an observed pattern
- *direct us to the details of the text
- *seek to connect these details to a larger issue (identity and/or "character development")
- *form the basis for a thesis (the ways that formal elements are used to communicate broader concerns)

Asking Research Questions

Sample Question

Titus Andronicus 1.1.106-121: Tamora begs for mercy for her son

OBSERVATION: Tamora bases her plea for mercy on the similarity between Romans and Goths: "O, if to fight for king and commonweal/Were piety in thine, it is in these" (1.1.114-15).

SUMMARY/PRELIMINARY HYPOTHESIS: Titus gets to say what is "pious" and what is "barbaric" because he is the victor. The victor controls MEANING. MEANING is related to POWER.

QUESTION: So/ when Tamora later becomes ascendant as the Empress, does SHE now have control of meaning?
Is being the "top dog" enough to guarantee that Tamora has control of language, or are there other factors involved here?
For example: Is POWER GENDERED?

This generates a QUESTION CHAIN:

What is the difference between Titus's control of meaning and Tamora's?

Do they use language differently? Why? Why not?

Do they have the same access to the POWER OF LANGUAGE? Why? Why not?

What are the implications of this difference/similarity in terms of how power is defined and exercised?

In other words, what is the nature of the relationship between MEANING/LANGUAGE and POWER in this play?

Asking Questions Continued An Illustration

What

Observation: Mary Wollstonecraft uses many dichotomies in her introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.

Question: What dichotomies does she use?
Which dichotomies seem to be the most important?

So What

Question: Why does she choose to set up terms in opposition this way? What does this allow her to do? Is this a strategy of resistance?

What does her emphasis on nature vs. culture tell us about how she defines women and their place in culture?

What does she value the most and how does she emphasize this using dichotomies?