

10 Questioning Strategies that Minimize Classroom Management Problems

Minimize classroom problems and maximize student learning with proven techniques for asking questions.

During tutoring sessions, questioning plays an important role in instruction and can serve a variety of purposes. They can be used to assess readiness for new learning, to create interest and motivation in learning, to make concepts more precise, to check student understanding of material, to redirect off-task students to more positive behavior, and to create the moderate amount of tension that enhances learning. Questioning is also an effective component of effective instruction and, when used correctly, can produce greater student achievement.

Asking good questions is an important skill that tutors must develop. Because this instructional strategy dominates class time and because students are active during the lesson, there are more chances for management problems to arise if tutors do not follow good questioning techniques. These problems arise typically when students are bored with a lesson or do not understand the tutor's expectations for behavior. Following these recommended approaches should minimize behavior problems and maximize student learning.

1. Write out some questions before working with students or planning the lesson.

Before working with students, tutors seldom write down or fully think through potential questions while planning; instead, they generate them extemporaneously during the lesson. This approach can lead to vague questions that do not engage students in deep, high-quality thinking and, consequently, unengaged learners may misbehave out of confusion or boredom. America Reads/Counts encourages tutors to generate questions that are clearly written, appropriate for the students' ability, and sequenced in a logical way.

2. Establish your expectations for behavior before beginning the questioning period.

Tutors may want to remind students to raise their hands, listen carefully to classmates' comments, and respect one another's right to self-expression. Clarifying ground rules reduces confusion and helps everyone know how to act and learn appropriate behavior for a discussion in a small group or one-to-one tutoring setting.

3. Call on a variety of students.

The elements of surprise and uncertainty are ways to "keep students on their toes" during a discussion. Teachers can keep students' attention by calling on them randomly. Because learners are uncertain about on whom the teacher will call, they will remain attentive. Effective educators know that they must interact with all children by the end of the lesson and that they must keep all children engaged for maximum learning to occur.

4. Cue students before asking a question

Behavior management problems arise because well-intentioned students cannot read their tutor's mind and thus do not know how to respond. Cueing the students before asking the question can minimize disruptive outbursts. Four cueing techniques are available:

*Call on a specific student and then ask the question (e.g., "John, what is the name of the main character in the story?"). This approach is advantageous for two reasons: the educator can ensure that a wide variety of students are involved throughout the lesson, and everyone clearly knows who the teacher is addressing.

*Ask students to raise their hands and then ask the question (e.g., "Please raise your hand if you can answer the question. Who was Sir Isaac Newton?"). Tutors can use this approach as a type of informal assessment to determine the number of students who appear to know the answer and give slower learners more time to formulate one.

*Ask students to shout out the answer and then ask the question (e.g., "Boys and girls, please shout out the answer to this question if you know it. What is the capital of the United States?" or "First figure out the answer to the problem in your head... what does $5+6$ equal?" Pause to allow students time to think of an answer. "Now everyone say the answer loud"). Best used during correcting papers or at the beginning of a discussion, this approach encourages participation because students do not worry about the correctness of their answers. Furthermore, bright learners tend to like the chance to demonstrate their quick intellectual reflexes.

*Ask all students to think of an answer before asking the question (e.g., "Boys and girls, I'm going to ask a question. I want everyone to think of an answer. Then I will call on someone. What is an obtuse angle?" Pause to allow students time to think of an answer. Then follow up with, "John, please share your answer."). This approach fosters more thinking from the group as a whole and maintains attentiveness because students are unsure of whom the tutor will call on.

5. Ask questions that are the appropriate level for each student.

"Success breeds success." When students feel success, they are more inclined to persist with a task. To help them feel success, the teacher should tactfully ask questions at the appropriate level. Frustrated students may hide their feeling by acting out or distracting others by telling jokes or acting like the class clown. Lower-achieving students especially need to feel success and should be given feedback for their correct answers. Asking questions that involve personal issues or opinions is one way to involve this group. If low-achieving students feel that the question is too hard or too easy, then they may misbehave.

6. Ask questions that elicit positive or correct responses.

75% of tutor's questions should elicit correct responses. Students will remain motivated and more willing to remain intellectually engaged with the teacher if they feel positively toward the information and can answer the teacher's questions correctly most of the time. Students generally will not disrupt the lesson if they are feeling successful.

7. Vary the person who responds to questions.

Rather than the tutor always responding to the students, another variation is to ask classmates to respond to one another's responses. This approach promotes positive social interaction by encouraging respectful listening. It also involves more people in the lesson and creates a more interactive exchange between individuals. The more students participate in the lesson, the less likely they are to misbehave.

8. Respond to every answer and correct errors.

Listen carefully to students' comments and maintain a high ration of positive to negative verbal feedback. Respond to every answer and offer specific praise. By doing so, tutors show their students that they value their ideas. As a result, students will be more inclined to behave because they know they are respected. Furthermore, if a student does not seem to understand, ask a classmate to rephrase the question or rephrase it yourself. If the answer is incorrect, indicate the part that is correct or ask a follow-up question for clarification.

9. Ask follow-up questions.

The goal of a question-and-answer session is to get everyone to talk, and one way to foster more discussion is to ask follow-up questions. Researchers found that 95 percent of teachers' questions are classified as low-level, usually requiring a yes or no response. Tutors can elicit more discussion by asking students to justify or explain their reasoning. Ask "why" questions promotes higher-order thinking.

10. Encourage students to ask questions.

The teacher is usually the person who asks the questions during the discussion. Yet teachers must take deliberate steps to get their learners to ask questions. At the beginning of the year, a short activity or game could be planned that requires the class to ask questions about a topic. For example, students could play the game "Twenty Questions." Repeating the activity and rewarding participants will foster the desired behavior. Once the tutoring session culture of questions has been established, students will feel more comfortable asking them.