

How can we teach kids to question?



While working on [A More Beautiful Question](#), I got to know the folks at a fascinating nonprofit called [The Right Question Institute](#). Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana, the RQI's co-directors, have spent many years studying how kids (and adults, too) form questions. In developing their own "Question Formulation Technique," they've found that it is, indeed, possible to teach kids to be better questioners—and in the process, help them become better thinkers.

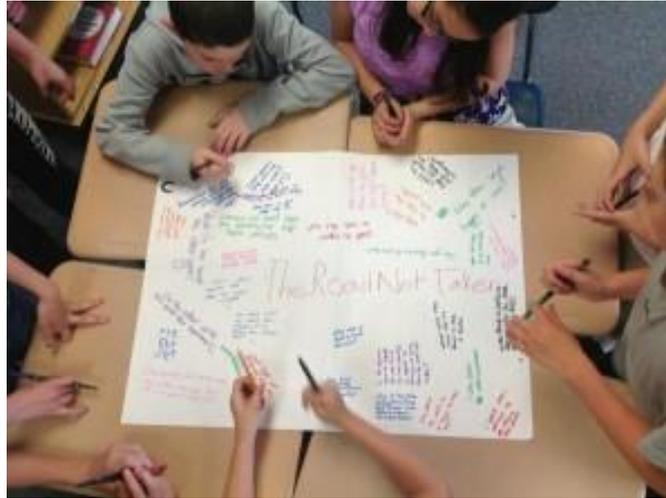
"People think of questioning as simple," Rothstein told me, but when done right, "it's a very sophisticated, high-level form of thinking." Questioning can help expand and open up the way we think about a subject or a problem—but questions also can direct and focus our thinking. One of the most important things questioning does is to enable people of all ages to think and act in the face of uncertainty. In the words of Steve Quatrano, a colleague of Rothstein and Santana at RQI, the act of forming questions helps us "to organize our thinking around what we *don't* know."

Sounds pretty important, right? Yet, for the most part, we don't teach questioning skills in school. And in most classrooms, questioning is still primarily the domain of the teacher. "Questions are used a lot in the classroom but it's mostly one way," says Rothstein. "It's not about the student asking, it's about the teacher prompting the student by using questions that the teacher has formulated."

Shifting the balance of power in the classroom

Rothstein and Santana hope to shift the balance of power in classrooms by putting students more in charge of their own questions. How might that work in the typical classroom? RQI has laid out a simple process in which a teacher can oversee exercises designed to encourage students to form lots of questions. The process is explained in detail in Rothstein and Santana's book [Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions](#)—a must-read for teachers or anyone interested in improving education.





A workshop moment

In a nutshell, here's how the RQI process works in classrooms:

Teachers design a “Question Focus.” This involves coming up with a premise or opening statement that can provide a focal point for generating questions from the students. (e.g., “Torture can be justified.”)

Students produce questions. Within a time limit, students (usually broken up into small groups), are supposed to generate and write down questions pertaining to that Q-Focus. Only questions are welcome—no opinions or answers, no debating which questions are best; the idea is to just keep inquiring about the subject from different angles.

Students improve their questions. At a certain point, students begin to work on the questions they've written down; they open the closed questions, and close the open ones. For example, an open question that began as *Why is torture effective?* might be changed to a closed one: *Is torture effective?* In doing this, students learn that a question can be narrowed down in some cases, expanded in others—and they begin to see that “the way you ask a question yields different results and can lead you in different directions,” Rothstein explains.

Students prioritize their questions. They are typically instructed to come to agreement on three favorites.

Students and teachers decide on next steps, in terms of acting on the prioritized questions.

Students reflect on what they have learned.

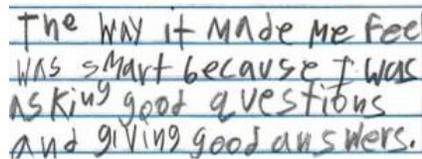
The process is designed to be simple enough that teachers can learn it in an hour, and students can grasp it immediately.



“Making it simple was the hard part,” Rothstein told me—that basic formula took about a decade to produce.

For the students taking part in the exercise, it can be challenging, Rothstein acknowledges, because “it requires them to do something they’ve never done—to think in questions.”

When students start thinking in questions



The way it made me feel
was smart because I was
asking good questions
and giving good answers.

Great feedback

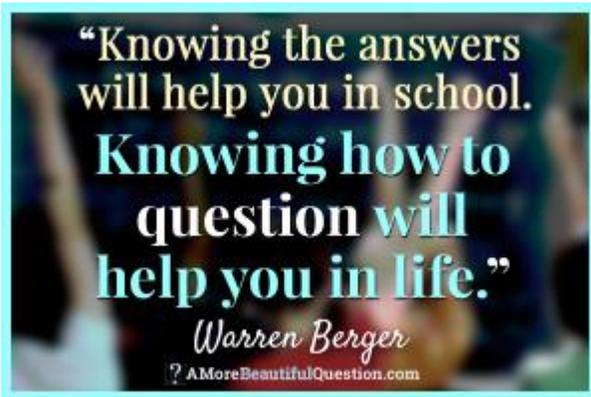
There’s no hard data yet on the effectiveness of the Question Formulation Technique, but it’s been earning raves from teachers. When her students start thinking in questions, observes the Boston high school teacher Marcy Ostberg, it “seems to unlock something for them.” The process tends to increase the level of student engagement, in part because kids “take ownership” of the questions they’ve raised; they begin to feel invested in them and want to figure out the answers.

Rothstein says teachers have been lining up for RQI sessions at teacher conferences around the country. “When they come to the sessions and learn about this,” he said, “they’re slapping their heads and saying, *How come we’ve never done this before?*”

To learn more about the Right Question Institute, visit [their website](#). And expect to read more about them here at AMBQ.com—I’m very interested in their ongoing work and plan to collaborate with them in the months ahead. We share the same larger goal—**to encourage more, and better, questioning in schools, business, government, and everyday life.**

Interested in this topic? Click this graphic to read articles on this site about [Kids & Questioning](#), and check out my popular Edutopia article “[5 Ways to Help Your Students Become Better Questioners.](#)”





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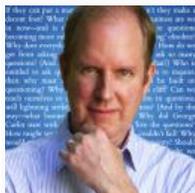
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About the Author



Innovation expert and questionologist Warren Berger has studied hundreds of the world's foremost innovators, entrepreneurs, and creative thinkers to learn how they ask questions, generate original ideas, and solve problems. He is the author or co-author of [eight books](#), including ***THE BOOK OF BEAUTIFUL QUESTIONS: The Powerful Questions That Will Help You Decide, Create, Connect, and Lead***, the bestseller ***A MORE BEAUTIFUL QUESTION: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas***, and the internationally acclaimed ***GLIMMER***, named one of *Businessweek's* Best Innovation and Design Books of the Year. His writing appears regularly in *Psychology Today*, *Fast Company*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *The New York Times*. He lives in New York. Follow him on Twitter at [@GlimmerGuy](#) and [subscribe to his blog posts](#).[MORE FROM THIS AUTHOR »](#)

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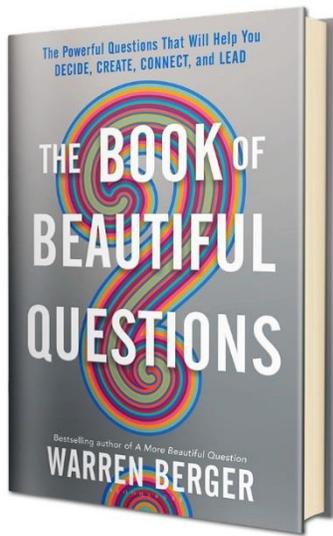
1. [To Build a Better Question](#) | September 6, 2016
2. [Asking Better and More Beautiful Questions | Censemaking](#) | March 12, 2014



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—*Lisa Bodell,*
*bestselling author of **Why Simple Wins**, and CEO of FutureThink*





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