

Provocation questions

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In her teaching, Dr. Cassander L. Smith regularly includes multiple opportunities for students to **craft** questions as well as answer them. Her approach requires students to challenge assumptions and invite explorations by providing a background statement and reasons that the question matters. She builds on students' provocative questions further in writing and reflection assignments.

Using provocation questions as the basis for writing and reflective prompts

These two writing assignments are designed to give students practice in asking open-ended questions that produce avenues for further research. The goal is to pose one or a series of related 'provocation' question(s) about early American literature and culture based on an initial reading of Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*.

Prompts should not simply present the question(s). They should also provide a premise or background information about how/why the student is asking that question(s). For example, what in their reading of Cooper's novel led them to their line of inquiry? They can point to key quotes/passages from the text. What are the stakes of finding answers to the question(s)? How might this line of inquiry change current conceptions of Cooper's text and/or of early America?

Students do not have to answer the question(s) they pose. This is an exercise in exploration and contemplation. At the end of the semester, students are asked to revisit their exploratory prompt.

Students revisit their question or questions

After having discussed early American literature and several secondary sources, students should ask themselves, how has your thinking about your initial question(s) changed? How might the other readings help arrive at an answer to their question(s)? How might the sources complicate their questions(s) or create new questions? This is a self-reflective exercise that asks students to apply their budding expertise in early American literature to begin formulating answers to their questions.

A model of a provocation question

This example provocation question is based on Olaudah Equiano's slave narrative. Note the format and the buildup to the actual question. Provocation questions should do more than simply ask a question. These questions should lay out a logic for reasoning. Questions should include background and an explanation for how the student arrived at their question. Provocation questions should also want to mention the stakes of the question, and why their line of inquiry matters in a larger context.

Example

Benjamin Franklin has been deemed the quintessential self-made American, embodying in his *Autobiography* all the mythical characteristics that make this country a great nation, a land of opportunity. His narrative has been upheld as a

model of the opportunities available to any person striving toward virtue and diligence. He Americanizes the myth of the self-made man, a myth of regeneration in the New World. His story of self-made manhood is quite similar to that of Olaudah Equiano, who also tells a story of diligence and virtue. And although he has been adopted into the American literary canon, Equiano did not identify himself as American and spent very little of his life on American soil. Given that these two men offer very similar stories of self-construction, in what ways might Equiano's narrative trouble the notion of self-made manhood as an American phenomenon, given that most of his rise occurs on the sea? Does it matter that his narrative precedes Franklin's? What is his position in American literature? And how does this discussion change if we consider Vincent Carretta's recent scholarship that argues Equiano was born in South Carolina? *How would a comparison of Franklin's and Equiano's narratives change how we conceive self-made manhood as an American construction, an American myth?*