

Florida Center for Reading Research

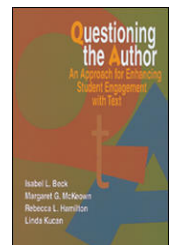
Questioning the Author

What is Questioning the Author?

Questioning the Author: An Approach for Enhancing Student Engagement with Text is the title of a book by Isabel L. Beck, Margaret G. McKeown, Rebecca L. Hamilton, and Linda Kucan, published in 1997. This book describes a comprehension strategy called *Questioning the Author*. The goal of *Questioning the Author* is to teach students to construct meaning during reading to improve comprehension. Dr. Beck and Dr. McKeown published a subsequent book called *Questioning the Author Accessibles: Easy-Access Resources for Classroom Challenges* designed to provide support for the implementation of *Questioning the Author*. A staff development program for teachers of grades 3-12 was developed around the key concepts of these two books and is designed to provide teachers with questioning techniques that encourage students to engage with ideas in the text to build understanding. Central to *Questioning the Author* are carefully constructed discussion questions, referred to as Queries. Queries provide a guided technique that teaches students to make sense of expository or narrative text. A unique facet of *Questioning the Author* is the concept of the fallibility of authors. Students are taught that text is simply someone's written ideas, which may or may not be clearly expressed. This knowledge gives students permission to question the authority of text; it also frees them from the sense of failure or frustration when understanding is not automatic, and places responsibility for building understanding back on the efforts of the student.

Because *Questioning the Author* is an approach that teachers use to guide whole class and/or small group discussions about text there are no teacher or student materials required, other than the current class text. When implementing *Questioning the Author*, it is important for the teacher to address the physical setup of the classroom. A U shape is suggested so students can see and interact with one another and the teacher can easily circulate. The teacher introduces *Questioning the Author* by reminding students that authors are real people and, like real people, are not perfect. S/he instructs students to remember that as readers their job is to figure out what the author is trying to explain and ask questions such as, "Why might texts be confusing?" Finally, the teacher demonstrates through a 'think-aloud' how to use *Questioning the Author*.

Teacher planning is an integral part of *Questioning the Author*. The goals of planning are for the teacher to closely pre-read the text to identify the 'big' ideas and potential problems, to segment the text, and to develop initial and follow-up Queries. Problems that a teacher may identify are lack of text clarity, coherence, or density of information that may impede understanding. Queries are not used to assess comprehension after reading, but to construct meaning during reading; their focus is on quality and depth of meaning. Queries help teachers in their role as facilitators by guiding the progress of group discussion and prompting student-to-student interaction. A *Questioning the Author* discussion differs from a classroom discussion in that students are not encouraged to simply share ideas they already have, but to collaboratively construct ideas from what they are reading. *Questioning the Author* encourages the idea that the text becomes the students' ally and is used to verify, support an argument, and interpret ideas. Examples of Queries include the following:



- Initiating-What is the author trying to say here? What is the author's message?
- Follow-up-Does the author explain this clearly?
- Narrative-How do things look for this character now? Given what the author has already told us about this character, what do you think s/he is up to?, How has the author let you know that something has changed?, How has the author settled this for us?

The teacher's role is to become an active participant in thinking and helping students develop their ideas, to read the text closely from his/her own perspective and that of his/her students, to focus his/her contributions toward building understanding, to advance students' thinking, and to signal students to further their ideas. The students' contributions to the discussion are to collaborate with one another and construct ideas as they are encountered, to develop and connect ideas from text, and to engage in shared investigations of meaning. There are several discussion moves, which are actions that teachers take to assist students in directing their ideas, including: marking (drawing attention to an idea); turning back (going back to the text to clarify); revoicing (using other words); modeling (demonstration of pulling unobserved ideas from the text); annotating (providing information to fill in the gaps) and; recapping (pulling together or summarizing while signaling time to move the discussion forward). The "Accessibles" resource provides support for the implementation of *Questioning the Author* by presenting brief excerpts using these discussion moves in actual lessons.

How is Questioning the Author aligned with Current Reading Research?

The National Reading Panel (2000) found the strongest scientific evidence for the effectiveness of comprehension instruction in asking readers to generate questions during reading. The assumption of question generation instruction is that readers will learn to engage text by making queries that lead to the construction of better memory representations. The process used in *Questioning the Author* is derived from research from the cognitive perspective, which indicates that in order to understand something, students need to actively utilize information, rather than passively accumulate information.

Questioning the Author is a reading comprehension strategy. It is an explicit, during-reading process replete with comprehension building supports. *Questioning the Author* includes teacher modeling through think-alouds, attention to text structure, and activation of prior knowledge. *Questioning the Author* focuses on the reader's building coherence among the text ideas by making connections through peer discussion, answering open ended questions that encourage summary and inference making, support for metacognition, question generation, engagement, motivation, authentic purpose for reading, and use of both narrative and expository text.

Professional development is provided by INSIGHT Professional Development. Teachers participate in a one or two-day workshop that introduces them to *Questioning the Author*, the research behind the program, and strategies for use in the classroom. On-site follow-up support with INSIGHT consultants is available to support the implementation of the key concepts learned during the staff development session. Further training is offered for district facilitators, who are then available to support individual teachers with the implementation of *Questioning the Author*. Resources include participant manuals, a resource book of model lessons, Accessibles, and a quick reference guide. Accessibles provides 25 detailed examples of difficult issues teachers might encounter in facilitating text discussion. These examples provide extensive practice lessons to aid both teachers and students in understanding the *Questioning the Author* routine.

Research Support for Questioning the Author

In 1999, a study by Sandora, Beck, and McKeown compared the effects of the *Questioning the Author* discussion technique, which occurs during reading, and the Great Books approach, which occurs after reading. In one school, all students in the sixth and seventh grades read and discussed four stories; the sixth graders used the *Questioning the Author* technique and the 7th graders used the Great Books approach. Across the stories read, mean scores for recall of information, responses to open ended questions, and length of recall were higher for the sixth graders. This quasi-experimental study produced significant findings in favor of *Questioning the Author*, but the interpretability of the results is questionable. The study cannot rule out the effects of intact classroom grade-level groups, age difference, or the chance that though equal at pretest, (on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, 75% of both groups scored below the 50th percentile for reading comprehension), the 7th grade class might have been low performing while the 6th grade class was typical, or the 6th grade class was high performing and the 7th grade class was typical.

In 1996, a yearlong study of 23 students found a significant improvement from pre- to post-test results of the percentage of students demonstrating various levels of constructing meaning and monitoring questions. However, the lack of a control group makes it impossible to know whether these gains are attributable to *Questioning the Author* techniques or other factors.

We conclude that the instructional content of *Questioning the Author* is consistent with current research on reading comprehension. There is a beginning level of research support for *Questioning the Author*, which is favorable, but not causally informative.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths of Questioning the Author:

- Use of this strategy encourages increased student motivation and engagement, more frequent student-to-student interactions, increased student understanding of text, and development of critical thinking skills.

Weaknesses of Questioning the Author:

- None were noted.

Which Florida districts have schools that implement Questioning the Author?

Currently, no schools in Florida have been trained in this strategy.

For More Information

<http://www.wrightgroup.com/index.php/home/profdevelopment/insight/researchbasedwrkshps/comprehensionpd/121>

References

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Important Note: FCRR Reports are prepared in response to requests from Florida school districts for review of specific reading programs. The reports are intended to be a source of information about programs that will help teachers, principals, and district personnel in their choice of materials that can be used by skilled teachers to provide effective instruction. Whether or not a program has been reviewed does **not** constitute endorsement or lack of endorsement by the FCRR.

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