

Ask, and It Shall Be Given You: Good Questions Make Good Essays

Robert Cullen

Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

Timeframe: 60-75 minutes

Target Audience: Students in first-year composition or critical thinking courses. The lesson could easily be modified for different disciplines or more advanced levels.

Materials needed:

- A handout covering tips, homework, student tasks, and the agenda for the day. An example is provided at the end of this lesson plan.
- An object to use when modeling the invention heuristic, "How Does Who Do What and Why?"
- Numerous interesting images and, if possible, several small objects for student practice. Almost anything will do, and three or four students can share a single object. Common objects work fine, and quirky objects can be fun.
- Objects that might be found in or near your classroom. Again anything will do: fliers, bulletin boards, outdoor sculptures, the view from a window, apps or photos on students' phones, etc.

Objective: After the lesson, students will be able to use Ann Berthoff's "How does who do what and why?" heuristic to generate ideas for essay topics and essay development.

Introduction to Lesson [3-5 minutes]:

- Write agenda, homework, and acronym for heuristic on the board:

<u>Agenda</u>	<u>Homework</u>	<u>"HDWDWW?"</u>
Model heuristic	1 statement	
Practice individually	1 question	
Collaborate with a partner	1 writing topic	
Share with the class	Memorize HDWDWW	

- Pass out the agenda sheet (see the last page of this lesson plan). Then explain the following:
 - You can't do this wrong! We are just trying something out.
 - I'm going to give you one key sentence which will help you generate topics for essays and help you develop your ideas within essays.
 - I'll model what I want you to do, using [the object of instructor's choice] as my visual aid.
 - You will practice today in class, working individually, then with a partner, and then sharing with the full class as time allows.
 - We will return to the key sentence throughout the semester so it becomes part of your writer's toolbox.

Procedures [50 minutes]:

Step 1 [15 minutes total]

Step 1A: Background information/explanation [5 minutes]

- Write "How does who do what and why?" on the board.
- Give credit to Ann Berthoff.
- Explain that this is an invention device.
- Explain that you can use it to come up with a topic or to develop ideas once you have your topic.
- Note that it is a reminder to ask basic but very powerful questions, especially questions about motivation—why do people act as they do?

Step 1B: Modeling: Analyze an object of your choice using HDWDWW [10 minutes]

- Ask each of the questions about the object.
- Be creative; think outside the box; dig into setting and motivation; have fun.
- Ask students to contribute their ideas.
- End by showing how your ideas could evolve into paper topics.

Step 2 [20 minutes total]

Step 2A: Explain student tasks or "deliverables" [5 minutes]

Students have individual tasks:

- Pick ONE thing to analyze from the images and objects I have brought to class.
- Take notes, using HDWDWW to help you jot down observations, deductions, hypotheses, speculations, memories. Don't self-censor! What questions can you generate about the object or image? What don't you know, and what are you curious about?
- Try to come up with one possible paper topic. Any kind of paper is fine—personal narrative, process essay, research paper, argument, compare and contrast, etc. You do not have to be able to write such paper at the moment—just conceive of what someone might write.

Step 2B: Carry out the tasks just assigned [15 minutes]

Give students time to complete the tasks outlined in step 2A.

Step 3 [15+ minutes, nearly to end of session. Adjust time accordingly.]

Step 3A: Share with a partner [5 minutes]

- If possible, add fresh observations or questions.
- If possible, generate a second topic that might make for an interesting essay.

Step 3B: Share with the class [10+ minutes]

- Volunteers share a few of their best ideas with the full class
- If time permits, have everyone share.

Closure/Evaluation [5 minutes]:

- Recap what you've done today.
- Praise any progress/good results.
- Assign homework:
 - Memorize "How does who do what and why?"
 - Type up one statement based on your notes; one question based on your notes; and one suggested writing topic based on the exercise.
- Ask if there are any questions. Answer now, by email, in conference, or in next class as appropriate.
- Use the homework, due at the next class, to evaluate student progress. You may also include "HDWDWW?" on any quiz throughout the semester: what does the acronym stand for?

Lesson Analysis:

This is a fun lesson that may pay big dividends. Berthoff's heuristic is simple enough for anyone to understand and remember, but powerful and flexible enough to investigate complex issues and problems. The lesson fits well with a pedagogy of writing as discovery. It can be done in 60 minutes though 75 is preferable. It could easily be tailored to specific disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. The biggest weakness of the lesson is that it requires substantial preparation the first time around—gathering objects and images for student practice.

"HDWDWW?" appears in Ann E. Berthoff's article "Is Teaching Still Possible?" in *College English* 46.8 (December 1984): 743-55. Berthoff is the author of several books, including *The Making of Meaning: Metaphors, Models, and Maxims for Writing Teachers* (Heinemann, 1981) and *The Sense of Learning* (Heinemann, 1990).

"HDWDWW?" Handout

Objective

After the lesson, you will be able to use the sentence "How does who do what and why?" to help generate ideas for your essays.

("HDWDWW?" is a technique championed by Professor Ann Berthoff.)

Agenda

1. I will model how to use the technique.
2. You will practice individually.
3. You will share and develop your ideas with a partner.
4. You and your partner will report to the class.

Tasks

1. Use HDWDWW to generate ideas about one object or image.
2. Come up with at least one paper topic related to the object/image.
3. Share with partner(s). If possible, add ideas/paper topics.
4. Engage in class discussion, ask questions, and review the homework assignment.

Tips

Don't self-censor. Use HDWDWW to generate ideas; evaluate the ideas later.

Use the "Who" question to see an issue from multiple perspectives. Should pot be legal in our state? Consider your own opinion, but also think about how growers, drug dealers, physicians, law enforcement, religious groups, and neighboring states might see the issue.

Homework

1. Memorize the question "How does who do what and why?" We will use it all semester.
2. For the next class session, bring one statement, one question, and one possible writing topic based on your in-class work today. Please type your work.