

How can we use 20 Questions?

Q Task

Students will apply strategic questioning skills in the game format called 20 Questions.

Clarifying the Task

This is an excellent strategy for developing the strategic application of questioning skills. It is an engaging activity to review course content. In this task example, the class has just finished a unit on the classification of animals.

Building Understanding

- Group students in teams of five. Assign one student in each group to select the animal that the other four students will work together to identify with their questions.
- The questioners can ask only questions to which the answer is “Yes” or “No”; the total number of questions they can ask is 20.
- The student who selected the topic will keep track of the questions or assign one student to be the record keeper and timer (if you want to set a time limit to move the questioning along).
- At any time a team questioner may ask, “Is it...?” If the guess is incorrect, the game continues. You can set a limit to the number of direct guesses that can be asked in any round.
- The object is to question strategically so as not to waste questions, and for students to build on each others’ questions.
- As each animal is identified, a new student decides on the next topic to be guessed and the process continues until all students have had a turn or until time for the activity expires.
- As with all new strategies, model this with the entire class first and keep practising until students have the skills to work in small groups.

Demonstrating Understanding

Debrief the activity with the students and list the strategies they thought worked well, and some of the problems they had. Ask them to reflect on the game process and to complete the My Thoughts About 20 Questions learning log (page 18), so they can learn to articulate how their teams used strategic thinking and good questioning skills to guess their animal.

Q Tip

Use 20 Questions at all age levels for review of historical figures and events, geographic locations, children’s authors, popular cultural figures, and science topics. It is a wonderful activity for rainy-day recess or long bus trips.

My Thoughts About 20 Questions

How did the 20 Questions game help you to review our topic today? Why?

What was difficult about this activity?

What strategies did you and your team use to guess the topic?

How well did your team work together?

What would you like your team to do next time you play 20 questions?



Variations on 20 Questions

The Question Box

- Decorate a medium-sized box with a lid. Inside the box place an item you want your students to discover. The item could have a specific purpose for your program or be an interest item, such as a signed baseball. It could relate to a theme or content unit you want to introduce; e.g., a popular book to introduce teen reading week, a lunchbox to introduce a unit on nutrition. Younger students could bring in their treasures as a diversion from traditional Show and Tell.
- The exercise should take no more than three to five minutes. Making it a timed item will encourage more participation. The class can ask Yes or No questions, but they have only 20 altogether.
- The purpose is to practise questioning skills and strategically build on the questions of others in order for the class to deduce the answer to “What is in the question box today?”

I’m thinking of... What is it?

This old game, usually played on long car trips, is another great strategy for practising purposeful questioning techniques. One student thinks of something for the others to guess and provides clues.

- *I am thinking of something that is green. **What is it?***
- *I am thinking of something that begins with the letter “K.” **What is it?***
- *I am thinking of an animal that lives on the farm. **What is it?***

The class then has 20 questions to guess the answer.

Picture Quest

For those who like to sketch

- Each student makes a sketch of something they are interested in; e.g., sports equipment or icon, road sign, logo. etc. The sketch could also be more specific, like something that gives a clue to a book or song title.
- Instruct students to fold their sketches and place each in an envelope.
- Group students in triads.
- One student per triad opens their envelope and shares their sketch. The other two students take turns asking questions, using the 20-questions technique, to determine what each sketch represents.
- Move to the next student in the triad and resume 20 questions until all three sketches have been identified.