THE ASKING DESK · FOR EDUCATORS

Bring questions to your classroom.

Six short activities that put the desk's moves in students' hands: write it down, wait, get questions back, keep asking. No hardware needed.

The Asking Desk is a school desk that gives you questions, not answers. Visitors write a problem on a card, feed it to the desk, wait a moment, and receive a slip of questions sorted into four families (Sharpen, Widen, Deepen, Imagine) plus a Wild Card. The activities that follow bring those same moves into a classroom. Start with the quick reference on the next page; every activity uses the four families.

	Quick reference: four families of questions	page 2
01	Peer question coaching	15 min · pairs · index cards
02	Family sort	20 min · small groups
03	Interrogate the answer	20 min · solo, then pairs · one chatbot answer each
04	Deal a Wild Card	15 min · pairs or table groups
05	Ask before you ask	10 min · solo · any task that invites AI
06	Leave with a question	5 min · whole class · exit ticket or wall
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The Asking Desk, an *AI in the Wild* project by Leticia Britos Cavagnaro, Stanford d.school (Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford). Supported by an AIMES Thought Leadership award, Stanford Accelerator for Learning. dschool.pub/asking-desk

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QUICK REFERENCE

Four families of questions.

Every slip from the desk spans all four families. The goal is to pull you across different kinds of thinking, not deeper into just one. Sharpen and Widen pin a problem down; Deepen and Imagine open it up.

Sharpen

Pin down what's said and what's known.

CLARIFY

What do you mean by ___?

ASSUMPTIONS

What are you taking for granted?

EVIDENCE

How do you know? What would count as evidence?

Rooted in Socratic questioning (Paul & Elder) and deep-reasoning questions (Graesser & Person).

Widen

Bring in other vantage points and consequences.

PERSPECTIVES

Who sees this differently, and why?

FROM EXPERIENCE

When have you faced something like this before?

IMPLICATIONS

If that's true, what follows?

Rooted in Paul & Elder, and King's work on questions that connect to prior experience.

Deepen

Go under the problem.

A DEEPER WHY

Why does this matter to you?

A BIGGER QUESTION

Is this the real question?

Rooted in elaborative "why" questions (Dunlosky et al.), Berger's why / what if / how, and research on problem finding.

Imagine

Open toward what could be.

WHAT IF

What if it were otherwise?

POSSIBILITY

When has this worked, and what made it possible?

Rooted in appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva) and generative design questions (Eris).

Wild Card

from left field

A playful metaphor that comes at the problem sideways: *If your ___ were a ___, what would ___?* Surprising, kind, and still connected to the problem. Activity 04 practices it.

Why Imagine matters: most question typologies are convergent and assume an answer is out there to be found. Özgür Eris, at Stanford's Center for Design Research, found that about 15% of the questions design teams asked fit none of them. These generative questions open possibilities rather than retrieve facts.

ACTIVITY 01

Peer question coaching

15 min · pairs · index cards

1. Each student writes a real problem: *I'm trying to ___, but ___.*
2. Partners swap cards. Each partner becomes a question coach and may respond only with questions: one Sharpen, one Widen, one Deepen, one Imagine. No advice.
3. The owner circles the question that moved their thinking most and says why.

Builds: The discipline of helping without answering.

NOTES

ACTIVITY 02

Family sort

20 min · small groups

1. Each student lists every question they asked (or searched, or prompted) this week.
2. The group sorts them into Sharpen, Widen, Deepen, Imagine, and "just looking up a fact."
3. Discuss: which family is crowded, which is empty, and what that says about how we think.

Builds: Awareness of your own questioning habits, and words to stretch them.

NOTES

ACTIVITY 03

Interrogate the answer

20 min · solo, then pairs · one chatbot answer each

1. Give students a confident answer produced by artificial intelligence related to a subject in your course.
2. Students list the questions the answer quietly assumed, and the ones it never asked.
3. Pairs pick the most important unasked question and pursue it without the chatbot.

Builds: Reading an answer as the end of someone else's inquiry, not yours. Go further with Experiment 6, “Find Questions to Your Answers,” in *Experiments in Reflection* (Ten Speed Press, 2023).

NOTES

ACTIVITY 04

Deal a Wild Card

15 min · pairs or table groups

1. Each student shares a problem in one sentence.
2. Others write a Wild Card: *If your ___ were a ___, what would ___?* Surprising, kind, and still connected sideways.

   > **EXAMPLE:** A visitor wanted a daily piano practice, but excuses kept winning. The desk asked: *If your excuses formed a band and played a gig, what would they be called?*

3. The owner answers one aloud and names what the metaphor revealed.

Builds: Imagination as a tool for analysis.

NOTES

ACTIVITY 05

Ask before you ask

10 min · solo · any task that invites AI

1. Before opening a chatbot, students write three questions of their own and wait two minutes.
2. Only then do they prompt the AI.
3. Compare: what did the AI cover that they missed? What did their questions reach that the AI didn't?

Builds: A habit of friction: your thinking first, so AI extends it instead of replacing it.

NOTES

ACTIVITY 06

Leave with a question

5 min · whole class · exit ticket or wall

1. End class with the question each student is leaving with, not the answer they got.
2. Post them on a wall or shared board. Open the next session with two or three.
3. Over a term, revisit: which questions grew, which got answered, which were the wrong question?

Builds: The slip's last line, in practice: *What if you kept asking your own questions?*

NOTES

CREDITS AND SOURCES

About these activities.

The Asking Desk, an *AI in the Wild* project by Leticia Britos Cavagnaro, Stanford d.school (Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford). Supported by an AIMES Thought Leadership award, Stanford Accelerator for Learning.

See the desk, try a demo and find more at dschool.pub/asking-desk.

GO FURTHER

Activity 03 builds on Experiment 6, "Find Questions to Your Answers," in *Experiments in Reflection* by Leticia Britos Cavagnaro (Ten Speed Press, 2023).

SUGGESTED CITATION

> Britos Cavagnaro, L. (2026). *The Asking Desk: Activities for educators.* Stanford d.school, Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford. https://dschool.pub/asking-desk

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RESEARCH ROOTS OF THE FOUR FAMILIES

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