

*DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
FOR USE WITH ANY FILM THAT IS A WORK OF FICTION*

Select the questions that will work best with your students and promote your educational goals.

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I. Questions to Stimulate Student Interest -- Get them Talking and Thinking

- Did you learn anything from this movie? If you did, what was it?
- What is the message of this movie? Do you agree or disagree with it?
- Was there something you didn't understand about the film? What was that?
- What did you like best about the movie? Why?
- What did you like least about the film? Why?
- Who was your favorite character in the movie? Why?
- Who was your least favorite character in the film? Why?
- Did anything that happened in this movie remind you of something that has occurred in your own life or that you have seen occur to others?
- What were you thinking as you finished watching the film?
- Would you recommend this movie to a friend? Explain your reasons.
- What part of the story told by the movie was the most powerful? Why?
- If you had a chance to ask a character in this movie a question, what would it be?
- If you had a chance to ask the screenwriter a question, what would it be?
- If you were writing the screenplay for this movie, would you have changed the ending? Explain your answer.
- What feelings did you share with any of the characters in the movie?
- Did any of the characters in this movie make you angry? Tell us why.
- Did you come to respect any of the characters in this movie? Who was it and why did you come to respect that character?
- If a psychologist were to look at the actions of [select a character] what do you think the psychologist would say about that character? Describe specific statements or actions that you think the psychologist would be interested in and the conclusions that you think the psychologist would draw from those statements or actions.
- If a priest, minister, or rabbi were to look at the actions of [select a character] what do you think the priest, minister, or rabbi would say about them? Describe specific statements or actions that you think the priest, minister or rabbi would be interested in and the conclusions that you think he or she would draw from those statements or actions.
- What comment is the author trying to make about the culture of the characters in this story?

Empathic Reaction Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways are the characteristics of the protagonist like your own or those of someone you know?
2. In what ways are the characteristics of the antagonist like your own or those of someone you know?
3. Is the problem to be solved in the film that can be seen in the struggle of the protagonist against the antagonist familiar to you in any way? If so, describe the similarities and differences.
4. What details in the setting of the film are similar to the setting in which you live or in various places you have been? What are those similarities and what are the differences?
5. The problems faced by the protagonist sometimes stray from the central conflict in the film. Describe these problems and show how they are familiar to the problems you or someone you know must face.
6. The personal qualities that help the protagonist solve his or her problem are often a part of the lesson to be learned in the film. What are these qualities and where have you seen them in your own experience, either in your own behavior or in behavior of someone you know?
7. Complications come along and make problem solving more difficult. What complications does the film's protagonist face that are similar to those you may have faced in your various struggles? What are they, and what are their similarities and differences?
8. Depth of feeling is what makes a film worth watching. Of the many feelings expressed in the film, with which are you most familiar?
9. The resolution to the problem in the film can be satisfying or disheartening. Think about how some of your own problems have been resolved; write about a time when the solution was satisfying and write about a time when the solution was disheartening.
10. The resolution of the film teaches a lesson. How can you apply the lesson in the film to your own life?
11. What was the strongest emotion that you felt when watching the film?
12. Which character did you [admire, hate, love, pity] the most? What was it about that character that caused you to have that reaction?

II. Questions Concerning Characterization

Note: In some of the questions we have used the term "major characters." Before asking the questions, have the class identify the major characters. In addition, these questions can also be limited to one or more characters.

Characterization is delineated through: (1) the character's thoughts, words, speech patterns, and actions; (2) the narrator's description; and (3) the thoughts, words, and actions of other characters. When students analyze character, they should be reminded to have these three sources in mind. Adapted from [California English-Language Arts Content Standards - Grade 7, Reading 3.3](#)

1. How are the major characters introduced? What does this tell us about what will happen in the story?
2. **[Select an action performed by one of the characters. Then ask.]** Explain why **[name of character]** took **[describe the action]** . What motivated him or her? **[You can then ask:]** What did this motivation have to do with the theme of the film?
3. The characters must be credible; how they act and what they say must make sense. What aspects of the personalities of the major characters in this story affect their credibility?
4. Is there consistency in the characters throughout the story? Do their actions follow their natures and ring true?
5. What motivates the major characters? Are their motivations or wants explained outright or revealed over time?
6. Subconscious motives are often the most powerful causes of human behavior. Are there any major characters who act on motives of which they are not aware? Describe any unconscious motives of the major characters and explain how these motives affect the actions of those characters.

7. Are there any relationships between various characters, be they friends, lovers, co-workers, or family members, that are important to the story? If so, describe the relationships that you believe contribute to the story and how those relationships advance the action of the story.

8. What motivates the protagonist in his or her struggle against the antagonist?

9. How does the protagonist work against the antagonist? Recount one specific episode in this struggle.

10. What motivates the antagonist to resist or struggle against the protagonist?

11. How does the antagonist resist or struggle against the protagonist? Recount one specific episode in this struggle.

12. In what ways are the characters' actions driven by the values endorsed or criticized in the story or by ideas presented by the story?

13. What role does the back-story play in explaining the actions of the major characters? Explain your reasoning.

14. Is there any information known to the audience that is being held back from any of the characters? If there is a hesitation in revealing information to characters, describe it and explain how things change once this information becomes known to those characters.

15. Are there any transformations or changes that occur over the course of the story in any of the major characters? For each transformation or change, describe how it comes about and how it relates to the story's themes or ideas.

16. When you compare and contrast the protagonist and the antagonist, do you find any similarities between them? Describe these similarities and how they relate to the plot and to the values and ideas presented in the story.

17. When you compare and contrast the protagonist and the antagonist, do you find any important differences between them? Describe these differences and how they relate to the plot and to the values and ideas presented in the story.

18. Are there any reversals of roles played by characters or sudden important changes of circumstances through the course of the story? If there are, how do these reversals illuminate character or lead to changes in character?

19. Which aspects of the protagonist's personality lead to the resolution of the conflict in the story? Describe them and their effect on the resolution.

20. As the story progresses toward a conclusion, internal as well as external conflicts suffered by the major characters are resolved. Select one of the major characters and describe his or her internal and external conflicts. In addition, tell us how the character's choices lead to a resolution of these conflicts.

This question can be modified by naming the character which is the subject of the question.

21. Some of the names used in this story tell us something about the characters. What do they tell us?

III. Questions Focusing on Plot

1. The middle of the story presents ascending difficulties, referred to as complications, which increase the tension and the need for a resolution. Describe one of the story's complications and show how it serves to push the characters toward more intense action.

2. One way to examine plot is to determine what type of conflict it entails. The classic divisions are: (1) person vs. person; (2) person vs. society, (3) person vs. nature, and (4) person vs. self. Often, more than one of these types of conflict occurs in a story. Using this analysis, briefly describe the conflicts in this story and classify it according to the categories set out above.

3. In terms of rising action, climax, and falling action, describe the structure of the plot, stating when the action stops rising and reaches a climax and begins to fall.

4. Often the central problem in a story transcends the characters; these persons are simply the tools used to resolve the problem. In this story, is there a problem that transcends character and how is it manifested?

5. What instability is there early in the story that is resolved and becomes stable by the end?

6. The action in the story must be believable. Detail a particular event or action that causes another event or has an important effect on a character or a relationship between characters. Describe how this event or action moves the story forward.

7. Is there a back-story, and if there is, how does it advance the main plot?

8. What is the key moment in the story, the scene which brings illumination or an "ah-ha" moment?

9. Although incidents in the story usually return to the main conflict, they often reveal a pattern related to the ideas in the story. This pattern causes the viewers to focus sharply on the story itself. What pattern can be seen in the story?

10. How does the progress of the pattern identified in the story reveal change or growth in the characters?

11. What is the moment of climax, the moment of highest tension, when the solution to the problem is now in sight?

12. The film's denouement establishes a sense of stability. What happens in this section of the story?

IV. Questions About Themes, Messages, and Ideas

1. The significance of the story is determined by the power of its comment on the human condition. What comment is being made in this movie about what it is to be human?

2. The theme of a story is the general idea or insight about life expressed by the author. Theme is a universal and meaningful concept that emerges from the characters' actions and from the outcomes of conflicts described in the story. Theme is often thought of as the lesson that the author is trying to teach the reader or audience. More than one theme can be included in a work of fiction; however, there is usually one primary theme that ties together all of the elements of a story. Usually, a theme can be expressed in one sentence. What is the primary or central theme of this story? Use one sentence to describe it.

3. Describe any other themes that you see in this story.

[This question is designed to be asked after question #2.]

4. What themes emerge from the back-story and how do they relate to the theme of the main story?

5. Many stories explore important social or political issues. Describe any specific social or political issues that affect the story. How do these issues impact characters and influence theme?

6. What life lessons can be learned from the choices made by the characters in this story?

[This question can be limited to one particular character.]

7. The conclusion of the story suggests a solution to the conflict that can be applied to the human condition in general. What values or principles that inform the actions of the characters can help people resolve their own life's conflicts?

8. How does the changing consciousness, the developing awareness of the major characters, affect the story and help the audience discover theme? Explain these shifts in thinking.

[Try modifying the question by naming the character or a group of characters.]

9. Although often considered an artistic flaw, a story can be didactic in that it teaches the viewers how to achieve an end presented as worthy. Explain the use of didacticism in this story and evaluate its success in illuminating an important idea.

10. What are the most dramatic issues relevant to our time that have been presented in this story? Describe the presentation of one such issue and show how it relates to the times in which we now live.

11. Stories can be persuasive. Show how the movie attempts to persuade viewers to accept the particular values or principles that the writers intended to promote.

V. Questions About Other Literary Elements

1. What is the tone or mood of the story?
2. How does the tone help guide the viewers into an empathic reaction to the story? Explain and give examples of both the tone and the empathy felt by the audience.
3. Evaluate the pacing in the story and how it affects other elements of the story such as theme.
4. What elements of irony exist in the story? How do they serve to move the story forward and how do they assist in illuminating the story's theme?
5. Stories can be told from the following points of view: first person, third person objective, third person limited, and third person omniscient. From whose point of view is the story told? Explain how the chosen point of view affects the way the story is told.
6. Is the point of view from which the story is told the best choice that the storyteller could have made? Argue your point.
7. A symbol in a story is an object, an animal, a person, an action, or an event that stands not only for itself, but also for something else. Symbols are of two types. Conventional symbols have a widely accepted meaning outside of the story. Examples are a nation's flag, a crucifix, a Star of David, or a nation's flag. Other conventional symbols reinforce meaning by reference to a culturally shared conception of the object, animal, action, or event. For example, rain is often a symbol of life or fertility. The fact that a story is set in the spring can serve as a symbol for renewed life or purpose. Other symbols have meaning only within the story. These are called contextual symbols. They usually have no special meaning except within the context of the story. Symbols keep their meaning as an object, animal, person or event, but within the story, they also suggest something else. Describe the symbols used in this story, both those that have meaning outside of the story and those which have meaning only within the story. What does each stand for?

[This question can be modified by naming one or several symbols as the subject for analysis.]

8. Evaluate the story's use of coincidence, if any. Was the audience prepared for the coincidence or was it off the wall and therefore considered a flaw in the story?
9. The conflict in this film is resolved when one of the characters unexpectedly gets very lucky. Did this sudden event ring true or did it make the story seem less credible?
10. The conflict in this film is resolved when one of the characters unexpectedly suffers some very bad luck. Did this sudden event ring true or did it make the story seem less credible?
11. Explain how the use of flashback in the story provides significant information and served to move the action forward.
12. Find examples of both foreshadowing and echoing in the story and indicate how the use of these devices lead to increased coherence.
13. Does the story include elements of allegory? Explain why you think it is an allegory.
14. Is this story a parable? If so, explain why you think it is a parable.
15. The setting of a story includes the time at which the action of the story occurs and the physical location or locations where it occurs. Settings must be recognizable and have a relationship to the meaning of the story. What is the setting of this story and what are the ways in which the setting contributes to the story being told? Could this story be told in any other time or place?
16. When does the expository phase in this story end? By the end of the expository phase, what have we learned about the characters and the conflict?
17. An allusion is a reference to something outside of the story about which the audience will be familiar. Stories often include allusions to historical, scientific or cultural points of interest. Describe an allusion that you noticed in the story and explain its relationship to the story as a whole.

If the story is rich in allusions, increase the number of allusions that the student must discuss. An alternative question would be to briefly describe an allusion from the story and ask students to explain its meaning and relationship to the story as a whole.

18. Did the film resort to the use of gratuitous violence, explicit portrayals of sexual encounters, or excessive profanity? If it did, how did these scenes affect the story told by the movie?

19. Did the film strain to achieve an emotional pitch? Did it exhibit sentimentality for which there was little or no justification? Which scenes? How could this flaw have been remedied?

20. The action in some movies disturbs the unity of the story or confuses the viewers as to the intentions of the filmmakers. Very often these scenes are left on the cutting room floor but sometimes they remain in the film. Have you noticed such a scene in this movie? If so, describe the scene and explain why you think it disturbs the unity of the story or confuses the viewers.

21. What does the title of the film refer to and how does it relate to the [insert the name of any literary element] of the film?

VI. Questions Concerning Theatrical Devices and Effects

See [Introducing Theatrical and Cinematic Technique](#). Questions 1, 3 and 4 can be asked with respect to an entire movie or limited to an appropriate scene. Question 2 can be asked of a specific character or a specific costume.

1. How do the sets contribute to the mood the filmmakers are trying to establish?
2. How do the costumes contribute to the image the filmmakers are trying to convey?
3. How does acting choice contribute to the story the filmmakers are trying to tell?
4. How do the props contribute to the image the filmmakers are trying to convey?

VII. Questions on Cinematic Devices and Effects

See [Introducing Theatrical and Cinematic Technique](#). Questions 1 - 3 can be asked with respect to an entire movie or an appropriate scene in a movie.

1. Identify one example of each of the following shots and describe how the shot affected the presentation of the story told by the film: close-up, medium shot, and long shot.
2. Identify one instance of each of the following types of shot angles that were used in this film and, for each, describe how the angle affected the presentation of the shot in which it occurs: low-angle, high-angle, eye-level.
3. Identify one instance of each of the following types of transitions from one shot to another that were used by the editors of this film and, for each, describe how the transition affected the presentation of the film: cut, fade, dissolve.
4. What is parallel editing, also called crosscutting, and what is it used for?
5. How did the editing of the film advance the story that the filmmakers were trying to tell? Explain how the editors achieved this effect.
6. What is point of view editing?
7. Describe the difference between long takes and short takes.

[Another way to ask this question is to show the class a short scene and ask the students to identify the short and long takes and discuss their use in the film.]

8. Analyze the use of music in the movie. Did it enhance the story that the filmmakers were trying to tell? How would you have used music in this movie?

9. Analyze the use of sound other than music in the movie. Did it enhance the story that the filmmakers were trying to tell? What sounds, other than music, would you have used to tell the story told by this movie?

10. Give examples from movies you have recently seen of diegetic sound, non-diegetic sound and internal diegetic sound. For each, describe why the scene qualifies as the particular type of

movie sound.

11. What is the difference between "low-key lighting" and "high-key lighting" and what are their different uses in film?

12. What is the difference between "side lighting" and "front lighting" and what are their different uses in film?

13. Film is a composition of pictures rather than words, as one would find in a novel. Which specifically framed shots reveal something important to the story line? Describe the shot and explain its contribution to the story.

14. Describe the use of color in the film. Did it advance the emotions the filmmakers were trying to evoke? How would you have used color in the movie?

VIII. Additional Questions for Foreign Movies

Questions 1 - 3 may be expanded to more than one thing or aspect depending upon the film and the abilities of the class.

1. Describe one thing that was universal that you learned from the film.
2. Describe one thing that you learned about the culture of the country in which the film was set.
3. Describe one aspect of the artistry of the film.
4. How might a director from [name the country in which the class is held or a country that the class has studied] have approached the subject of the film?
5. How might a director from [name the country in which the class is held or a country that the class has studied] have approached [name one or more aspects of the film] differently? --- In the alternative: How would this story have been told from the point of view of another culture?
6. Is the story of this film unique to [name the culture of the story shown in the film], or could the story of this film have taken place in another country or setting?

Click on these links for websites helpful in framing questions based on [Bloom's Taxonomy](#) and [Costa's three levels of intellectual functioning](#).

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