Question Stems

Questioning to Discover Main Ideas
Once you have identified those initial topics on which to focus, a next step is to think about the points you would like to make about each. A guide for strategic questioning can help you not only discover these points and construct effective topic sentences – those that make a meaningful assertion or generalization – but also uncover the relationships between these points.

Question Stems
Question stems help writers tease out main ideas, identify the relationships among the ideas, and logically sequence the idea within a larger argument.

Questions that help DEFINE
* What is the meaning of ______________?  
* What are the various features of ______________?  
* What are some concrete examples of ______________?  
* When is the meaning of ______________ misunderstood?

Questions that help understand VARIATION
* How is ______________ changing?  
* What are the different varieties/types of ______________?

Questions that help COMPARE AND CONTRAST
* What is the most important difference between ______________ and ______________?  
* What is the most important similarity between ______________ and ______________?

Questions that help understand RELATIONSHIPS
* What causes ______________?  
* What are the effects of ______________?  
* What is the purpose of ______________?  
* What are the consequences of ______________?  
* How is __________ related to ______________?

Questions that help understand CIRCUMSTANCE
* Is ______________ possible or impossible?  
* What qualities, conditions, or circumstances make ______________ possible or impossible?  
* What would it take for ______________ to happen?  
* What would prevent ______________ from happening?

Questions that understand RELEVANCE
* What is the significance of ______________?  
* What is the value of ______________?  
* What case can be made for or against ______________?

Questions that help define and solve PROBLEMS
* What is the problem of ______________?  
* What are possible solutions for the problem of ______________?
Using Questioning to Develop Main Points

At the paragraph level, writers may discover main points by using a three-step process:
1. Identify a topic (or issue)
2. Develop a topic question (or question at issue) to answer
3. Provide an answer to the topic question

For example, let’s say a writer wants to focus on the topic of EQUAL OPPORTUNITY relative to the larger issue of education. S/he may think that it is important to have equal opportunity and develop an initial question using one of the stems above:

What is the purpose or value of equal opportunity in education?

This question helps the writer move beyond a main point that is overly broad (e.g., equal opportunity is important) to articulate a main point that is focused and specific (e.g., Equal opportunity is necessary to ensure that __________).

Once the writer has considered this question and identified an initial answer, s/he might develop a follow-up question, again using the stems above:

What qualities, conditions, circumstances make equal opportunity possible or impossible?

Again, framing the question in this way helps the writer move beyond the overly simplistic (e.g., Equal opportunity is not possible) to the focused/explicit (Equal opportunity is only possible if ______________). The writer’s response to this question helps him/her make qualifying assertions, potentially leading to another topic entirely.

NOTE! An effective topic sentence will make a generalization or assertion. So while a good question can help in the writing process, strong topic sentences typically are not in the form of a question, but rather your response to the question.