

Better Questions, Better Decisions

Voter Engagement Workshop



The Right Question Institute offers many of our materials through a Creative Commons License and we encourage you to make use of and/or share this resource. Please reference the Right Question Institute as the source on any materials you use. Source: The Right Question Institute www.rightquestion.org



Workshop Overview

This workshop is intended to engage students in thinking about the importance of the elections and voting process and to develop two skills:

- How to identify decisions
- How to ask their own questions

These two skills are foundational for effective participation. In this workshop participants apply the two skills in the context of the elections.

Two components of the Right Question Strategy are used in the workshop:

- *The Framework for Accountable Decision Making* – to develop the ability to focus on decisions. Participants learn how to identify decisions and apply three key elements for accountable decision making - the reasons for making the decision, the process for making it, and the role of the individual being affected by the decision in the process. Once participants learn to identify decisions and the reasons that influence decisions, understanding the process and their role in the process allows for better and more accountable decision-making.
- *The Question Formulation Technique (QFT)* – to develop the skill of asking questions. The QFT offers a step-by-step process to produce, improve, and strategize on how to use questions. The QFT helps develop three thinking abilities in one process: divergent thinking, convergent thinking, and metacognition. These thinking abilities are transformational and have an impact on what participants know, how they feel, and what they are able to do.

This kit includes:

- an annotated guide for facilitators that outlines the steps of the workshop and facilitation tips.
- a slide deck that outlines the facilitation steps.
- a worksheet that can be used to document the work of individuals or small groups.

The workshop is organized into two parts:

- I. Learning about decisions and asking questions using the Question Formulation Technique - 40 minutes.
- II. Using the Question Formulation Technique to ask questions about elected officials - 40 minutes.

Workshop Outline

Part I: Learning About Decisions and Asking Questions Using the Question Formulation Technique

- Participants learn to identify decisions using an example of an everyday decision: what to wear. They name the options from which they had to choose and select one. This step helps them explore how to reach a decision. They learn that in any decision, there should be options to choose from and that the chosen option becomes the decision. During the exercise they explore how, in their decision-making process, there are good reasons for making the decision, there are specific steps taken in order to make the decision, and that they played a specific role in the process.

- Participants ask questions using the Question Formulation Technique (QFT)
- The term ‘election’ is defined.
- An imaginary situation is introduced to create a sense of urgency for participation. Participants learn that they will not be making the decision about what to wear any longer and that a ‘Clothing Director’ will be elected to make the decision for them. Because this is a very personal decision, they will want to have a say in the election.
- They ask questions about the candidates for Clothing Director using the step-by-step process of the QFT: discuss the rules for producing questions, produce questions, categorize questions, practice changing questions from one type to another, prioritize the questions, and reflect. In the reflection they will think about what they learned and whether they would like to play a role in the election.

Part II: Using The Question Formulation Technique to Ask Questions About the Candidates for President

- Participants learn that there is no such thing as an election of a Clothing Director, but that elections are held every year in which people—elected officials—are chosen to make decisions that will affect them. Examples of elected officials and decisions they make are introduced. Participants are prompted to think about additional examples of decisions elected officials make.
- The facilitator refers back to the exercise about what to wear and makes participants aware that the same ideas apply when decision makers make decisions – there should be options to choose from, good reasons for making the decision, a clear process, and a role for the people being affected by the decision.
- The facilitator introduces the presidential election, examples of decisions the president makes or influences and asks participants to name the candidates who are running for president. This step helps develop awareness of the important role the president has in decision making and awareness that there are candidates the participants might not know about.
- Lastly, participants ask questions about the candidates using the Question Focus “Questions I have about the candidates for president.”
- Participants produce questions following the rules, categorize and prioritize questions. and reflect.

Follow-up activities

A variety of follow-up activities can be implemented now that students have thought about the role of the president in decision-making and have an agenda on what they want to know. They can participate in mock elections or hold debates or interviews. They can also work on research projects or educational projects to share what they have learned with others.

Annotated Guide

Objectives

By the end of the workshop participants will have:

- Learned the definition of the term 'decision.'
- Explored key elements of good decision making: reason, process, and role.
- Used the Question Formulation Technique to ask questions about candidates in an election.
- Used the technique to formulate and improve questions.
- Asked questions about elected officials.
- Reflected on what they have learned and how they can apply it further.

Materials

- Newsprint/chart paper, markers, PowerPoint slide deck *or* Voter Engagement Worksheet

Lesson Outline and Time Allocation

Total time: 80 minutes

- Learning About Decisions and Asking Questions Using the Question Formulation Technique
 - I. Introduction and workshop overview: 3 minutes
 - II. Learning about decisions: 10 minutes
 - III. Asking questions using the Question Formulation Technique: 27 minutes
- Using the Question Formulation Technique to Ask Questions About the Candidates for President
 - IV. Learning about the elections: 10 minutes
 - V. Asking questions about the candidates using the Question Formulation Technique: 30 minutes
 - VI. Follow-up activities: Optional

Workshop Guide

Part I: Learning About Decisions and Asking Questions Using the Question Formulation Technique

I. Introduction

Time: 3 min | Setting: Large group

1. Introduce the workshop.

2. Introduce objectives.

Today we are going to:

- *Define the term 'decision.'*
- *Explore key elements for good decision making: process, reasons, and role for participants.*
- *Practice using a method for formulating our own questions.*
- *Use this method to formulate and improve questions about candidates in an election.*
- *Use the method to ask questions about elected officials.*
- *Reflect on what you have learned and how you can apply it further.*

Tip: Keep the introduction short and simple so you can move into the workshop as quickly as possible.

II. Learning About Decisions

Time: 10 min | Setting: Large group

1. Introduce a working definition of a 'decision.'

- *A decision is the selection of one option from among two or more options.*

2. Ask participants to think about a decision they make every day and options they had.

- *Every day you make decisions. For example, you make decisions about what to wear. You choose between different options. Think about your decision about what to wear today. Name options you had.*

_____ or _____
_____ or _____

For example, sneakers or boots. If from these two options, you chose to wear boots, that's the decision you made.

Ask participants to name their reasons, their process and role in making the decision about what to wear.

- *Name the reasons you had for choosing what you are wearing.*
- *Name the process you went through or steps you took before making the decision.*
- *Name your role in the decision.*

3. Introduce elements for good decision making from the Framework for Accountable Decision Making.

- *When you make decisions there are good reasons for making the decision, there is a process you follow and there is a clear role for you.*
- *Reasons: You might have chosen to wear _____ because you wanted to be comfortable or based on the activities you had scheduled for the day.*
- *Process: You might have checked the weather and thought about the activities for the day.*
- *Role: You had a role in the decision as decision maker.*
- *There are many decisions where you are not the decision maker but the same key elements apply. There should be good reasons for the decision, a clear process for making the decision, and a role for you or for the people affected by the decision in the process.*

4. Provide a working definition of the term 'election.'

- *Today, you made the decision about what to wear, but imagine that an election will be held this year.*
- *An **election** is a process in which people are chosen to make decisions.*
- *Imagine that this year there's an election and you will have a chance to choose between two candidates for the position of Clothing Director who will make decisions about what you will wear.*
- *When you are not the decision maker and other people make decisions that affect you, knowing how to ask the right questions can help you. The first step in learning to ask the right questions is to ask lots of questions. We call that "producing questions."*

III. Asking Questions Using the Question Formulation Technique

Time: 30 min | Setting: Small groups

1. Prepare participants to work in small groups.

Divide the large group into small groups of 4-5 individuals. Hand out newsprint and markers to each group. Have each group select a recorder. The recorder's role will be to document all the questions posed by the group while following the "rules" listed below.

2. Introduce and discuss the rules for producing questions.

- *Here are some tips or "rules" that make it easier to ask questions:*
- *Rules for Producing Questions:*
 1. *Ask as many questions as you can.*
 2. *Do not stop to discuss, judge or answer the questions.*
 3. *Write down every question exactly as it is stated.*
 4. *Turn any statement into a question.*
- *Think about what might be difficult about following these rules.*

3. Introduce the Question Focus.

- *A Clothing Director will be elected who will make decisions about what you will have to wear for the next four years.*

4. Produce questions.

Give participants 5 minutes to make a list of questions in their small groups. Ask them to follow the rules for producing questions while the recorder documents and numbers each question.

- *Ask questions. Follow the rules. Number the questions.*

5. Introduce the definitions of closed and open-ended questions.

- *Closed-ended: These questions can be answered with “yes” or “no” or with a one-word answer.*
- *Open-ended: These questions need an explanation.*

6. Ask participants to categorize the questions on their lists as closed or open-ended.

- *Mark all closed-ended questions with a “C” and all open-ended questions with an “O.”*

7. Ask participants to name advantages and disadvantages of both kinds of questions.

- *There are advantages and disadvantages to both kinds of questions. Sometimes a closed-ended question is what you need to ask. The same is true for open-ended questions. You can change questions from one type to another depending on what you want to know or do.*

8. Ask participants to change one closed-ended question to an open-ended and one open-ended question to a closed-ended one.

9. Prioritizing Questions.

Participants prioritize their questions.

- *Prioritize your questions by choosing the 3 questions that you would like to get answered first. Keep the Question Focus in mind while prioritizing.*
- *A Clothing Director will be elected who will make decisions about what you will have to wear for the next four years.*
- *After prioritizing, think about why you chose the questions you did as your priority questions. Where are your priority questions in the sequence of your entire list of questions?*

10. Sharing.

Ask participants to share the questions they changed, their priority questions and rationale, and their number in the original sequence.

- *Share the questions you changed - read the original and the new question; your priority questions, reasons for choosing them as priority, and their number on the original list.*

11. Reflection.

Ask participants to reflect by responding to two or more of these questions.

- *Share your thoughts on the following:*
 - *What have you learned so far?*
 - *If there were an election for a Clothing Director, would you vote in that election? Why or why not?*
 - *Why would it be important to ask questions before voting?*
 - *How do you feel about voting now?*

12. Summarize the work participants have done so far.

- *So far we have defined the term decision and explored what a decision is using an example of a decision we make every day. We looked at the reason for making the decision, the steps or process for making it, and the role we played. Lastly, we followed a step-by-step process for producing, improving, and prioritizing our own questions. We asked questions about an imaginary situation – the election of a Clothing Director. We also shared our work and reflected on what we learned and how it connects to voting. We can use the skills practiced here in many different situations.*

Part II: Using The Question Formulation Technique to Ask Questions About Elected Officials

IV. Learning About the Elections

Time: 10 min | Setting: Large group

1. Introduce part II by briefly recapping part I.

- *So far we have explored what a decision is and asked questions about the election of a Clothing Director.*
- *The good news is that there is no such election. But there are many kinds of elections held each year – local, state, and national – in which people are chosen to make decisions that affect you.*

2. Provide examples of the types of decisions made by elected officials.

- *For example:*
 - *A mayor makes decisions about how the city or town is run.*
 - *A senator makes decisions about laws that affect you.*
 - *A president makes many decisions about what the government does or does not do.*
- *Officials get to make decisions about policies, laws, and funding because we elect them to make these decisions for us. For example, they decide whether to:*
 - *Increase or decrease funding for education*
 - *Increase or cut funding for access to health care*
 - *Require or not require photo identification to vote*

3. Ask participants to name examples of decisions made by elected officials.

- *What are other examples of decisions you know elected officials make?*
- *How does this relate to what we learned before? Voting in an election is similar to making decisions about what to wear:*
 - *There are reasons for you to choose one of the candidates.*
 - *There are some steps or a process for voting.*
 - *There is a part or role for you.*
- *There are many elections each year that include: electing public officials, ballot questions on special laws or propositions.*

4. The Presidential Elections: Introduce the fact that the President of the United States is an elected official. Name some of the decisions that the president makes or influences.

- *This November, there will be an election of an official that affects us all. A president will be elected. One important thing the president does is set priorities for how money is spent and whether there will be increases or cuts in the programs that affect you. The president influences*

decisions on many things, including education, the environment, benefits, health care programs, immigration, and fighting wars. Who do you want to make these decisions?

- *List the names of some candidates who are running for president.*

V. Asking Questions Using the Question Formulation Technique

Time: 30 min | Setting: Small groups

1. Prepare participants to work in small groups.

Divide large group into small groups of 4-5. Hand out newsprint and markers to each group. Have each group select a recorder.

2. Review the rules for producing questions.

- *Here are the rules for producing questions we will be following:*
 - *Ask as many questions as you can.*
 - *Do not stop to discuss, judge or answer the questions.*
 - *Write down every question exactly as it is stated.*
 - *Turn any statement into a question.*

3. Introduce the Question Focus.

- *Questions I have for the candidates for president.*

4. Give participants 5 minutes to make a list of questions in their small groups.

Ask questions. Follow the rules for producing questions, and number the questions as you produce them.

5. Review the definitions of closed- and open-ended questions.

- *Closed-ended: These questions can be answered with “yes” or “no” or with a one-word answer.*
- *Open-ended: These questions need an explanation.*

6. Ask participants to categorize the questions on their lists as closed or open-ended.

- *Mark all closed-ended questions with a “C” and all open-ended questions with an “O.”*

7. Ask participants to change one closed-ended question to an open-ended and one open-ended question to a closed-ended.

8. Prioritizing Questions - Ask participants to prioritize their questions.

- *Prioritize your questions by choosing the 3 questions that you would like to get answered first. Keep the Question Focus in mind: Questions I have for the candidates for president.*
- *After prioritizing, think about why did you choose those three questions you did as your priorities.*

9. Next Steps.

- *Let’s come up with an action plan. In order to answer your questions, what specific information do you need to get? How would you go about getting it? Or, what tasks will you need to implement to get it?*

10. Sharing.

Ask participants to share the questions they changed, their priority questions and reasons for choosing, the number of the questions in the original sequence, and their next steps with the questions.

- *Share the questions you changed - read the original and the new question, your priority questions and their number on the original list, and your next steps with the questions.*

11. Summarize the work participants have done so far.

- *So far we have defined the term decision and explored what a decision is using an example of a decision we make every day. Next, we looked at the reason for making the decision, the steps or process for making it and the role we played. We also considered the election of a Clothing Director and followed a step-by-step process for producing, improving, and prioritizing our own questions. Lastly, we looked at decisions made by elected officials and asked questions about the candidates for president.*

12. Reflection

Ask participants to reflect by responding to two or more of these questions. Introduce one question at a time.

- *Share your thoughts on the following:*
 - *What did you learn?*
 - *Why would it be important to ask questions about the candidates for president?*
 - *How do you feel about voting now?*
 - *What are some reasons you would want to vote or encourage others to vote?*
 - *In addition to voting, in what other ways can you play a role in the election or influence who gets elected?*

VI. Follow-up activities (Optional)

- Hold a mock presidential election. Have participants use a QFT to inform how they will vote.
- Hold a mock ballot referendum about an amendment or initiative under consideration in your region/state. Have participants use a QFT to inform how they will vote.
- Have participants complete a research project about an election.