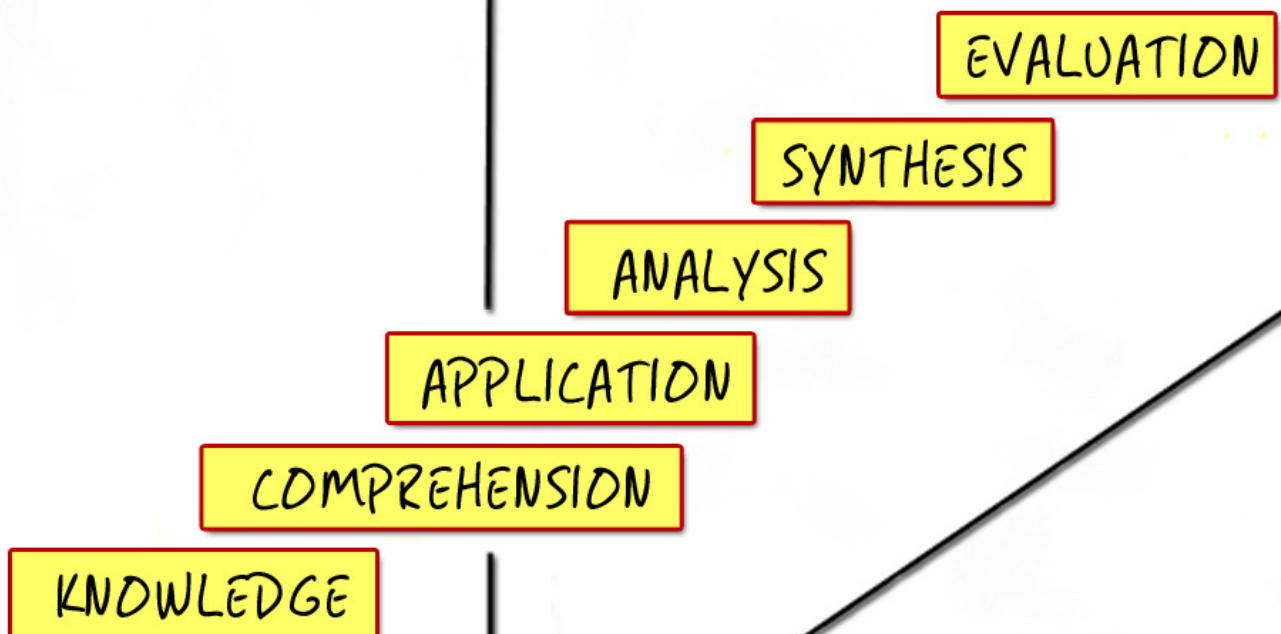
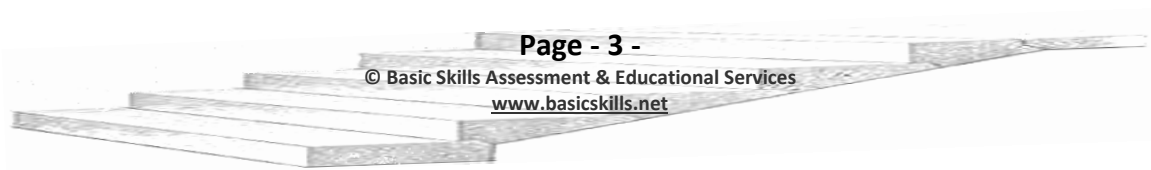


# HOW TO ASK QUESTIONS THAT MATTER



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## Introduction

This little booklet, as the title suggests, is designed to teach you how to *ask questions that matter*. Why is such a booklet necessary? Because the vast majority of text book publishers populate their tests with questions that frankly don't matter. If our children's education is measured primarily by learning the answers to questions on such tests, then I think we will have under-educated and perhaps even miss-educated our children. Because the window of time we have to home school our children is brief (I know from personal experience, mine are now either in college or graduated), you really don't want to waste yours or their time on what amounts to busy work.

In becoming aware of higher levels of thinking that go beyond simply recall, we can begin to ask questions that train our children to really think, and not simply regurgitate. In the chapters that follow, I will briefly explain how you can expand your student's thinking and understanding by asking appropriate questions. A lot of this can be done orally so you can put these concepts to use immediately. To help you remember and use the concepts I'm presenting, I'll be using a teaching pattern in which I will typically...

1. Present a concept
2. Give an example of it
3. Ask you a question that will require you to apply what you've learned
4. Provide you with my response to the answer you chose.

Let's get started, there's no time to waste!

## JUST THE FACTS, PLEASE!

There are six kinds of questions we may ask our children in order to check their understanding. These questions have often been represented by educators as a pyramid to suggest that some questions are harder to answer than others. Questions at the bottom are easier than questions at the top. While not a bad idea, I like to think of these questions as a series of steps, with the bottom step representing fact-type questions. These are the kinds of questions that dominate the tests you and I have used with our children over the years. These are the kinds of questions that, while often necessary, don't evaluate our grasp of a subject much beyond a surface level. But, test publishers like these kinds of questions because they're easy to write, and we like them because they're easy to correct. And our children find knowledge-based tests unpleasant because they are often long, boring, and just plain mind-numbing.

These questions often start with the following phrases:

What happened when...

List the steps for...

Name the city where...

How long is a...

Who painted the...

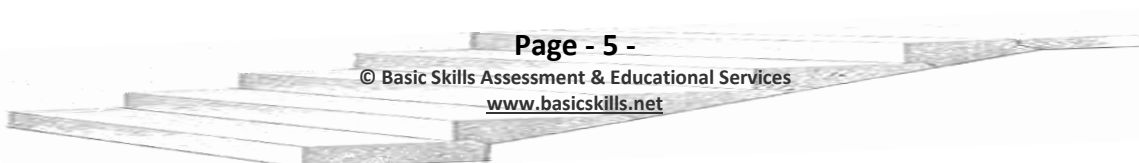
Locate the rivers flowing from...

Write the formula used to solve...

State the rule that governs...

You get the idea. Being able to give the answers to questions that start like the above is evidence that a student knows something, but it does not mean he or she understands what they know.

I learned something recently when my laptop died. Actually two things. Make that three. First, to avoid being totally stressed out, backing up your data regularly is essential (my last back up was done four months prior). Second, history repeats itself (this wasn't the first time I had a hard drive in a computer fail), and I failed to pay attention. Third, I learned a new term: Terabyte. That's the storage size of the backup device that now contains the data my computer- tech friend was able to salvage from my laptop.



So, to someone knowing the above, they would probably conclude that yes, I knew something (I had some facts), but didn't truly understand them, or at least act with understanding...

So how do you present and measure factual knowledge in an intelligent and effective manner? One way is to use three principles which I have summarized as the *three D's*.

The *three D's* are:

1. Decide what facts are essential
2. Drill facts intelligently
3. Demonstrate the usefulness of the facts

Here are some examples of how these can be applied when teaching elementary and high school students.

1. Decide what facts are essential

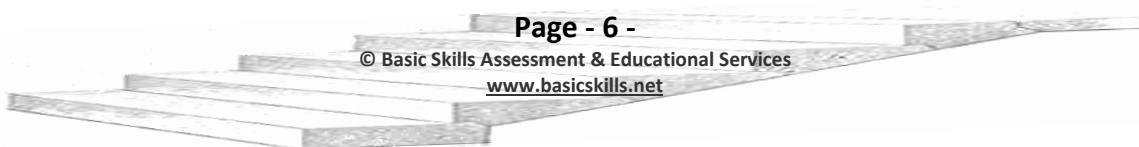
What I mean is that you have to decide what not to teach or test over.

Elementary students: If you are going to teach your first grader how to tell time, you could start with identifying the numbers on the clock and then the different "hands" on the clock. You could teach telling time first to the hour, then to the half hour, and then to the quarter hour. After this, you could teach how to tell time with five-minute segments and then one-minute segments. What you wouldn't do is try to teach all of the above in one setting. A first or second grader can absorb only so much at a time.

High school students: You're covering the story of Cortez and his attempt to overtake the Aztec empire. There are a myriad of facts he could know like how many ships sailed with him, how many soldiers and sailors he commanded, what year and month it was, how long the battle took, how many died, etc., but memorizing all of this is just a waste of your student's study time. Thinning out the minutiae from what has significance to this historical event is key, and something we must do when it comes to using published tests that seem to make no distinction. Don't be afraid to start cutting!

2. Drill Facts Intelligently

Elementary students: Once you know what facts are essential to your lesson, present them in a way that is simple, clear, and easy to understand. That means using appropriate vocabulary and concrete examples at your child's level. Include as many senses as you can think of. Let them handle a real clock. Have them say the numbers



on the clock as you point to them. Move the long hand so they can see the little hand move between numbers at the same time.

**“Drilling facts is easier if they are meaningful and have captured the student’s attention.”**

High school students: If we draw out the fact that Cortez actually burned his ships so his men wouldn’t have the option of turning back, knowing the facts mentioned above take on real significance. Learning that Cortez had only 600 men, our high school student might ponder Cortez’s odds of winning the battle, whether their more aggressive fighting shortened the length of the battle, etc. Drilling (memorizing) facts is easier if they are meaningful and have captured the student’s attention.

3. Demonstrate the Usefulness of the Facts

Elementary students: Demonstrate how knowing how to tell time can help us in everyday life, such as when dinner will be served, when we can expect our friends to be coming over, when a favorite TV show will start, etc.

High school students: Knowing that Cortez took bold (insane?) action to help increase his odds of success can make learning about this historical event compelling even to a fourteen-year old. What “ships do we need to burn” to accomplish something remarkable in which the odds are against us?

\*\*\*\*\*

Now it’s time to check your understanding. It’s OK. This quiz is not graded. Actually, maybe it’s my ability to communicate the above principles simply and clearly is what’s being graded...

Once you choose an answer to the question below, look across to the following page to find out what I think about your answer choice, and if you’re tracking with me.

**Question: When home schooling, if you want your student to appreciate the value of the facts she is responsible to know for a science test, you should:**

- A. Use the publisher’s test as is because they know best.
- B. Have faith and hope for the best.

- C. Have your student answer only the odd-numbered questions.
- D. Downsize the test by eliminating questions that are insignificant when it comes to gaining an understanding of the subject.

For the answers, as well as the next six chapters, *How to Ask Questions that Matter* can be purchased at [www.basicsskills.net](http://www.basicsskills.net)

