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Leading Questions: Prohibited in Court and Tutoring Sessions

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Abstract

Throughout the Writing Center, tutors often ask leading questions in order to foster a specific train of thought from their readers. Throughout this essay, I will discuss the harms of asking leading questions, using psychological experiments to illustrate my point. I will present several examples of questions that may surface in a tutoring session. I will explain ways to expand the original scope of the questions and prevent those questions from falling into the category of “leading questions.” Leading questions can severely alter a student’s interpretation or perspective on their writing, which limits learning, inhibits self-growth, and minimizes the effectiveness of tutors.

Key Words: tutoring, leading questions, biased teaching

A leading question, as defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is “a question asked in a way that is intended to produce a desired answer.” In a court of law, these types of questions are highly discouraged and sometimes strictly prohibited. Human memory and cognition are susceptible to the input received from the world around us. Asking leading questions can cause individuals to answer incorrectly or to create false memories.

The strength of leading questions has been illustrated through several experiments. An experiment conducted in 1996 after a highly publicized plane crash asked subjects if they had seen the moment on television when the plane “hit the apartment building.” More than half of those questioned claimed to have seen the footage, despite the film having never existed (Cooley).

Another study showed that when presented with misleading, open-presumptive questions, respondents answered incorrectly more than four times as often--37.8% vs 8.2% (Sharman). This substantial difference was only caused by a slight alteration in the question asked: “Tell me about the company logo on Eric’s van” was changed to “tell me about the AJ’s logo on Eric’s van.” Though these changes seem minor, the impact on an individual’s memory and cognitive function can be severely influenced.

Similar in court and psychological experiments, tutors asking leading questions can inhibit students’ learning, subconsciously discouraging students from coming to their own conclusions and instead relying on the knowledge, experience, and prompting provided by the tutor.

Throughout a tutoring session, we often formulate our own opinion on the student’s writing. This is completely natural; however, we must be ever careful not to *assert* our own opinions into their personal work. Though questions may seem innocent and unassuming at first,

we need to be careful how we address issues in student's papers. In following section, I will provide poor question examples, explain their implicit messages, and then explain how to reframe questions in order to allow students to formulate their own responses and conclusions. Concerns with a student's paper can range from grammar to structure to effective word choice, with a wide array of directions to take the student. For example, if we find a student's thesis to be poorly written, we may ask questions like the following: (1) What are the three points you discuss in your thesis? (2) How could you make the second point in your thesis more specific? (3) Do you feel confident in your thesis statement? (4) How could your thesis statement be improved?

The questions will be addressed in their respective order. This question (1) insinuates that a thesis statement must contain three points, possibly constricting a student to a narrow perspective or forcing them to include weak arguments simply to appease the "rule of three." The next question (2) directly calls out the student for not being specific enough. Instead of looking at ways to improve the second point or their thesis overall, the student will fixate on specifying the second point. Although specificity may be needed, asking questions in this manner tells the student what is wrong, instead of helping them identify the issue for themselves. Asking if a student is confident (3) in a particular area of their paper implies that you, the tutor, are not. This kind of question almost always sparks doubt in the student's mind because people only ask questions when they themselves are unsure or doubtful (e.g., how often do you ask someone if they like their shoes when you think they look nice versus when you think they look terrible?). It is well understood that people pay compliments to express agreement but ask questions when there is doubt or a difference of opinion. The final question (4) informs the student that you do not believe their thesis statement is good enough. To what level or degree is unknown because

the question is ambiguous in nature (i.e. you haven't specified what could be improved and how much actually *needs* to be changed).

Questions should be broad in nature but specific enough to give student's direction in how to improve their papers. "What are the three points you discuss in your thesis?" could be changed to something along the lines of, "A thesis statement usually explicitly states the purpose and lists the most vital parts of an essay. If readers only get one thing out of the essay, what would you want them to know, and what evidence supports that claim?" Though significantly longer, this framing improves from the original in several ways: the implementation of "usually" allows room for discussion, exploration, and creativity on the student's part; explaining the purpose of a generic thesis statement provides the student a goal or end result without implying theirs doesn't fit the criteria, thus enabling them to analyze what may or may not be missing from the thesis; the actual question portion breaks the thesis down into smaller, easier-to-handle chunks, guiding them toward the standardized, structured thesis without forcing students to needlessly add or remove parts of their argument.

The second example question, "How could you make the second point in your thesis more specific?" could be addressed by a clarifying question that is, intentionally or unintentionally, a misinterpretation. Asking the student, "The second point focuses on such and such, and then later in the essay it'll talk more about such and such?" where 'such and such' is the misinterpretation of the point, opens up the issue for a discussion. The student will then either correct you or agree with your interpretation, giving you the opportunity to provide compliments on parts of their explanation you think would be valuable to include, possibly encouraging the student to substitute what they originally had. This form of questioning prompts the student to verbally explain their point further due to your (the tutor's) own misunderstanding, shifting the

blame from the student to the tutor. Students, especially if they are passionate about their topic, tend to respond well to these types of prompts and questions.

Yes or no questions, like “Do you feel confident in your thesis statement,” should be converted to open-ended questions that invoke deeper thought in the student, thus avoiding surface-level responses that don’t improve writing. Chances are high that the student won’t feel confident in their thesis if you feel that way after they’ve read it aloud. Asking questions like “What can we do to help you feel more confident about your thesis?” can help them self-identify issues within the thesis so they can correct it.

The final question posed, “How could your thesis statement be improved?” can be reworked in a similar fashion as the previous question. You could try posing a pros and cons discussion like “The thesis statement is one of the most powerful parts of an essay. What do you feel is really good about your thesis and what are some things you think we could work on?” This encourages the student to compliment their own writing and discover their own mistakes.

Leading questions should be avoided in tutoring sessions because they pull students out of their own minds and can inhibit their development as a writer. By expanding our questions to be more thought-provoking and by considering the implicit messages our questions may send, we will be able to cultivate a more nurturing and educational environment for our students.

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