

Practice 1 Asking Questions and Defining Problems

Questions are the engine that drive science and engineering.

Science asks

- What exists and what happens?
- Why does it happen?
- How does one know?

Engineering asks

- What can be done to address a particular human need or want?
- How can the need be better specified?
- What tools and technologies are available, or could be developed, for addressing this need?

Both science and engineering ask

- How does one communicate about phenomena, evidence, explanations, and design solutions?

Asking questions is essential to developing scientific habits of mind. Even for individuals who do not become scientists or engineers, the ability to ask well-defined questions is an important component of science literacy, helping to make them critical consumers of scientific knowledge.

Scientific questions arise in a variety of ways. They can be driven by curiosity about the world (e.g., Why is the sky blue?). They can be inspired by a model's or theory's predictions or by attempts to extend or refine a model or theory (e.g., How does the particle model of matter explain the incompressibility of liquids?). Or they can result from the need to provide better solutions to a problem. For example, the question of why it is impossible to siphon water above a height of 32 feet led Evangelista Torricelli (17th-century inventor of the barometer) to his discoveries about the atmosphere and the identification of a vacuum.

Questions are also important in engineering. Engineers must be able to ask probing questions in order to define an engineering problem. For example, they may ask: What is the need or desire that underlies the problem? What are the criteria (specifications) for a successful solution? What are the constraints? Other questions arise when generating possible solutions: Will this solution meet the design criteria? Can two or more ideas be combined to produce a better solution?

■ Students at any grade level should be able to ask questions of each other about the texts they read, the features of the phenomena they observe, and the conclusions they draw from their models or scientific investigations. ■

What are the possible trade-offs? And more questions arise when testing solutions: Which ideas should be tested? What evidence is needed to show which idea is optimal under the given constraints?

The experience of learning science and engineering should therefore develop students' ability to ask—and indeed, encourage them to ask—well-formulated questions that can be investigated empirically. Students also need to recognize the distinction between questions that can be answered empirically and those that are answerable only in other domains of knowledge or human experience.

GOALS

By grade 12, students should be able to

- Ask questions about the natural and human-built worlds—for example: Why are there seasons? What do bees do? Why did that structure collapse? How is electric power generated?
- Distinguish a scientific question (e.g., Why do helium balloons rise?) from a nonscientific question (Which of these colored balloons is the prettiest?).
- Formulate and refine questions that can be answered empirically in a science classroom and use them to design an inquiry or construct a pragmatic solution.
- Ask probing questions that seek to identify the premises of an argument, request further elaboration, refine a research question or engineering problem, or challenge the interpretation of a data set—for example: How do you know? What evidence supports that argument?
- Note features, patterns, or contradictions in observations and ask questions about them.
- For engineering, ask questions about the need or desire to be met in order to define constraints and specifications for a solution.

PROGRESSION

Students at any grade level should be able to ask questions of each other about the texts they read, the features of the phenomena they observe, and the conclusions they draw from their models or scientific investigations. For engineering, they should ask questions to define the problem to be solved and to elicit ideas that lead to the constraints and specifications for its solution. As they progress across the grades, their questions should become more relevant, focused, and sophisticated. Facilitating such evolution will require a classroom culture that respects and values good questions, that offers students opportunities to refine their questions and questioning strategies, and that incorporates the teaching of effective questioning strategies across all grade levels. As a result, students will become increasingly proficient at posing questions that request relevant empirical evidence; that seek to refine a model, an explanation, or an engineering problem; or that challenge the premise of an argument or the suitability of a design.