

STRETCH-AND-CHALLENGE QUESTIONS

Questions that deepen creative thinking without simply adding more work

RESOURCE	07 - Differentiation and inclusion
SUBJECTS	Fine Art, Photography and Graphic Communication
LEVELS	GCSE and A Level
INCLUDES	Questioning ladder, AO1-AO4 banks, subject prompts, cards and reflection sheet
FORMATS	Editable Microsoft Word and print-ready A4 PDF
PRINT	White background; suitable for colour or greyscale printing

Purpose

Use carefully chosen questions to move students beyond description and first ideas. The prompts ask learners to notice evidence, explain decisions, make connections, test alternatives, judge outcomes and transform influences into personal responses.

KEY PRINCIPLE Stretch the thinking, not the amount of writing. A strong response may be spoken, demonstrated, photographed, sketched, annotated or made practically.

Challenge through purposeful questioning

Stretch-and-challenge questions are most useful when they reveal what a student understands and prompt a productive next action. They should not be reserved for a fixed 'top group': any learner may be ready for deeper thinking in one part of a project and need support in another.

A five-part classroom routine

- Look at the student's current evidence before selecting a question.
- Ask one question at a time and allow thinking, looking or making time.
- Request evidence: ask the student to point to the image, test, page, file or decision.
- Follow the answer with a practical action that can change or extend the work.
- Return later and ask what changed, what was learned and what should happen next.

What challenge is not

- More pages, more artists or more writing without a clear purpose.
- Using difficult vocabulary that the student cannot apply to visible evidence.
- A hidden test with one answer already chosen by the teacher.
- A demand to make every experiment successful or polished.

GCSE TO A LEVEL The same question can work at both levels. Increase the expectation for independence, sustained investigation, analytical precision, synthesis and justification rather than merely increasing quantity.

Choose the smallest prompt that moves thinking forward

IF THE STUDENT DESCRIBES	Ask for effect, reason or evidence: How does that choice change what the viewer experiences?
IF THE STUDENT COPIES	Ask for selection and transformation: What will you retain, reject or alter to make the influence yours?
IF THE STUDENT RUSHES	Ask for alternatives and criteria: What two other possibilities could you test before deciding?
IF THE STUDENT IS STUCK	Narrow the choice: Which one variable could you change - scale, crop, viewpoint, material or sequence?
IF THE STUDENT IS CONFIDENT	Introduce uncertainty: What assumption could you challenge, and what evidence would test it?

Adapt without removing challenge

- Read the question aloud or pair it with a visual example.
- Offer two possible thinking moves, but let the student choose the content.
- Allow a spoken, practical or diagrammatic answer before written annotation.
- Break a complex question into: What do you notice? Why might it matter? What will you do?
- Fade the prompt when the student begins to ask an equivalent question independently.

WAIT TIME Silence can be productive. Give the student time to look back through evidence, handle materials or compare alternatives before answering.

Move from evidence to independent transformation

The ladder is not a fixed sequence. Start at the point that matches the student's current evidence, then move up or back as the work develops.

THINKING MOVE	QUESTION	USE WHEN
1 NOTICE	What can you point to, name or identify in the work?	<i>Ground the discussion</i>
2 EXPLAIN	How does this choice affect meaning, mood, function or the viewer?	<i>Move beyond description</i>
3 CONNECT	What useful connection can you make between two sources, texts or ideas?	<i>Build relationships</i>
4 TEST	What could you change deliberately to find out whether the idea becomes stronger?	<i>Create new evidence</i>
5 JUDGE	Which option best serves the intention, and what visible evidence supports that judgement?	<i>Make a decision</i>
6 TRANSFORM	How could you combine, disrupt or reframe what you have learned to make the response more personal?	<i>Extend independence</i>

Three follow-ups that work at every level

WHERE IS THE EVIDENCE? 	WHAT WILL CHANGE NEXT?
THIRD FOLLOW-UP How will you know whether that change has improved the work?	

Questions for any point in a project

Select a question because it addresses a visible need. Avoid moving through the list mechanically or asking several questions before the student can act.

THINKING MOVE	QUESTION	USE WHEN
INTENTION	What are you trying to communicate, reveal, question or make the audience experience?	<i>Direction is unclear</i>
EVIDENCE	Which part of the work best proves that your project has developed, and why?	<i>Development is claimed</i>
ALTERNATIVE	What is another credible way of solving the same visual or practical problem?	<i>First idea accepted</i>
CONSTRAINT	Which limitation could become a productive rule rather than a barrier?	<i>Choices feel unfocused</i>
AUDIENCE	What might a viewer notice, misunderstand or feel that you did not intend?	<i>Meaning needs testing</i>
SELECTION	What should be removed, reduced or left unresolved to make the intention clearer?	<i>Work is overloaded</i>
TRANSFER	What have you learned here that could improve a different part of the project?	<i>Learning is isolated</i>
INDEPENDENCE	What question do you need to ask yourself before the next practical decision?	<i>Student awaits direction</i>

FOLLOW-UP Ask the student to answer by pointing to evidence, then agree one practical action and a review point.

AO1: investigate, connect and develop

These independent prompts support critical engagement with relevant sources. Teachers should use the wording and requirements of their own current specification.

THINKING MOVE	QUESTION	USE WHEN
RELEVANCE	Why is this source useful to your specific intention rather than simply connected to the theme?	<i>Source is superficial</i>
ANALYSIS	Which precise visual or conceptual choice produces the effect you have identified?	<i>Comment is general</i>
CONTEXT	How does purpose, audience, place or time change how this work can be understood?	<i>Context would deepen</i>
COMPARISON	Where do these two sources agree, differ or create a useful tension?	<i>Sources sit separately</i>
PRACTICAL STUDY	What could you make or test to understand the source through practice rather than biography?	<i>Research is text-heavy</i>
SELECTION	Which aspect will you retain, reject or transform, and why?	<i>Influence risks copying</i>
SYNTHESIS	How can two unlike influences combine without either becoming decoration?	<i>Ideas need integration</i>
DIRECTION	What new project question has this investigation allowed you to ask?	<i>Research needs impact</i>

FOLLOW-UP Show exactly where the source has changed a practical or conceptual decision in your own work.

AO2: explore, select and refine

Use these questions to make experimentation purposeful. The goal is not a page of effects; it is evidence that testing informed a stronger decision.

THINKING MOVE	QUESTION	USE WHEN
VARIABLE	What single variable could you change so the comparison teaches you something useful?	<i>Tests are random</i>
PURPOSE	What question is this experiment designed to answer?	<i>Activity lacks intent</i>
CONTROL	Which technical choice must become more controlled, and which could remain unpredictable?	<i>Risk needs focus</i>
FAILURE	What did the least successful test reveal that the strongest test did not?	<i>Mistakes are hidden</i>
COMBINATION	Which two processes or qualities could interact to create a result neither produces alone?	<i>Tests stay separate</i>
CRITERIA	What will make one option more suitable for the intention, audience or format?	<i>Choice is taste only</i>
REFINEMENT	What purposeful change can you make without losing the quality that already works?	<i>Work is restarted</i>
TRANSFER	How will the selected test alter scale, composition, sequence or presentation in the next version?	<i>Test has no consequence</i>

FOLLOW-UP Photograph or retain before-and-after evidence and annotate the reason for the change.

AO3: record, select and reflect

Recording can include drawing, photography, notes, diagrams, contact sheets, measurements and other forms appropriate to intention. Challenge comes from purposeful selection and insight.

THINKING MOVE	QUESTION	USE WHEN
VIEWPOINT	Which viewpoint, crop, distance or moment reveals something the obvious view misses?	<i>Recording is predictable</i>
SELECTION	Why is this record more useful than the alternatives you chose not to develop?	<i>Evidence is unedited</i>
ACCURACY	What must be observed accurately, and where could interpretation be more valuable?	<i>Aim is confused</i>
INSIGHT	What did first-hand recording reveal that secondary imagery could not?	<i>Primary work lacks role</i>
SEQUENCE	How does the order of these records change the story, rhythm or argument?	<i>Series needs logic</i>
REFLECTION	Which unexpected detail has altered your intention or next decision?	<i>Annotation repeats</i>
GAP	What evidence is missing between this idea and the next development?	<i>Journey is unclear</i>
METHOD	Would a different recording method reveal a different kind of information?	<i>One method dominates</i>

FOLLOW-UP Ask the student to create the missing record, not merely write that it is missing.

AO4: realise, present and evaluate

Use these questions before and during realisation. A personal response should grow from the investigation, recording and refinement rather than arrive as an unrelated final piece.

THINKING MOVE	QUESTION	USE WHEN
COHERENCE	Which earlier decisions are visibly brought together in this response?	<i>Outcome feels detached</i>
PERSONAL	What have you selected, changed or questioned that makes this more than an imitation?	<i>Voice is unclear</i>
VISUAL LANGUAGE	How do composition, form, colour, scale, type, sequence or material carry the intention?	<i>Meaning is asserted</i>
AUDIENCE	Where and how should this be encountered for the intended effect to work?	<i>Presentation is generic</i>
PRIORITY	What must remain strongest when time, material or format forces a compromise?	<i>Plan is unrealistic</i>
RESOLUTION	Which detail needs greater control, and which part would suffer from overworking?	<i>Finish needs judgement</i>
EVALUATION	Where does the response exceed, alter or fall short of the intention, and why?	<i>Evaluation is vague</i>
NEXT QUESTION	If the project continued, what would be the most valuable unresolved direction?	<i>Reflection needs depth</i>

FOLLOW-UP Ask for one visible example from the final response and one link back to earlier evidence.

Questions that connect evidence

Higher-quality portfolios show relationships between sources, observations, experiments and decisions. These prompts help students turn separate pieces of evidence into a developing line of enquiry.

THINKING MOVE	QUESTION	USE WHEN
SIMILARITY	What shared quality links these two pieces of evidence beneath their obvious subject matter?	<i>Links are superficial</i>
DIFFERENCE	Which difference creates the most useful possibility for your own work?	<i>Contrast needs purpose</i>
CAUSE	What decision produced the change between version one and version two?	<i>Development is unclear</i>
TENSION	Which two ideas resist each other, and could that tension become part of the meaning?	<i>Work is too resolved</i>
PATTERN	What repeated visual or conceptual pattern is emerging across the project?	<i>Direction is hidden</i>
HIERARCHY	Which influence or piece of evidence should lead, and which should support?	<i>Everything competes</i>
SYNTHESIS	What new possibility appears only when these sources or tests are combined?	<i>Combination is additive</i>
TRANSFER	How could a successful decision from one medium or shoot be translated rather than copied?	<i>Learning needs movement</i>

FOLLOW-UP Place the two pieces of evidence side by side and make a third response that shows the relationship.

Questions for experimentation and productive uncertainty

Creative risk should be purposeful and safe. The question is not whether a student can make something unusual, but whether a deliberate disruption reveals a stronger possibility.

THINKING MOVE	QUESTION	USE WHEN
ASSUMPTION	What are you treating as fixed that could actually be changed?	<i>Solution feels inevitable</i>
REVERSE	What would happen if you reversed the scale, hierarchy, sequence, contrast or viewpoint?	<i>Idea needs disruption</i>
RESTRICTION	What productive constraint could force a more inventive decision?	<i>Options are too broad</i>
MATERIAL	What unfamiliar material or process could challenge the expected surface or meaning?	<i>Handling is habitual</i>
AUDIENCE	How would the work change for a different site, user, reader or viewing distance?	<i>Context is assumed</i>
UNCERTAINTY	Which part of this test can you allow not to be fully controlled, and why?	<i>Process is over-managed</i>
RECOVERY	How could an accident, limitation or failed result become useful evidence?	<i>Failure has occurred</i>
BOUNDARY	How far can you push this quality before the intention becomes weaker?	<i>Extremes need testing</i>

FOLLOW-UP Define what will remain constant, what will change and what evidence will be used to judge the result.

Questions for a short, evidence-led conversation

Use three or four prompts, then give the student time to act. A critique should clarify choices and possibilities rather than turn the teacher's preference into the student's solution.

Open

- What are you currently trying to make this work do?
- Which part should we look at most closely, and why?
- What decision are you least certain about?

Probe

- Where is the visible evidence for that judgement?
- What alternative did you consider, and why was it not selected?
- Which source, observation or test has influenced this choice most strongly?
- What might another viewer notice or misunderstand?

Close

- What is the smallest useful action you will take next?
- What will remain unchanged while you test that action?
- When will you review the result, and what criteria will you use?

STUDENT'S NEXT ACTION	EVIDENCE TO REVIEW
FEEDBACK CHOICE Ask the student which feedback they will act on, adapt or reject - and to give a reason.	

Fine Art: stretch-and-challenge

Use these prompts with drawing, painting, printmaking, sculpture, mixed media, installation and related practice. Select the questions that fit the student's intention and chosen media.

THINKING MOVE	QUESTION	FOCUS
SURFACE	How does the surface alter the behaviour or meaning of the material?	<i>Material</i>
MARK	Which marks carry observation, emotion or movement most convincingly, and why?	<i>Visual language</i>
COMPOSITION	What changes if the focal point is displaced, cropped, repeated or removed?	<i>Structure</i>
SCALE	How would a radical change of scale affect the viewer's physical experience?	<i>Encounter</i>
SOURCE	What can you transform from the artist's method without borrowing their solution?	<i>Influence</i>
PROCESS	Where should control give way to accident, layering, erasure or material resistance?	<i>Experiment</i>
MEANING	Which formal decision does the most conceptual work in this piece?	<i>Analysis</i>
RESOLUTION	What should remain open or ambiguous rather than be fully explained?	<i>Judgement</i>

MAKE IT VISIBLE Make one focused study that tests the answer through material, scale or composition rather than writing alone.

Photography: stretch-and-challenge

Use these prompts for still and moving image, digital manipulation, sequences, books, screens or installation. Include ethical and practical considerations where relevant.

THINKING MOVE	QUESTION	FOCUS
VIEWPOINT	Whose position does the camera create, and how could another viewpoint challenge it?	<i>Meaning</i>
FRAME	What is excluded from the frame, and is that absence useful or misleading?	<i>Composition</i>
LIGHT	How does the direction, quality or colour of light alter the subject's interpretation?	<i>Technique</i>
MOMENT	What changes when you wait, repeat, direct, stage or surrender control of timing?	<i>Process</i>
EDIT	Which adjustment clarifies the intention, and which risks becoming an effect without purpose?	<i>Refinement</i>
SEQUENCE	What meaning is created by the gap or transition between two images?	<i>Narrative</i>
ETHICS	What responsibility do you have to the subject, audience and context of display?	<i>Context</i>
PRESENTATION	Would scale, order, surface, sound or location change how the image is read?	<i>Resolution</i>

MAKE IT VISIBLE Make or re-edit a small comparison so the technical or presentational choice can be judged from evidence.

Graphic Communication: stretch-and-challenge

Use these prompts for branding, advertising, illustration, information design, packaging, publishing and digital outcomes. Test in the intended format wherever possible.

THINKING MOVE	QUESTION	FOCUS
AUDIENCE	What must the audience understand, feel or do - and what could distract them?	<i>Purpose</i>
HIERARCHY	What should be seen first, second and third, and does the layout achieve that?	<i>Communication</i>
TYPE	What does the type choice communicate before the words are read?	<i>Typography</i>
SYSTEM	Which rule creates consistency, and where could breaking it add meaning?	<i>Identity</i>
IMAGE	Does the image explain, persuade, provoke or merely decorate?	<i>Function</i>
CONSTRAINT	How can format, budget, production or accessibility improve rather than restrict the idea?	<i>Brief</i>
TESTING	What changes when the design is viewed at its real size, distance, device or location?	<i>Application</i>
ORIGINALITY	How has research been transformed into a communication idea appropriate to this audience?	<i>Resolution</i>

MAKE IT VISIBLE Create a real-size proof or mock-up, then record one change made because of how the design actually functioned.

Choose one question

Tick one prompt that will help your work now. You may answer by speaking, pointing, sketching, comparing, photographing, annotating or making.

LOOK CLOSER ☐ What is the strongest part? Point to it. ☐ What important detail have you not used yet? ☐ What might a viewer notice first?	EXPLAIN A CHOICE ☐ Why did you choose this material, image or layout? ☐ How does this choice affect mood, meaning or function? ☐ Where can you show evidence for your answer?
TRY A CHANGE ☐ What happens if you change one thing? ☐ Which two versions could you compare? ☐ What safe creative risk could you test?	DECIDE WHAT IS NEXT ☐ Which version fits your intention best? Why? ☐ What should you keep, change or remove? ☐ What question will you ask yourself next?

My chosen question

THE QUESTION _____	MY FIRST ANSWER OR EVIDENCE _____
NEXT The practical action I will take is: _____	

Cut out, select and return

Give one card when a student is ready to deepen a current decision. The student should return with evidence, not simply a written answer.

NOTICE What can you point to that another person might miss? Which detail deserves closer investigation?	EXPLAIN How does this decision change meaning, mood or function? Why is this choice more suitable than the obvious alternative?
CONNECT What useful link joins two sources, tests or observations? Where could one idea challenge rather than confirm the other?	TEST Change one variable and keep the others steady. What do you learn? What safe creative risk could reveal a new direction?
JUDGE Which option best serves the intention? Point to evidence. What should be removed, reduced or refined?	TRANSFORM How can you combine, disrupt or reframe what you have learned? What would make this response recognisably yours?
RETURN WITH The original evidence, the changed version and one sentence or spoken explanation of what the comparison revealed.	

Student stretch-and-challenge review

QUESTION	The question I chose or was asked: _____
EVIDENCE	The image, page, file, test or discussion I used: _____
DECISION	What I decided and why: _____
ACTION	What I changed, tested or made: _____
REVIEW	What the new evidence showed: _____
NEXT	The question I can now ask myself: _____

Further guidance

Education Endowment Foundation: Metacognition and Self-Regulated Learning; Teacher Feedback to Improve Pupil Learning; and within-class attainment grouping guidance - educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk

AQA: current GCSE and A Level Art & Design specifications and assessment-objective guidance - aqa.org.uk

This independent resource uses broad Art & Design assessment language. Teachers should check the current specification, authentication rules and assessment arrangements for their own examination board and centre.

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