Guidelines to Developing Discussion Questions

1. Ask open-ended questions. You do not want your peers to be able to answer your questions with one word; you want to encourage discussion.

2. Ask questions that go beyond basic knowledge and comprehension (see Bloom’s Taxonomy & the Elements and Standards of Critical Thinking on the back). Ask readers to analyze, synthesis, and evaluate!

3. Some ideas:
   a. Select a specific passage and ask readers to reflect on some aspect of it.
   b. Explore how recurring motifs point towards a possible theme.
   c. Think about the greater philosophical and cultural questions that the text raises.
   d. Explore a character’s motives.
   e. Ask readers to support their answers with textual evidence.

4. Always reference a page number (for your own knowledge), so you can guide your peers to the part of the text that brought the question to mind.

Examples of Discussion Questions from Great Expectations:

❖ Analyze Pip’s reaction to the criminal in the cemetery (2-5)
❖ “Conscience is a dreadful thing when it accuses man or boy…” (19). What does Pip’s sense of guilt tell you about Pip?
❖ Identify the literary device used in this quote: “… the bellows seemed to roar for the fugitives, the fire to flare for them, the smoke to hurry away in pursuit of them, … the pale afternoon outside almost seemed in my pitying young fancy to have turned pale on their account, poor wretches” (41). How does Dickens’ diction affect the mood of the story?
❖ Share your thoughts on Ms. Havisham and Estella. Use evidence from the text to support your characterization (65-69)
❖ What do you think the significance is of Ms. H’s watch & her clock both being stopped at the time of 8:40?
❖ What does Joe decide to lie about in chapter 13? Why does he lie? How does his decision to lie contradict advice he gave to Pip earlier in the novel?
❖ Why has Pip’s attitude toward becoming a blacksmith changed so drastically? (119)
❖ What do you think of Pip’s desire to “better” Joe? (124) What is Pip’s motivation for educating Joe?
❖ Read the description of Orlick on page 126. Based on Dickens’ description, including his choice to use the biblical allusion of Cain, what are your first impressions of Orlick?
Bloom’s Taxonomy

Bloom’s Taxonomy is a systematic discussion of the ways in which people think. The first three levels – knowledge, comprehension and application – are basic skills that you have learned throughout your academic career. These three build onto each other, like steps of a ladder. The next three – analysis, synthesis and evaluation – are also interrelated, but do not necessarily follow sequentially like the first three. Good discussions of literature begin at the analysis, synthesis or evaluation levels of thinking. (The first three levels of the taxonomy are, of course, important when discussing literature, but they should not be the central focus of discussion.)

Knowledge: define, recall, recognize, remember, who, what, when, where
Comprehension: describe, compare, contrast, rephrase, explain
Application: problem-solving
Analysis: identify motives or causes, draw conclusions, provide evidence
Synthesis: predict, produce, write, design, develop, construct
Evaluation: judge, argue, decide, appraise, evaluate, choose

Elements and Standards of Critical Thinking

Another way is to think about questions that derive the from the elements and standards of critical thinking (these question templates are all adapted from Paul and Elder’s *Critical Thinking: Learn the Tools the Best Thinkers Use*):

Purpose: What is the character trying to accomplish in saying this? What is the central aim in this line of thought?
Information: What is the most significant information that we can find in this text? Why?
Inferences: How did that character reach that conclusion?
Concepts: What is the main idea in this reading? How does the reading explain this main idea?
Assumptions: What are the underlying assumptions about this concept? Within this reading? What justifies those assumptions?
Implications: What are the implications of this?
Point of View: From what point of view should we examine this text?