

FIVE QUESTIONS

Activity 4: SIDE A
40 – 100+ minutes
TUTOR NOTES (p.1)

Instructions for Tutor or Teacher leading the session

AIMS. To use scientific objects to generate a fresh piece of writing.
For writers to explore the creative energy engendered by chance and the unfamiliar.

Suitable for: Guided work in schools, particularly Year 9 + ; also, creative writing courses & MAs.

[Adults: by all means do this activity on your own – but try NOT to look at ‘C’ before ‘A’ & ‘B’ are done.]

A. START. Ask students to create a sheet of paper like this:



... i.e. 10 boxes, in two columns of five.

B. CHOOSE. Each person now chooses a number from **1** to **9** (*privately*, in his/her head).

C. SURPRISE! Next, allocate the following science/sci-fi subjects according to the numbers chosen:

- | | | |
|---|--|--------------------|
| 1 = the ‘Big Bang’ | 2 = a clone | 3 = Saturn’s rings |
| 4 = a gaseous life-form | 5 = a dinosaur skull | 6 = plutonium |
| 7 = electricity | 8 = an <i>incredibly</i> advanced robot from the year 2999 | |
| 9 = a species (not yet discovered) at the bottom of the sea | | |

[You may, of course, construct your own list, especially when using this exercise more than once.]

D. IMAGINE.

Give people time to quietly contemplate their respective subjects (**no** writing yet). Encourage them to visualise the specifics... *where* the plutonium is, which sea the species is in, what *kind* of dinosaur, etc.

Younger or less confident students might need some help here, especially with items like the gaseous life-form or the Big Bang. You can field questions, or flesh out each object with a few facts or ideas on a handout or whiteboard. Make it clear they don’t have to be experts on their new subject. A little uncertainty doesn’t undermine the exercise – in fact, it often adds an inventive spark.

E. QUESTION.

Now they imagine they’re about to **interview** their object on prime-time TV. (Yes – the Big Bang *can* talk!) They write down 5 questions in the **left** column. They should keep these **short** but **interesting**.

It’s useful to provide a few examples of how a good (open) question can draw an interviewee out. For instance, with the living gas, “What colour are you?” is fine, but “What would happen if I breathed you in?” might be even better. There’s no reason you can’t ask plutonium “What makes you laugh?” or Saturn’s rings “What do you do to relax?”

Q 1	
Q 2	
Q 3	
Q 4	
Q 5	



F. PAUSE... to ensure everyone has written down at least 4 decent questions. Those with fewer should be urged to wrap things up with simpler queries like “What’s your favourite colour/ food?”

[Side B... →



G.

Some ANSWERS...

Here's the crunch: they now **become the object** being interviewed. So, in the **right-hand column**, they try to answer their own questions. Their replies should (i) **avoid naming the object** and (ii) be **legible**.

The best type of answer is a **concise sentence** or **suggestive phrase**. Curt replies (Yes/ Don't know/ It depends), or rambling ones, won't work as well. "Usually *after I've eaten*" is a far more intriguing response to "Do you get hungry?" than a flat "No." They can also answer with another question.

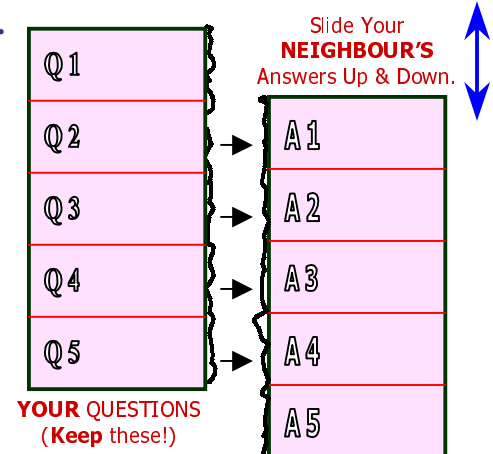
Steer them away from trying to get 'the right answers'. Responses can be 'made up' or off the wall, as well as factual or serious. If anyone dries up, try to help them to be more confident about improvising.

H.

SCISSORS and SWAPS...

- When everyone has at least 4 answers in place, arrange the students into **GROUPS OF FOUR OR SO**. Once that's settled, ask them to cut (or tear) their sheets **vertically** down the middle.
- They now **SWAP ANSWERS** with someone else in their group. [It's crucial that you ask them to **KEEP THEIR OWN QUESTIONS at all times** – they swap answers only.]
- They slide this **borrowed set of answers** alongside their questions, up and down, hunting for unusual, weird or stimulating question-answer combinations (see diagram →)...

Example: Q. What do you breathe? / A. The earth's crust.



If (in spite of earlier instructions) anyone gets long or illegible replies, they'll have to guess what's written or cherry-pick the bits they want. That's all part of the game too.

- Keep them **swapping answers** within their groups until they have plenty of good lines (hopefully, a mix that's variously surreal, hilarious, powerful). Don't let things get too 'careful': the answer-swapping should be brisk. They can share results as they go, particularly funny ones, but make sure everyone **writes down** at least half a dozen interesting outcomes **of their own** (perhaps on the reverse of their questions, in the right place) or else they'll have no material later. If anyone is confused, offer support.

Also, give them blanket permission to rewrite things *however they like*. Certainly, they can adjust the detail of question-answer pairs to make better sense (changing 'you' to 'they'... that kind of thing).

I.

Some WRITING ...

There's a wealth of (plenary) follow-up here. Focusing on **received answers they wrote down** (not their own, *original* answers), explore how a strange idea, or a clutch of phrases, might be taken forward...

- Using one of their 5 questions as a title, and **all** the new answers they noted, each person makes a '**list poem**'. Or they can build a **group piece**, everyone contributing statements as they go.
- They arrange those answers to **get a voice** 'just speaking about itself' (it's often effective when the questions are left *implied* like this). Are there glimpses of an appealing personality or skewed logic? Invite students to listen to that voice, to follow it where it takes them. Maybe they can expand or develop it in some way?
- Does anyone have a **line/ thought** they feel they can run with? Can they say why, or how? Do any of their question-answer pairs prompt an **unexpected way of seeing things**?
- Is there an arresting **image** or **turn of phrase** that can inspire (or act as an opening or closing line in) a new piece? They might try picking one or two statements that invoke a scene or character, then go on to **flesh them out** (if they need to, they can **repeat the exercise** to get more material).

A key outcome is when students begin to see how to pan for gold among apparent duds. For instance, Q. "How old are you?" / A. "I am all colours" might lead to writing about age through a series of differently-coloured emotional lenses. Q. "Do you have friends?" / A. "I'm in the shadows" could suggest a piece on being overshadowed by a friend, or a conversation with one's shadow. In summary, then, the benefits of this exercise include:

- Winkling out the germ of a concept that really grabs them, then being able to develop it;
- Enjoying, and being more confident about, modifying, rearranging, reinventing, etc.;
- Noticing how, in writing, working on one thing can end up going somewhere else.

