

13 Ways of Looking at a Topic

What is it?

A planning tool that uses a set of simple questions to help teachers find the aspects of a topic that will foster student curiosity and energize teaching and learning

What are the benefits of using this tool?

Have you ever considered just how incredible a volcano, or the Pythagorean Theorem, or the Bill of Rights really are? Classroom content is truly full of wonders. Sometimes, though, teachers are so close to their content that they can forget how rich and amazing it can be. When this happens, teaching can go flat, quashing student curiosity. This lesson-planning tool, which is inspired by Wallace Stevens's famous poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," is designed to help teachers rekindle (or kindle for the first time) their love affair with the content they teach. It provides thirteen distinct ways of searching for curiosity-boosting "best bets"—those aspects or attributes of classroom topics that excite teachers' passion to teach and spark students' desire to learn. The tool also helps teachers integrate these best bets into their lessons and units.

What are the basic steps?

1. Select a topic that you are about to teach.
2. Review your own understanding of the topic. Identify the big ideas and key supporting details that you want students to understand.
3. Use the questions at the top of the 13 Ways Planning Form (p. XX) to help you find particular aspects or attributes of the topic that are especially interesting to you and/or likely to spark student curiosity. Check off any ways that you plan to pursue in your lesson or unit.

Note: The goal isn't to check off all thirteen boxes. Instead, look for a manageable number of best bets that you believe have the greatest chance of raising curiosity in relation to the topic.

4. Decide how you will integrate your chosen best bets into your lesson or unit. Use the space on the 13 Ways Planning Form (p. XX) to work through your ideas. Here are some questions you might ask about each best bet to help you integrate it into your instructional design:
 - Can you build a lesson around it?
 - Can you design a task around it?
 - Can you conduct a discussion or Socratic Seminar on it?
 - Can you connect it to students' lives, experiences, and concerns?
 - Can you create an essential question to help students explore it deeply?
 - Can you engage students in an inquiry into its causes and/or effects?

How is this tool used in the classroom?

- ✓ To help teachers find the aspects of a topic that are most likely to raise student curiosity
- ✓ To facilitate lesson and unit planning that will increase students' desire to learn
- ✓ To energize teaching and learning

EXAMPLE 1: Primary science

In planning an extended lesson, a first-grade teacher decides to use just one question from the 13 Ways Planning Form (“What’s amazing about it?”) to open students’ eyes to the wonders of something they take for granted—trees. To begin the unit, she places a large poster at the front of the room with the question “What’s so amazing about trees?” During the extended lesson, the teacher regularly stops, redirects students’ attention to the poster, and captures any new and “amazing” information that the class has learned about trees. The completed poster is shown below.



EXAMPLE 2: Secondary ELA

A high school English teacher is planning a unit on Shakespeare's *Othello*. He uses the 13 Ways Planning Form to look for new ways to increase student curiosity in the play. Below are the four ways the teacher settled on as best bets, along with his notes for how to integrate each best bet into the unit.

Topic: Shakespeare's *Othello*

What's unique about it?

- Iago = evil genius
- He is considered one of the greatest villains ever created.
- What's so uniquely disturbing about him is that he uses people's goodness against them: "So I will turn her virtue into pitch, and out of her own goodness make the net that shall enmesh them all."

How to integrate: Iago is an archetype and the model for several pop-culture villains who adopt his tactics. I will challenge students to find examples of pop-culture villains based on Iago and explain their choices.

What's controversial about it?

- Depictions of race and gender
- Is it racist?
- Is it sexist?
- Is it fair to judge works of art by today's standards?

How to integrate: These questions will make for a rich and provocative Socratic Seminar. I will encourage students to take on the controversy directly during the Socratic Seminar.

What's relatable about it?

- Jealousy
- Love
- Manipulation/gullibility
- Passions getting the best of us

How to integrate: These are universal themes and emotions we've all experienced. Throughout the unit, we will regularly discuss connections to students' own lives. Students will write in their journals about their feelings, reactions, and relevant experiences.

What good is it in the "real world"?

- How can a play written over 400 years ago help us learn how to manage our emotions?

How to integrate: This will be one of the essential questions for the unit. We'll use it to look at ourselves and to explore the idea of "Shakespeare the psychologist"—someone with preternatural insight into human behavior.

13 Ways Planning Form

Which ways of looking at your topic are your “best bets” for sparking student curiosity?

- 1. What’s unique/novel/unprecedented about it?
- 2. What’s controversial about it?
- 3. What’s strange/mysterious about it?
- 4. What’s relatable about it?
- 5. What’s humorous/funny about it?
- 6. What’s amazing / hard to believe about it?
- 7. Why do people care about it?
- 8. What’s something about it that most people overlook / don’t know / get wrong?
- 9. How do people react to it? What are some different perspectives or opinions on it?
- 10. What good is it in the “real world”?
- 11. Where are there opportunities within it to create suspense?
- 12. Where are there opportunities within it for students to make discoveries?
- 13. What about it gets you fired up? Why are you excited to teach it?

How will you incorporate your best bets into your lesson or unit?

