



WE HUMANS

# Why we should all stop saying "I know exactly how you feel"

Sep 21, 2017 / Celeste Headlee



Kasia Bogdanska

You don't. And you're also steering the focus away from someone who probably just wants to be heard. Here's how to be a more considerate conversation partner, says radio host and writer Celeste Headlee. *— what the other person will be about*

A good friend of mine lost her dad some years back. I found her sitting alone outside our workplace, just staring at the horizon. She was absolutely distraught, and I didn't know what to say to her. It's so easy to say the wrong thing to someone who is grieving and vulnerable. *A situation where you're not sure what to say exactly. A person who is not a stranger.*

So I started talking about how I grew up without a father. I told her my dad had drowned in a submarine when I was only nine months old and I'd always mourned his loss, even though I'd never known him. I wanted her to realize that she wasn't alone, that I'd been through something similar and I could understand how she felt.

But after I related this story, my friend snapped, "Okay, Celeste, you win. You never had a dad and I at least got to spend 30 years with mine. You had it worse. I guess I shouldn't be so upset that my dad just died."

I was stunned and mortified. "No, no, no," I said, "that's not what I'm saying at all. I just meant I know how you feel."

And she answered, "No, Celeste, you don't. You have no idea how I feel."

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Often subtle and unconscious, conversational narcissism is the desire to do most of the talking and to turn the focus of the exchange to yourself.

She walked away and I stood there feeling like a jerk. I had wanted to comfort her and, instead, I'd made her feel worse. When she began to share her raw emotions, I felt uncomfortable so I defaulted to a subject with which I was comfortable: myself. She wanted to talk about her father, to tell me about the kind of man he was. She wanted to share her cherished memories. Instead, I asked her to listen to my story.

From that day forward, I started to notice how often I responded to stories of loss and struggle with stories of my own experiences. My son would tell me about clashing with a kid in Boy Scouts, and I would talk about a girl I fell out with in college. When a coworker got laid off, I told her about how much I struggled to find a job after I had been laid off years earlier. But when I began to pay more attention, I realized the effect of sharing my experiences was never as I intended. What all of these people needed was for me to hear them and acknowledge what they were going through. Instead, I forced them to listen to me.

Sociologist Charles Derber describes this tendency as "conversational narcissism." Often subtle and unconscious, it's the desire to take over a conversation, to do most of the talking,

and to turn the focus of the exchange to yourself. Derber writes that it "is the key manifestation of the dominant attention-getting psychology in America."

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9 He describes two kinds of responses in conversations: a shift response and a support response. The first shifts attention back to yourself, and the second supports the other person's comment.

### Example number 1:

#### The shift response

Mary: I'm so busy right now.

Tim: Me, too. I'm totally overwhelmed.

- showing same situation

#### The support response

Mary: I'm so busy right now.

Tim: Why? What do you have to get done?

- showing interest in another

### Example number 2:

#### The shift response

Karen: I need new shoes.

Mark: Me, too. These things are falling apart.

- listening to oneself.

#### The support response

Karen: I need new shoes.

Mark: Oh yeah? What kind are you thinking about?

- having another person talk

- 10 *Shift responses* are a hallmark of conversational narcissism — they help you turn the focus constantly back to yourself. But a *support response* encourages the other person to continue their story. It lets them know you're listening and interested in hearing more.

“the difference between responses and how they come off / effect others.”



we tend  
to be  
self-centered

We can craftily disguise our attempts to shift focus — we might start a sentence with a supportive remark and then follow up with a comment about ourselves.

- we always try to switch the conversation as we pretend to be interested in another person.
- 11 The game of catch is often used as a metaphor for conversation. In an actual game of catch, you're forced to take turns. But in conversation, we often find ways to resist giving someone else a turn. Sometimes, we use passive means to subtly grab control of the exchange.
  - 12 This tug-of-war over attention is not always easy to track. We can very craftily disguise our attempts to shift focus. We might start a sentence with a supportive comment, and then follow up with a comment about ourselves. For instance, if a friend tells us they just got a promotion, we might respond by saying, "That's great! Congratulations. I'm going to ask my boss for a promotion, too. I hope I get it." — As people, even if it is subconsciously, we try to switch the situation.
  - 13 Such a response could be fine, as long as we allow the focus to shift back to the other person again. However, the healthy balance is lost when we repeatedly shine the attention back on ourselves. — we can talk about ourselves as long as we make it about the other person  
↳ keep balance in a conversation
  - 14 While reciprocity is an important part of any meaningful conversation, the truth is shifting the attention to our own experiences is completely natural. Modern humans are hardwired to talk about themselves more than any other topic. One study found that "most social conversation time is devoted to statements about the speaker's own emotional experiences and/or relationships, or those of third parties not present."  
↳ to make a connection, humans are hardwired to talk about themselves & their experiences
  - 15 The insula, an area of the brain deep inside the cerebral cortex, takes in the information that people tell us and then tries to find a relevant experience in our memory banks that can give context to the information. It's mostly helpful: the brain is trying to make sense of what we hear and see. Subconsciously, we find similar experiences and add them to what's happening at the moment, and then the whole package of information is sent to the limbic regions, the part of the brain just below the cerebrum. That's where some trouble can arise — instead of helping us better understand someone else's experience, our own experiences can distort our perceptions of what the other person is saying or experiencing.

↳ explanation about  
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66

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## The more comfortable you are, the more difficult it is to empathize with the suffering of another.

- 16 A study from the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences suggests that our egos distort our perception of our empathy. When participants watched a video of maggots in a group setting, they could understand that other people might be repulsed by it. But if one person was shown pictures of puppies while the others were shown the maggot video, the puppy viewer generally underestimated the rest of the group's negative reaction to the maggots. *our opinions of things are derived from our experiences.*
- 17 Study author Dr. Tania Singer observed, "The participants who were feeling good themselves assessed their partners' negative experiences as less severe than they actually were. In contrast, those who had just had an unpleasant experience assessed their partners' good experience less positively." In other words, we tend to use our own feelings to determine how others feel. *we put ourselves into the equation of empathy; this eliminates others' emotions.*
- 18 Here's how that translates to your daily conversations: Let's say you and a friend are both laid off at the same time by the same company. In that case, using your feelings as a measure of your friend's feelings may be fairly accurate because you're experiencing the same event. But what if you're having a great day *and* you meet a friend who was just laid off? Without knowing it, you might judge how your friend is feeling against your good mood. She'll say, "This is awful. I'm so worried that I feel sick to my stomach." You'd respond, "Don't worry, you'll be okay. I was laid off six years ago and everything turned out fine." The more comfortable you are, the more difficult it is to empathize with the suffering of another. *We can dilute the feelings of others since our past experiences aren't as fresh.*
- 19 It took me years to realize I was much better at the game of catch than I was at its conversational equivalent. Now I try to be more aware of my instinct to share stories and talk about myself. I try to ask questions that encourage the other person to continue. I've also made a conscious effort to listen more and talk less. *to help make better; meaningful conversation, agree more & listen more.*
- 20 Recently, I had a long conversation with a friend who was going through a divorce. We spent almost 40 minutes on the phone, and I barely said a word. At the end of our call, she said, "Thank you for your advice. You've really helped me work some things out." *All someone wants is for another to listen.*
- 21 The truth is, I hadn't offered any advice. Most of what I said was a version of "That sounds tough. I'm sorry this is happening to you." She didn't need advice or stories from me. She

just needed to be heard. *-we really do not want advice, we want our thoughts heard by another person outside our own heads.*

*Excerpted with permission from the new book We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter by Celeste Headlee. Published by Harper Wave, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers. © 2017 Celeste Headlee.*



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Celeste Headlee** is the host of the daily news show, "On Second Thought," on Georgia Public Broadcasting.

book excerpt   Celeste Headlee   conversation   the art of conversation





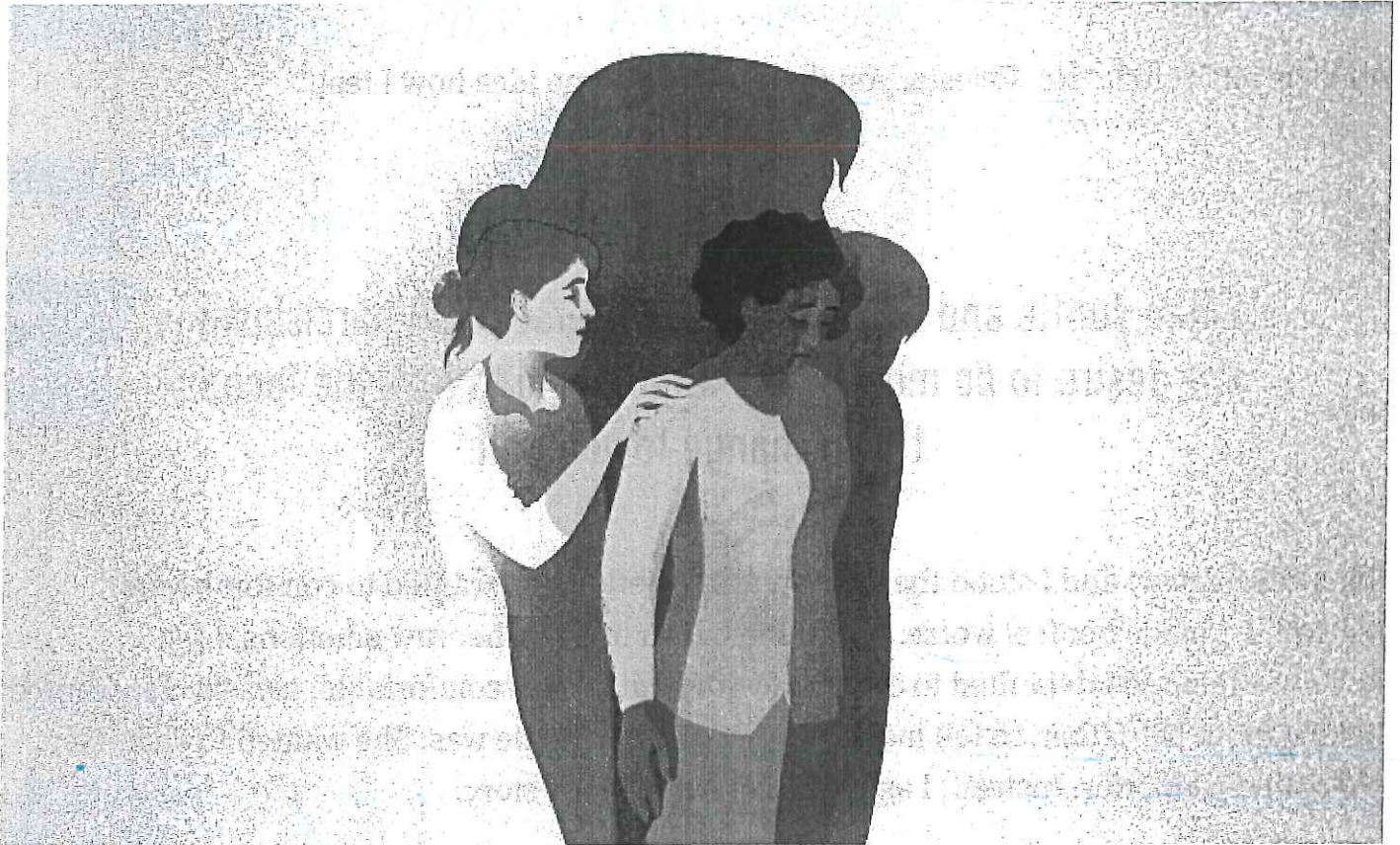
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10/10- very thorough- nice!

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A good friend of mine lost her dad some years back. I found her sitting alone outside our workplace, just staring at the horizon. She was absolutely distraught, and I didn't know what to say to her. It's so easy to say the wrong thing to someone who is grieving and vulnerable.

-became what you say to someone who is just getting over a loss (personal).



- 2 So I started talking about how I grew up without a father. I told her my dad had drowned in a submarine when I was only nine months old and I'd always mourned his loss, even though I'd never known him. I wanted her to realize that she wasn't alone, that I'd been through something similar and I could understand how she felt. *- Trying to help her by saying what she went through*
- 3 But after I related this story, my friend snapped, "Okay, Celeste, you win. You never had a dad and I at least got to spend 30 years with mine. You had it worse. I guess I shouldn't be so upset that my dad just died." *- Frustrated w/ the fact she's trying to make her feel like her okay when right now*
- 4 I was stunned and mortified. "No, no, no," I said, "that's not what I'm saying at all. I just meant I know how you feel." *- thinking you know how someone feels b/c went through similar situation*
- 5 And she answered, "No, Celeste, you don't. You have no idea how I feel." *- saying basically b/c we went through similar situations doesn't mean you know exactly how I feel.*

Often subtle and unconscious, conversational narcissism is the desire to do most of the talking and to turn the focus of the exchange to yourself. *- people grieve differently*

- 5 She walked away and I stood there feeling like a jerk. I had wanted to comfort her and, instead, I'd made her feel worse. When she began to share her raw emotions, I felt uncomfortable so I defaulted to a subject with which I was comfortable: myself. She wanted to talk about her father, to tell me about the kind of man he was. She wanted to share her cherished memories. Instead, I asked her to listen to my story. *- She just wanted someone to talk to but she took over*
- 6 From that day forward, I started to notice how often I responded to stories of loss and struggle with stories of my own experiences. My son would tell me about clashing with a kid in Boy Scouts, and I would talk about a girl I fell out with in college. When a coworker got laid off, I told her about how much I struggled to find a job after I had been laid off years earlier. But when I began to pay more attention, I realized the effect of sharing my experiences was never as I intended. What all of these people needed was for me to hear them and acknowledge what they were going through. Instead, I forced them to listen to me. *- noticed she was making everything about her instead of just being there for people to listen too.*
- 7 Sociologist Charles Derber describes this tendency as "conversational narcissism." Often subtle and unconscious, it's the desire to take over a conversation, to do most of the talking,



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— Talk less; listen more

“

We can craftily disguise our attempts to shift focus — we might start a sentence with a supportive remark and then follow up with a comment about ourselves.

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*- Can't just let someone have their*

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*- stop the attention seeking*

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*- it's a natural human response. Trying to not do that*

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*- Natural response. The brain automatically tells us to respond the way we know how too.*

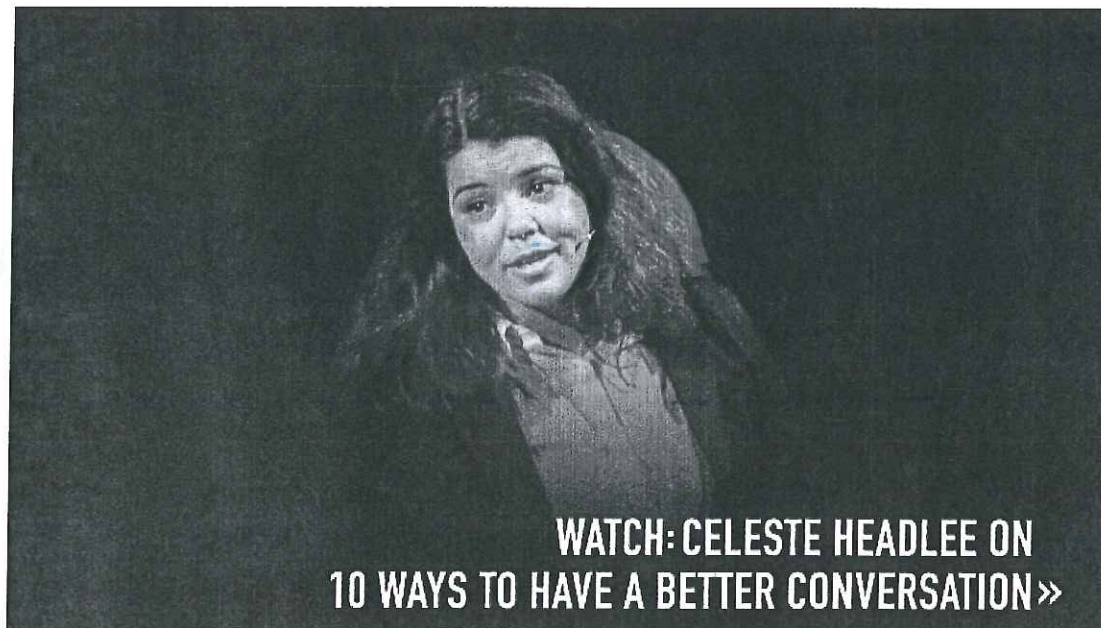


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QUESTIONS:

NOTES:

SUMMARY:



TOPIC/OBJECTIVE: no -1  
Electronics

NAME: Landon's A.

CLASS/PERIOD: 308

DATE: -1

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: How does our screens make us unhappy?

QUESTIONS:

-3

NOTES:

• More than half of our free time is taken up by our screens

• Instead of showing a photo of experience

• Some apps make us unhappy

Incomplete notes

-2

SUMMARY:

-2

1/10



# Example AVID Tutorial Questions

## Science

- L1. What are the 5 layers of the earth's atmosphere?  
 L1. Who is considered the father of the field of Genetics?  
 L1. About when did the Cretaceous period end?  
 L1. What is the product of this reaction:  $C_3H_8 + 5O_2 \rightarrow ?$
- L2. What are some unique features of the upper atmosphere?  
 L2. What did Mendel do differently in his experiments than his contemporaries?  
 L2. What did the Cretaceous and Jurassic periods have in common?  
 L2. What other combustion reactions would produce carbon dioxide and water vapor?
- L3. How much easier would it be to launch a rocket from the upper atmosphere?  
 L3. Why did Mendel succeed where his contemporaries did not?  
 L3. Why did the dinosaurs die?  
 L3. What would make for a better internal combustion engine?

Level 1: Look it up or solve it – either way, there is one correct answer. Note: "Tutorial Questions" may not be Level 1!

Level 2: There is a set of correct answers – your answers may depend on how you interpret the question.

Level 3: Completely open-ended questions. Note: No "correct" answers, but some may be "better" than others!

## Math

- L1. What is the graph that satisfies the equation  $y = 2/(3+7e^x)$ ?  
 L1. If Jim's car is 15 feet long at rest, what's the length at  $2/3$  the speed of light?  
 L1. What are the complex roots of  $y = 3x^4 + 10x^3 - 3x^2 + 16x + 11$ ?
- L2. How does the graph change as you alter each of the constants?  
 L2. At what speed would the car's length (l) be equal to Jim's height (h)?  
 L2. How do you solve a 4th-degree polynomial equation?
- L3. How is the S-Shaped Growth curve used in the physical and social sciences?  
 L3. What might it be like to fly near the speed of light?  
 L3. What in my life might vary as a 4th-order equation? (A depends on B depends on C depends on D.)

Even a "hard" question can be Level 1 if it has only one answer!

When you're mainly JUGGLING, comparing, RELATING, or mixing-n-matching pieces and concepts, you're using Level 2.

Level 3 questions jump out of the lesson, into the "real world".

## English

- L1. How many plays were written by William Shakespeare?  
 L1. Which character is also known by some as "Mithrandir"?  
 L1. List 50 prepositions in alphabetical order.
- L2. Which of Shakespeare's plays have been most influential?  
 L2. How is Gandalf's race (Astari) like and unlike the race of Men?  
 L2. How can you tell a prepositional phrase from a participial phrase?
- L3. What might the eternal popularity of Shakespeare say about people in general?  
 L3. How might Gandalf's imperfections be important to the telling of the story?  
 L3. How might participial phrases be used to make your writing more colorful and active?

Even if it took you years to find the answer, if it has one answer, it's Level 1!

Use graphical organizers to sort and organize Level 2 thinking: "Draw It Out!" ex. Grids, charts, graphs, mind-maps, Venn diagrams...

Level 3 questions can be used in a lesson to "Make It Real".

"So what? Is this useful? What does this have to do with anything?"

## History

- L1. Who signed the Declaration of Independence? (name at least 10 of the signers)  
 L1. What date was the Iraq War launched by the United States government?  
 L1. Who did the Warren Commission charge with shooting President John F. Kennedy?
- L2. What did the signers of the Declaration of Independence have in common?  
 L2. What according to President George. W. Bush are the reasons for the Iraq War?  
 L2. What do other theories have to say about the Kennedy assassination?
- L3. Is the Declaration of Independence fully living up to its original vision?  
 L3. How different could the last few years have been had the U.S. not invaded Iraq?  
 L3. Who killed JFK?

You are responsible for bringing your Level 1 knowledge to tutorial in the form of your notes!

You also must bring to tutorial a Level 2 or 3 question.

Your fellow students and tutor will help you to MOVE THROUGH LEVEL 2 THINKING TOWARDS LEVEL 3 THINKING to help you "Make It Real"!

# Levels of Questioning

## **LEVEL 1 - FACTUAL. "JUST LOOK IT UP."**

- What is \_\_ • When • Who • Where • How many/much/long
- Why, according to...? • How, according to...?

=> A Level 1 question gives you all the information you need to find a definite answer.

## **LEVEL 2 - INTERPRETIVE. "READ BETWEEN THE LINES."**

- Compare & contrast • Analyze • Relate • Interpret
- Find patterns • Why, judging by the book's description... ?
- How, guessing by \_\_'s account...?

=> A Level 2 question requires you to interpret part of the question to answer it.

Hint: You may choose to justify your interpretation and choices, or describe (analyze) the possible interpretations.

## **LEVEL 3 - REFLECTIVE/OPEN-ENDED. "BEYOND THE LESSON."**

- Reflect on • Apply • Decide • Justify • Prove
- Give your opinion • Explain your reasoning
- Imagine • What if \_\_? • "...in a different situation...",
- Find an analogy or metaphor • Come up with a new way
- Evaluate: good/bad, better/worse, effective/ineffective, practical/impractical, beneficial/detrimental, appropriate/inappropriate, certain/uncertain, possible/impossible, necessary/unnecessary. . .
- Why, based on all that you know...? • How, based on your own experience...?

=> A Level 3 question is open-ended. You must provide your own interpretations and evaluate different options to provide your own answers in your own way.

Hint: You may choose to describe your evaluation process:

ex. "Assuming 'A', there are these options...; comparing/contrasting the options, weighing the differences and similarities, taking into account my own preferences (x, y, z) – the appropriate choice is \_\_\_\_\_. But if we assume 'B', ...."

### **What level are these questions?**

- What does our book say is the primary cause of the American Civil War?

Level 1 - It's strictly factual. Just look it up. There is only one answer.

- What do historians say is the primary cause of the American Civil War?

Level 2 - "Which historians?" Different historians give different answers.

- What was the primary cause of the American Civil War?

Level 3 - Your answer totally depends on your own perspective, giving consideration to domestic and worldwide pressures, evaluation of historical research, as well as your own beliefs. There is no single "right" way to answer this question, but you can choose to be more thorough, balanced, insightful, and logical.

### **• HINTS for Answering Level-3 Questions •**

Some Level-3 questions may appear simple – but below the surface, there may be MANY fine answers. When questions are "vague", figure out what you need to know – then fill in the blanks yourself! "If A, then \_\_; If B, then \_\_, etc." Look through the possibilities for patterns, and discuss them, too. Sum them up, then start again looking for new sets of possibilities and patterns. Level-3 answers don't end – until you decide they do!





## Tutorial Question Stems:

1. How are \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_ similar?
2. What is the difference between \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_?
3. How could \_\_\_\_ be used to \_\_\_\_?
4. What do you think would happen if \_\_\_\_ ?
5. How does \_\_\_\_ connect to what we've learned before?
6. What is a new example of \_\_\_\_?
7. What are the strengths and weaknesses of \_\_\_\_?
8. In your own words, what is \_\_\_\_?
9. Why is \_\_\_\_ important?
10. How would you explain \_\_\_\_?
11. What is another way to explain why \_\_\_\_?
12. How do you think \_\_\_\_?
13. How does \_\_\_\_ compare to \_\_\_\_?
14. How are \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_ different?
15. Imagine that \_\_\_\_ ; how would you react?
16. What will happen to \_\_\_\_ if \_\_\_\_ ?
17. What speculation can we make about \_\_\_\_?
18. Considering \_\_\_\_ what conclusion can be made about \_\_\_\_?
19. How would you summarize \_\_\_\_ in your own words?
20. What are the real life applications of \_\_\_\_?
21. How can I apply the process for  
(simplifying/solving/factoring) problem I already know to the  
question \_\_\_\_\_?