# Wickedly Reliable Formats of Engagement for the Active Learning Classroom

The Active Learning Classroom is driven by students doing ***their own thinking*** in situations you have designed, so you (the resident expert) can respond and offer feedback. For many instructors, the hardest challenge is to design the kind of activity that 1) is engaging and inherently interesting and 2) demonstrates the targeted thinking, so it becomes visible to the instructor (and to the students, themselves).

***A key*** to creating intrinsically interesting tasks is to require students to make autonomous choices and decisions within a restricted framework, rather than generate free responses to open-ended questions. This is the same technique used by game designers to make game scenarios so exciting and engaging. Restricted autonomous decisions emphasize the student’s clear commitment to a way of thinking, which implicates him/her more directly in the challenge. This in turn causes the feedback to be interesting, EVEN IF THE STUDENT IS WORKING WITHIN A TOPIC WHERE HE/SHE HAS NO REAL INTEREST. By making his own, clear choice, the student has now invested in the challenge, which makes the outcome relevant at a personal level. Now the student is motivated to learn whether his/her decision is sound, which makes the discussion about the decision particularly engaging.

### Consider these contrasting examples:

Open format: “What is the author of this article trying to say?”

Closed format: “Make a decision: Which of the following (3 or 4 statements), in your judgment, is the best summary of what the author of the article intended to say?”

Tasks that are open-format (make a list; brainstorm reasons; generate a solution; “discuss;” etc.) might have their place at times, but they can lead to problems if you are trying to promote focused, analytical discussions in class. For one, the responses to an open-format question can be so far afield as to not be highly useful in a general debrief of student thinking. Second, open-format tasks tend to allow certain kinds of students to dominate the conversation, because they are less timid to generate and share their perspective, even if it is not particularly insightful. Also, it’s too easy for less confident, less assertive or less quick-thinking students to defer to the “best” student’s answer. Closed-format questions tend to level the playing field, as slower students are usually quicker to choose than to generate an answer.

### Consider these decision-making formats to use for constructing student tasks that lead to dynamic discussion:

* Select the best/most accurate/most comprehensive item from a limited set of options
* Sort the following statements, items, objects, etc. into categories (use this to help students develop thinking with any taxonomic scheme, stages of a process/procedure, typologies, etc.)
* Rank the following items according to…(X criteria)
* T/F: Is the following judgment about X true? Why or why not?
* A single value (numerical estimate or other scoring). Examine this paragraph. Based on the criteria we use for evaluating expository writing, assign a score from 1 to 10, on how successful it is.
* Sequencing/organizing stuff (chronological; procedural; logical; narrative). Based on your understanding, arrange the following events in their most likely chronological order.
* What does not belong? Of all the objects on the table, which is the exception to our definition of igneous rock.

These are hybrid formats: open but somewhat restricted:

* Single sentence (Write a summary; definition; claim about X in a single sentence)
* Limited word task (Read the case and offer your analysis of what has happened in 2 words)

### Debriefing

The benefit of these restrictive format tasks is that an instructor’s follow-up question to students, “WHY?” is now clearly focused and deeply analytical. “Why did you score this paragraph a 7 and not a 3?” Why did you choose that rock, and not the others? Why did you put this object in that category, rather than this other category? “Why” when it follows a student’s own, autonomous decision implicates s the student directly, making the answer something that matters, because it is personal and immediate to his own thinking.