

The Loom: Answer Keys & Socratic Discussions

WHY AREN'T THERE ANSWER KEYS?

On our forums one day, Kris posted this plea:

“We’re on Week 6, but I’ve been struggling on and off with the *answers* to the Student Activity Page discussion prep. questions each week. I have three different levels and a kindergartner learning to read, and I just don’t have time to do the research myself. I know the answers are there in the extensive teacher notes and group discussion pages somewhere, but they aren’t specifically marked, so I have *so much* digging to do to prepare for discussion each week! Is there an easier way? I guess part of the problem is that I never had any history other than American in school, so I don’t know much about this place or time period. Any help or shortcuts you could suggest would be appreciated.”

I appreciated her plight, and here’s the answer I gave her:

I have two thoughts to offer, but not the answer you’d probably most like to hear.

1. It will get better.

- Over time, you will learn how to digest the Teacher’s Notes and then lead discussions. (For you, the owner of a Redesigned volume, it’s already easier than it was for Kris, because we’ve tightened the connections between what students are asked and their discussion scripts, and we’ve double checked to make sure the answers to our questions are found in their assigned readings.)
- One practical suggestion for you, the teacher, in learning to digest the week’s material is to read the questions in the Student Activity Pages *first*, before you survey the Teacher’s Notes. Perhaps even do so with a highlighter in hand, highlighting answers to these questions as you find them in the Teacher’s Notes.
- In all labor, there truly is profit (Proverbs 14:23)! Remember, the next time you teach this year-plan, you will know *so much more* and it will be *much* easier.

2. I suggest you attempt to major on the majors. Not every question we have offered needs to be answered explicitly. The idea of the discussion is to help you help them make *connections* between *concepts*, tracing broad themes in history, literature studies, and the history of Christianity. The end goal of our questions is not a “here is a tricky question... what’s the picky little answer that you’ll never need to remember after next week?” type of discussion. Nor is it an “answer these ten questions and you can go on to the next lesson” question and answer session. We assume you will take some time to prepare yourself to actually *teach* concepts and main ideas to your students. *Tapestry* attempts to help you prepare and to mentor you in being the teacher. We make no claims to do the teaching for you, nor to be an independent study program for your students. *Tapestry* is a hands-on homeschooling program. So as you prepare, look in the questions and in the Teacher’s Notes for themes and repeated concepts, not so much for isolated facts.

To another mom, who asked a similar question, I gave this rather lengthy response:

As experienced homeschoolers, the authors of *Tapestry of Grace* have tried text-book-and-answer-key approaches to educational discussions, where, instead of attempting to master the content of the week’s lesson ourselves, we “blindly” fire questions (that to us are meaningless) at our students, who answer them in brief phrases or one-word responses that match our answer keys. Our experience using these types of curricula was that we had nothing to offer our students in the way of instruction or interpretation, and our students quickly became bored. The learning they did amounted to being able to mouth the “correct” answer back to us, in parrot fashion. In the end, we reasoned, why not just hand them the answer key and let them correct their work themselves? The only real benefit to our walking through the question/answer process (not even a “discussion,” really) with them was that they were held accountable to whatever the curriculum designers felt was important in the lesson.

We believe that this model of instruction does not result in children who know how to analyze and synthesize information, how to parse and analyze arguments, how to compare and contrast similar positions, and how to write thoughtful, supported arguments in favor of biblical truth. It tends to produce people who learn to ask one question more than any other: “Will it be on the test?” This question, we feel, expresses an attitude directly contrary to our goals as Christian homeschoolers. Are we not educating our children to be world changers through the teachings of Jesus Christ? We believe that most homeschooling parents do not invest so much time discipling sons and daughters merely so that they can “succeed” in the world system. We do hope that most parents are equipping children to function in an above-average way in the world. More than this, however, we hope that they desire to raise men and women whose hearts are devoted to God, such that, for them as for the Apostle Paul, “to live is Christ; to die is gain.”

An alternative to this text-book-and-answer-key approach is the *Tapestry* one. Simply put, we unashamedly ask you, the parent-teacher, to master the week's content. We try to give it to you in "sweetened condensed milk" format, but to use *Tapestry of Grace* as it is intended, you simply must "digest" the content of the week's lesson. Your students (especially those in high school) will read in a great amount of detail. Our Teacher's Notes summarize those details and pull out the main ideas for you. We have worked hard in past editions, and are being even more careful and thorough in this new one, to make sure all the questions we ask students are answered by the Teacher's Notes as a whole. Reading them takes less than an hour a week and teaches you what you need to know in order to lead real discussions on all levels of learning in your homeschool.

One of the beauties of this approach is that you will truly grow as a person and as a Christian citizen as you learn right along with your student. You are setting an example for your students of adult learning, and it is a wonderful thing, each time, when you get onto a topic and you and your student marvel together.

"Mom, I never knew Lewis and Clark went to Oregon!"

"I know! I was surprised at that myself... Can you imagine what the land must have been like when they saw it for the first time?"

Conversations like this do not happen when you flip open an answer key and say, "Where did Lewis and Clark go on their journey?" prompting your student to read off his paper, "Parts of the West, including Oregon."

Furthermore, you will know as much as (or more than) your student if you invest an hour in the Teacher's Notes each week. Thus, you will be able to hold a true discussion in which you guide your student's learning by asking meaningful questions and responding to his responses, in accordance with the grace and maturity that you have been given in your own unique walk with the Lord Jesus. Your preparation time equips you to be a true *teacher*, not just an administrator who regulates and enforces the completion of independent learning assignments in your homeschool.

That, then, is my response to the question about the lack of answer keys within the curriculum. It is central to our educational philosophy *not* to provide them, an aspect that sets *Tapestry of Grace* apart from other curricula. We are comfortable with the fact that *Tapestry* is not for everyone; we don't believe any one course of study can fit all educational needs or life situations.

Having asserted our underlying philosophy, let me say a few practical things that do respond to your desires for more straightforward answer keys, or which may help you make the transition to our new way of teaching more easily.

1. We all have weeks where (due to busy seasons, moving, health problems, etc.) we simply can't get to a thoughtful or lengthy discussion. Our position is that, during those weeks, discussion is not meant to be our focus. God is doing something else that takes center stage in our students' lives. In our house, we have our students check their work using the Teacher's Notes during weeks like those, and we refuse to worry or fuss if we are not getting to *everything*.
2. We do recognize that, because of our "content-based, not resource-based" philosophy of curricula, we did not check thoroughly to make sure that all questions we asked were answered in the resources recommended in Classic *Tapestry* volumes. (We are being *far* more scrupulous about this in Redesigned editions.) Because we recognize and freely admit this weakness, we have long ago established special online forums for Classic users that are designated for questions about our questions. If one of our questions stumps you or your student, come to our bulletin board and ask in the year-plan specific forums for Student Activity Page questions! Most of these are reliably answered within 24 hours.
3. For mothers of dialectic-level students, we have seen the wisdom of adding discussion outlines for you at your student's level. It has been harder than we originally thought to simplify rhetoric-level outlines for these younger students who are not yet ready for true analysis and synthesis. Our new outlines focus on the connections that dialectic-level students should be able to see and enjoy.
4. We are also working, wherever possible, to make our discussion outlines for both dialectic and rhetoric follow more closely the questions we are asking in their student pages. (For instance, if there are two questions asked in Student Activity Pages, we attempt to provide, in the discussion outline of that week's Teacher's Notes, questions and answers that follow the order of the questions asked in the Student Activity Pages.)
5. Finally, we are also going to be following through with our *Evaluations* CD-ROMs (tests). These are meant to serve those of you who still feel a need for that question-answer format in order to function securely as a teacher—which amounts to a perceived need to hold your children accountable for the factual content of their readings. In this case, you can use our tests for this accountability (and even skip the Teacher's Notes and discussions if you wish) rather than trying to make our discussion outlines fulfill a function for which they were never designed.

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WHAT'S THE POINT?

The main fact to which I want to draw your attention is that teaching with *Tapestry* is meant to be different than teaching with other programs, such as the traditional text books and classroom lectures on which you may have grown up. *Tapestry of Grace* is a plan for guided, integrated unit studies. Our guides focus on both themes and facts of God's plan as revealed through history. We do not arrogantly assume that we know your unique worldview, theology, gifts, talents, and passions. As a result, our discussion guides are structured (and with Redesign, they are even more complete) but they are always loose. We ask you to prepare for your discussions so that the Holy Spirit can teach your children directly through you.

We hope to provide enough support and information for you not only to teach, but to teach by asking questions. This method of teaching, known as "socratic discussion," is named for Socrates, a Greek philosopher of the early 400's B.C. who taught, not by lectures, but by asking leading questions to make people rethink their assumptions. This teaching method has stood the test of time as being one of the most effective ways to form lasting worldviews in students' minds.

In our day of insta-everything, it may come as a shock to some of you that you are not instantly good at leading Socratic discussions the moment you crack open a week-plan, or that your children can't take mental leaps easily from concept to concept as you ask them our discussion questions. Give yourself and your children time. Remember, both you and they are learning whole new ways to study together! As you walk in the disciplines that *Tapestry* is teaching you, you will grow more and more familiar with them, and you will learn how to adapt them to your children and your teaching style.

SOCRATIC DISCUSSION VS. TEXTBOOK Q&A:

The discussion outlines as written in *Tapestry* are trying to help you conduct socratic discussions with your children. This means that you teach by questioning, leading the student step-by-step towards a conclusion that you have in mind but that the student has yet to discover. Sometimes children make mighty leaps and bridge connecting ideas easily. Sometimes they are clueless as to where you are trying to lead them, and you must supply questions that have easier, more obvious answers in order to coax them forward. This is where your skill as a teacher comes into play: how well can you judge just the right question to lead the student to see your point?

For instance, let's say that I wanted my child to understand the connections between Napoleon and Thomas Jefferson. I'd start by asking, "When was Napoleon in power?"

Student: (*looking in his notebook*) "1800-1814, roughly."

Teacher: "Good, and who was President in the United States then?"

Student: "Thomas Jefferson."

Teacher: "What was the big land purchase that Thomas Jefferson made as President—the one that doubled the territorial size of the United States in one deal?"

Student: (*confidently*) "The Louisiana Purchase."

Teacher: "Right! Now, did you know that Thomas Jefferson bought all the land in the Louisiana Purchase from the European country of France?"

Student: "Ohhhhh."

Teacher: "Yes, it was their colonial holding. Now, from whom would he have had to purchase that land?"

Student: "Napoleon?"

Teacher: "Right. Now, why would Napoleon have been willing to sell the land?"

Answers may vary, but the fact is that Napoleon knew he couldn't hold the land and fight his battles in Europe, and he was in need of money to fight the European battles. Students may guess all or part of this fact; teachers will encourage right guesses until students are done guessing. Then, we fill in the blanks with information they either can't know or didn't remember.

Correctly conducted, Socratic discussions are very valuable (and very different from texts or lectures)

1. They engage the student in active dialogue, thereby holding his attention longer than any other form of teaching, except perhaps drama or storytelling. (Let's face it, we all like to air our opinions, and Socratic teaching gives the students many chances to do this!) In both lecture and textbook Q&A sessions, students can mentally "check out." In Socratic discussion, they need to listen for the question and then formulate an answer, after which they listen for the response, and then formulate their own response, and so forth.

2. Socratic discussions also train the student by frequent practice to think about what he's saying, to articulate clearly what he's thinking, and to uphold his statements with logical supports. (No flat, general statement, especially of the student's personal opinion, should stand unchallenged in a Socratic discussion. Any student who makes a statement should be able to support it with evidence of some kind.) Consider this statement: "I think Jefferson was wrong to make the Louisiana Purchase," asserts your student.

"Why?" you ask.

"Because."

The student may have read an author's opinion but not followed his reasoning. Or he may have had a purely emotional, biased, or arrogant opinion formed without facts, or without regard for facts. In either case, the student must be asked to say why he holds his opinion, and to support his opinion with facts and persuasive arguments.

"Because why?"

"I don't know."

"Did it say so in your reading? Maybe it had something to do with the Constitution?"

"Oh, yeah, I think so...?"

"Well, where does the Constitution give the President the right to buy land for America?"

"I don't know."

"How about we look it up?" (Look it up together; there is no such provision.) "See? Some people feel that Jefferson overstepped Constitutional bounds in making this purchase."

Now, what happens if you, the teacher, don't know this constitutional information? (This particular fact is in some of the reading choices for the week but not all of them, and it is not highlighted in the Teacher's Notes.) The answer is that you still don't let the student offer an unsupported opinion.

"John, can you tell me why you think Jefferson was wrong?"

"No."

"Did you read in your reading that Jefferson was wrong to make the purchase?"

"Yes, somewhere."

"Let's see if you can find it again, and we'll get back to this point. You really need to have facts to back up an opinion. If you have trouble, tell me and I'll help you later."

Then you go on to the next question.

To use this very valuable teaching method, two basic things need to happen:

1. The student must have a basic grasp of the facts of the discussion. Using *Tapestry*-guided discussion questions and outlines, this is fairly easily achieved. Our student questions rely on main facts found in most history resources on the week's topic; again, if the odd question here or there is not found in alternate readings you choose to assign, just skip the question, or research the answers together using the Internet.
2. The teacher must have in mind the connections, themes, and points that she wants to make. She needs to understand how to link the facts the student knows with the new concepts or themes she wants him to understand. It is important, therefore, for you, the teacher, to understand that the Teacher's Notes as a whole are designed to make you mistress of the main facts and "in the know" as to where you want the discussion to end up.

SOCRATIC DISCUSSIONS AT DIFFERENT LEARNING LEVELS

For grammar-level students, use socratic questioning primarily to draw out narration of facts that a student has learned, and hope to make only a few simple connections between them. I know it takes more time out of your day, but I do recommend that you hold separate, short-and-sweet discussions with younger kids that focus on them telling you what they've learned, and you highlighting the main facts or themes for emphasis. It is generally not a good idea to have them sit in on discussions with dialectic- or rhetoric-level students.

In our example from the Napoleon week-plan, for instance, you might just say to a grammar-level student, "Isn't it amazing to think that the wars in Europe that Napoleon was fighting helped further the development of America?" There's plenty of time for them to make connections later, and you really will overtax youngsters by requiring higher-level thinking than they are naturally ready for. Like the proverbial task of trying to teach a pig to sing, it does no good and annoys the pig!

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This does not mean you never use Socratic techniques with grammar-level children. Socratic methods used in everyday activity will cause your children to be better thinkers all through life. You probably already know this, though you may not realize it.

Here's an example. When ten-year-old Susie asks, at 10:00 AM on a typical homeschool day, "Can I go out and play?" what is your response? Do you just say "yes" or "no"? Or do you begin to ask questions like, "Have you done your morning chores? Are the breakfast dishes completely done, with the counters wiped?" She's nodding. "How about your math assignment? And the history reading I assigned you?" Now, she's looking down at the floor. "What do you think I'm going to say?" you ask gently.

"No," she answers.

"Why?" you ask.

"Because I haven't done my Math yet."

"Okay. When you think you're done, come ask again!" you reply, warmly affirming her.

She got it. She arrived at the right conclusion, and you did not tell her the answer. This is Socratic teaching, and if children are seldom given easy answers even to simple questions, they soon learn to think out these things for themselves before they even come asking!

Dialectic-level socratic discussions will focus on connections, asking students to state their points precisely and making sure they substantiate their points with facts. Use our discussion outlines more like a lecture than you will with rhetoric-level students, making sure that dialectic-level students understand the *main ideas* of the lesson.

Rhetoric-level student discussions will still rest on a foundation of clearly stated points with factual support, but these students can discuss more and more questions for which there is no clear, factual answer. For instance, using our example from the 1800s, they could get deeply into the murky Constitutional questions that confronted Jefferson and the Congress concerning the legality of the Louisiana Purchase. They could discuss the fact that this situation brought Jefferson's desires for a prosperous and secure agrarian society into conflict with his political theories that had previously upheld "strict construction" in interpreting the U.S. Constitution.

WARNING AND ENCOURAGEMENT

If you've not done a lot of Socratic teaching in the past, several things can easily happen:

1. You may not give yourself time to learn this style of teaching, leading you to lapse back into lecture-textbook Q&A style of teaching, and causing your kids' attention spans to shorten as you go on. Can we plead with you? Give yourself grace and space to grow as a teacher, and make time to prepare your lessons! Don't wing it and expect perfection right away. Please allow yourself a chance to grow into this
2. You both may ask clumsy questions because you're unskilled, and your kids may get frustrated because they can't find the right answer immediately. Again, give yourselves time and persevere! You and they are learning a new and valuable skill. You are learning the skill of leading by questioning. They are learning to listen and respond with thoughtful answers. These are challenging occupations, and worthy of much time and effort!
3. Many kids—especially at the dialectic and rhetoric levels—who aren't used to this kind of teaching don't like it at first. They just want you to hurry up and tell them the answer that will be on the test so they can fill in the blank and get an "A." Help them understand the goal of the weekly discussion as we have articulated it to you above. Explain that this type of discussion is designed to teach them to carry on persuasive conversations, to the Lord's glory, for the rest of their lives. This skill will make them better workers, better students, and better citizens. Ask them to pray with you that both of you and they will seek to please the Lord first and foremost, as you grow together in these new skills for His sake.
4. Experience with kids—my own, and co-op students—has taught me that they don't know what's good for them. The problem is, I don't really either, except when I read my Bible and listen to counselors wiser than myself. The Bible tells me to discipline them and not to spare for their crying (Proverbs 19:18 [KJV]). Dear reader, please pray hard for yourself and your children, and listen to the Holy Spirit and wise counselors whom you trust. *Tapestry* and its methods are not for everyone, and they may not be for you. But I'd like to say, as an older woman in Christ and an experienced homeschooling mom of six children and 21 years, you *can* do more than you think, and they *will* thank you. It may be years away, but the fruit is sweet and eternal. Don't give up; stay the course and work hard. Pray even harder. Work to learn this new skill from this curriculum and from those whom you know to be excellent teachers. Your efforts *will* pay off, and you will reap if you faint not!