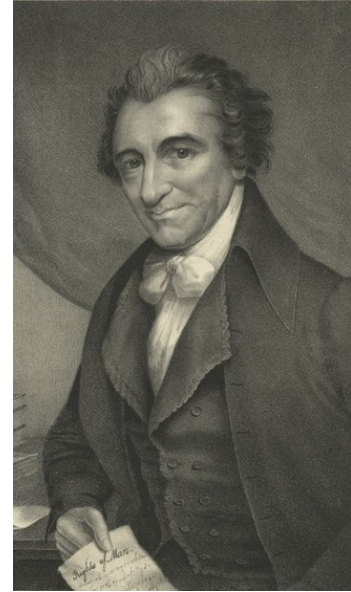


## The **QUESTION** as a Rhetorical Device in Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, 1776

***“Hath your house been burnt?  
Hath your property been destroyed before your face?”***

***“Can ye restore to us the time that is past?  
Can ye give to prostitution its former innocence?”***



Throughout *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine used high-powered questions to challenge his readers and drive home the “common sense” of his argument: we must abandon hope of reconciliation with Britain and commit ourselves to independence. In this activity we explore how Paine used two types of questions as persuasive devices — the *rhetorical question* and the *hypophora* (high PAH fer uh) — to direct his readers to a seemingly irrefutable conclusion. Study the chart below and answer the questions on pp. 2-4.

	<b>RHETORICAL QUESTION</b>	<b>HYPOPHORA</b>
<b>The writer asks a question and . . .</b>	leaves it unanswered.	immediately answers it.
<b>The question gets its power from . . .</b>	the implied or assumed answer.	the one-two punch of the Q&A.
<b>Example from <i>Common Sense</i></b>	<p><i>“It is easy getting into holes and corners and talking of reconciliation: But do such men seriously consider how difficult the task is and how dangerous it may prove, should the Continent [colonies] divide thereon?”</i></p> <p>What is the implied answer to Paine’s question?</p> <p>NO, with the further implication that anyone who <u>really</u> understands our crisis knows this is so.</p>	<p><i>“But admitting that matters were now made up [settled with Britain], what would be the event [result]? I answer, the ruin of the continent.”</i></p> <p>What is the one-two punch of Paine’s hypophora?</p> <p>The question “What would result if we reconciled with Britain?” suggests specific benefits, i.e., trade will flourish, peace will be preserved, etc. Paine’s blunt reply of RUIN thrusts the opposite and drastic result into the reader’s mind.</p>

Look for ways Paine uses **QUESTIONS** to

- invite the reader to be an active participant in the flow of ideas
- establish a direct one-to-one engagement with the reader
- set an immediate and conversational tone
- guide the reader to the writer’s conclusion before the writer has expressed it
- sound authoritative and informed
- imply an either-or clarity to the issue: it can be either *yes* or *no*, *this way* or *that way*.

In a **RHETORICAL QUESTION**, the writer asks a question but leaves it unanswered. The implied answer gives the rhetorical question its power.

**EXAMPLE ONE**

***“Ye that tell us of harmony and reconciliation, can ye restore to us the time that is past? Can ye give to prostitution its former innocence? Neither can ye reconcile Britain and America. The last cord now is broken, the people of England are presenting addresses [speeches] against us.”*** COMMON SENSE, Para. 106

1. On the two short lines, write the implied answers to the questions (yes or no).
2. On the dotted line, write a sentence to clarify Paine’s point. Begin with “Of course” or “Of course not.”
3. Since Paine implies that no other answer is rational, what does he imply about anyone who would disagree?

***“Ye that tell us of harmony and reconciliation, can ye restore to us the time that is past? \_\_\_\_\_ Can ye give to prostitution its former innocence? \_\_\_\_\_***  
.....  
***Neither can ye reconcile Britain and America. The last cord now is broken, the people of England are presenting addresses against us.”***

**EXAMPLE TWO**

***“Resolution is our inherent character, and courage hath never yet forsaken us. Wherefore [therefore], what is it that we want [lack]? Why is it that we hesitate [to separate from Britain]? From Britain we can expect nothing but ruin. If she is once admitted to the government of America again, this Continent will not be worth living in.”*** COMMON SENSE, Para. 123

4. On the two lines, write phrases to express the implied answers to the questions.
5. On the dotted line, write a sentence to clarify Paine’s point. Begin with “So it is obvious that” or “So who can deny that.”
6. Compare your expanded statement with Paine’s. Why do you think Paine left these questions unanswered and let their unstated answers do the persuading?

***“Resolution is our inherent character, and courage hath never yet forsaken us. Wherefore, what is it that we want [lack]? \_\_\_\_\_***  
***Why is it that we hesitate [to separate]? \_\_\_\_\_***  
***From Britain we can expect nothing but ruin. If she is once admitted to the government of America again, this Continent will not be worth living in.”***  
.....  
.....

In a **HYPOPHORA**, the writer asks a question and immediately answers it.  
The one-two punch of the Q&A gives the hypophora its power.

**EXAMPLE  
ONE**

***“But, admitting that we were all of English descent, what does it amount to? Nothing. Britain, being now an open enemy, extinguishes every other name and title: and to say that reconciliation is our duty is truly farcical.”***

*COMMON SENSE*, Para. 68

7. “*What does it amount to? Nothing.*” With this hypophora, Paine bluntly rejects the argument that the colonies must reconcile with Britain due to their English heritage.” Why do you think Paine chose to state his answer and not imply it?
8. How does the QUESTION — “*What does it amount to?*” — set the reader up for Paine’s Q&A punch?
9. How does the ANSWER — “*Nothing*” — imply that there is only one reasonable response?

**EXAMPLE  
TWO**

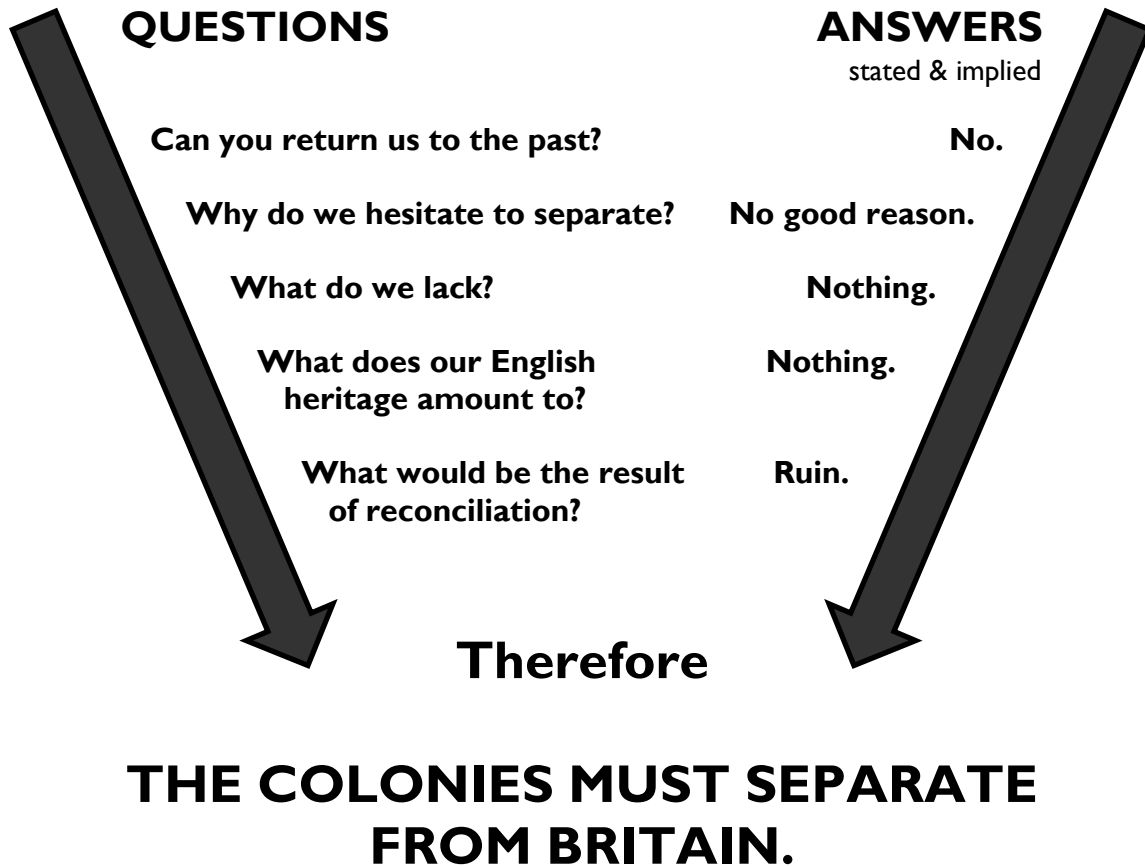
***“But where, say some, is the King of America? I’ll tell you, friend, he reigns above, and doth not make havoc of mankind like the Royal Brute of Great Britain.”***

*COMMON SENSE*, Para. 103

10. With this hypophora, Paine stresses that the “king” of the new nation will not be a monarch but the Law, based on God’s laws. Why do you think Paine chose to state his answer and not imply it?
11. How does the QUESTION set the reader up for Paine’s Q&A punch?
12. How does the ANSWER imply that there is only one reasonable response?

## ***Paine's Rhetorical Trap***

Follow the trap that Paine creates for his readers with rhetorical questions and hypophoras.



13. From these examples in *Common Sense*, explain how questions can function as powerful persuasive devices in argumentative writing. Find other examples in *Common Sense* to illustrate your explanation.

Portrait of Paine courtesy of the New York Public Library.