

## Cabin Fever Questions



*Humanities Washington is pleased to nominate Cabin Fever Questions for the 2020 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize for Public Humanities Programs.*

The sharing of questions, ideas, and stories sits at the heart of the humanities. But in early March, this sharing became more difficult as the in-person conversations and events so vital to humanities work were suddenly shut down by the rapid spread of COVID-19. Initially hardest hit by the virus was Washington State, which was the first US state to be afflicted by the virus and, for a time, the hardest hit.

In this exceptional context, with the world feeling as though it were turned upside down, Humanities Washington sought to provide an alternative way for people to have engaging, well-researched, and humanities-centered conversations to help make sense of it all. On March 15, 2020, Governor Jay Inslee announced the shutdown of Washington State. Three days earlier, on March 12, the first edition of Cabin Fever Questions went out. In a time when it is essential for the humanities to not only be responsive to world events, but also proactive in serving our society, Humanities Washington knew that we must strive for four goals:

- Provide a humanities lens through which to view current events, the experience of isolation and quarantine, and universal questions.
- Fuel the curiosity of our audiences.
- Create a timely, rich, and well-researched method of connecting people to one another, whether across the internet or within the same home.
- Provide relief to individuals and families shouldering great burdens in the time of COVID-19 through rich conversations and humanities resources

Cabin Fever Questions was our answer. By providing curated, specific, and deep questions, supported by resources like primer videos, investigative articles, and conversations with humanities scholars, we could achieve all four. We knew that people were inundated with rapid-fire news that felt overwhelming. We wanted to make something that cut through the noise and provided context, and that encouraged deeper thinking than typically flashed through their social media feed. Creating short questions in a graphically distinct way was key to the program's success.

With in-person events disallowed, this created a way to create a blended community of both digital content and interpersonal connection, without contributing to video-conference fatigue. Cabin Fever Questions allowed Washingtonians to both contextualize and understand the times we are living in, to deeply connect to the people around in them, and to enjoy a reprieve from the daily psychological onslaught of COVID-19. Cabin Fever Kids, a further evolution of the program, pursued our service aims even more concretely: pinpointing excellent children's books for caregivers, developing age-appropriate and inclusive discussion questions, and directing families to free copies at libraries. This sought to provide relief to parents caught in a frantic cycle of caregiving, working, and, because of COVID-19, teaching as well. By offering a crafted, slow, and intentional activity, families had the chance to connect and thrive, rather than merely get through the day.

*"Wanted you to know that I have LOVED the Cabin Fever questions and have been sharing them with staff and friends. Our prison and hospital librarians have been looking for things to send into the prisons, via the counselors, to keep them occupied while the library is closed. They identify worksheets of various kinds that offer a reading or writing exercise. One of your questions made it into the latest batch of materials: 'how do we behave ethically during a pandemic?'"*

## Program Aims

### *A Humanities Lens*

Given the speed and intensity of the modern news cycle, it is can be difficult to find stable ground on which to get some perspective. Cabin Fever Questions (CFQ) sought to provide a chance for audiences to inquire at a deeper level than the headlines provide, taking the time to ask themselves: what do I think about this topic? *Why* do I

think that? What does my family think? CFQ allows for the deep, deliberative approach of the humanities to be applied to the weekly news cycle, a time to reflect amongst the whirlwind of current events. Informed by humanities research, freely available pedagogical materials, and the news of the day, CFQ sought to provide a humanities lens through which to view the events of our turbulent world.

### *Fueling Curiosity*

This an era where time, attention, and moments of reflection are scarce. While the media landscape pushes its audiences towards passive consumption and shallow engagement, we wished to do the opposite: fueling curiosity, so that our audiences can participate actively with the humanities and dig deeper. Beyond the Netflix binge, we knew that audiences wished for more inviting, inspiring, and intellectually rich activities.

### *A Method of Connection*

Intentionally, CFQ was a rapid-response program, connecting audiences to the big questions of the day and to each other. We aimed to encourage our audiences to turn toward the people in their homes, their families, and their lives and talk. This meant going beyond everyday to-do lists and surviving the tumultuous present, but taking a moment to connect, seek common ground, and foreground curiosity.

### *To Provide Relief*

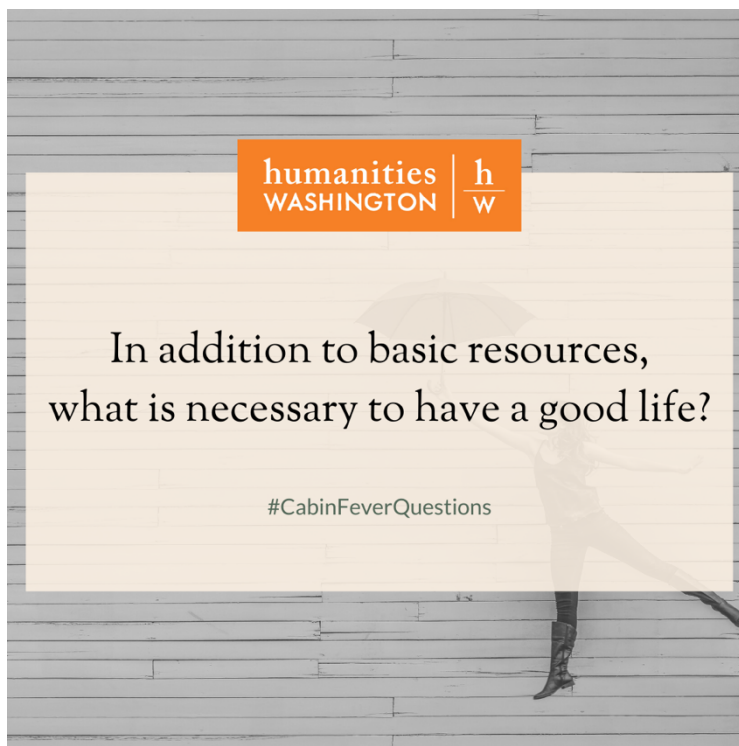
Essential to this program was the goal of providing relief to individuals, households, and families. On one level, we aimed to offer entertaining and multi-faceted questions, aided by humanities research and scholars, as content that we wanted to cut through the day's news and concerns. On another level, we wished to provide critical support to caregivers who were suddenly responsible for the education of their children. Cabin Fever Kids, in particular, provided vetted children's books, pointed families toward free copies of the texts, and curated discussion questions for both familial bonding and education. In a time when so many are separated from loved ones, we take these opportunities for meaningful connection seriously.

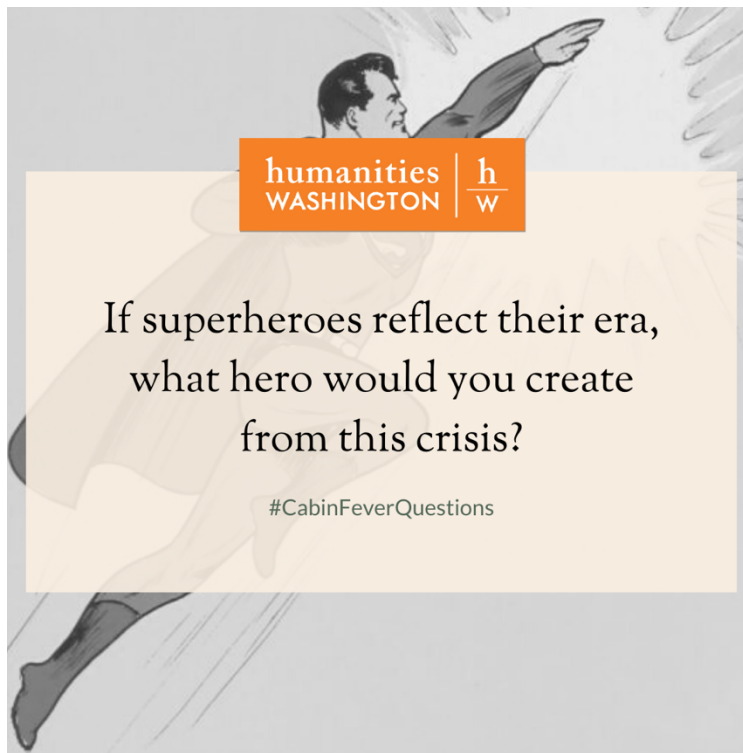
## **Program Overview**

### *Structure*

Cabin Fever Questions delivered inspiring and enlightening questions to the inbox and social media feeds of our audience. They stood apart from the typical content one sees while scrolling social media. CFQ posed a question, either one mined from humanities disciplines (e.g. how do you define happiness?), or a critical question connected to the contemporary moment. While the speed of CFQ might seem like a question of scheduling, it is an essential element of the program. While events and community conversations take weeks, or even months, to plan, CFQ questions can get at the heart of the matter in a timely and impactful way.

Cabin Fever Questions starts with a question:





These questions are designed to feed the curiosity of participants, encouraging them to turn to the people in their lives: their partners, roommates, families, or neighbors. These questions are also a form of outreach: showing an inviting side of the humanities and proving that the humanities are essential to modern life. These are core questions that on which only the humanities can offer guidance.

The questions are provided by members of our Speakers Bureau, humanities scholars at Washington State universities and colleges, and by Humanities Washington staff. Each question is thoroughly researched to disseminate what humanities scholars are saying about the topic, the history or cultural context of the topic, and proactive guides to help audiences determine what they and others think.



***DIG DEEPER:***

[\*Wikipedia's Great Experiment: Finding a Definition of "Happiness" We Can All Agree On\*](#) via Quartz

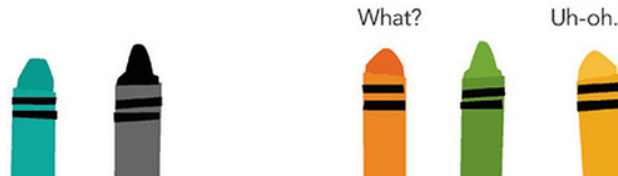
[\*Laurie Santos: Psychology and the Good Life\*](#) via Aspen Institute

[\*True Happiness Isn't about Being Happy All the Time\*](#) via The Conversation

[\*What's Your Definition of Happiness?\*](#) via Psychology Today

***Cabin Fever Kids***

Cabin Fever Kids (CFK) takes CFQ as its model but adds specific content to support families. Rather than focusing on current events, CFK focuses on a particular children's book and provides questions for reflective conversation inspired by the books plot, characters, and themes. Critically, books that have free versions available, whether as e-books through libraries, videos of storytellers reading the book aloud with the book displayed, or audiobooks (including some read by Dolly Parton), are the centerpiece of this half of the program.



## *Red: A Crayon's Story* by Michael Hall

Red is miserable: “He was red. But he wasn’t very good at it.” Other crayons try to help him be better at being red, but he just can’t be red! That is what’s making Red miserable. That is until Berry asks Red to make an ocean; Red says it was easy! Red then makes blue jeans, a blue whale, and blue skies. How will the other crayons react when Red says, “I’m blue!”?

### **LISTEN TO THE BOOK HERE**

Or download it online from your local library system

[Learn more about the author](#)

### **QUESTIONS**

#### **Red is good at some things but not others.**

- How can we tell if he is good at being red or blue?
- Can you be good or bad at being yourself?

#### **Others have lots to say about how Red might be better at being red, but what does this mean?**

- Have you ever been given a label that didn’t feel right? How did you deal with that?
- Have you ever tried to do something or be something you just couldn’t do or be? Why?
- Do you think labels can be harmful or helpful? How so?
- Who decides what labels you? Do we have control of what others see?

#### **Red says, “I’m Blue!”**

- How are you different than how others see you? How can you know?
- How are you different than others? What makes you *you*?
- Is it okay to be different? Why?



**Red isn't like the other crayons.**

- How is Red similar to or different from other crayons?
- How is Red the same and different at the same time? How can that be?
- Do you think there might be other mislabeled crayons? Why?

*Distribution*

From March 12 to May 29, Cabin Fever Questions were produced two to three times a week and sent via email to Humanities Washington's 12,000 + email list. Questions were also posted to our Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, with a combined number of followers of over 8,000, to encourage easier sharing and to reach more of our audience.

*Design*

In some ways, it is surprising how few brands, either nonprofit or otherwise, share simple questions as posts. Using short image/copy posts is of course the standard mode of internet marketing, but most brands are trying to tell you to buy something, and they use simple, bold statements to do it. When a question is asked by a company in their marketing, the answer is obvious: buy the product. Cabin Fever Questions was subtly unique in its open-endedness. It lacked an agenda, a notable quality in a social media space where everything feels like it has an agenda.

For that reason, we wanted the design to reflect the feeling of open-endedness. Our brand fonts are relatively modest but clean and eye-catching, and they echoed the more subtle and reflective tone of the project. Designed like Instagram posts, we superimposed the questions over tailored photos. We selected images that reflected some crucial element, either literally or metaphorically, of the question being asked, but ensured that the question stood out and the image blended in the back. We used the warmer, more inviting color tones in our brand palate because this was and is a period of immense anxiety and we wanted the questions to feel welcoming.

We found that design was not just a superficial element, but critical to stand out against the noise and to make our audience willing to share. It had to be eye-catching, but not flashy. It had to match the tone of the questions and our current moment. It needed to make people want to associate with the content and share.

*Financial Structure*

The primary cost underlying our *Cabin Fever* series was the staff time needed to prepare each weekly eblast. Since personnel costs are a fixed cost for Humanities Washington and no additional staff members/interns were brought on to assist with the project, this pandemic-responsive program required no additional material outlays of funds. We paid a small amount of money to external freelancers and our fees to our eblast company increased slightly, but neither were large enough to be considered material to the bottom line. Given the large amount of positive feedback received, as well as the digital nature of program dissemination which enabled Humanities



Washington to reach a substantial statewide audience, this project realized a fantastic return on investment.

## Impact

The response to Cabin Fever Questions was unlike anything we have seen on our online platforms. We received more emails from our audience complimenting this digital project than any other communications project we've produced. The initial three Cabin Fever Questions emails received open rates of 30% or above—the highest response rates we ever got for emails sent to our full list of 12,000.

At the height of the first wave of the pandemic, the Washington State Department of Health posted about the project on its Facebook page to its 33,000 followers. It was highlighted on social media by the NEH, the FSHC, and several times by Phi Beta Kappa. Multiple partners around the state, and even other humanities councils, posted our Cabin Fever Questions to their own feeds and solicited feedback from their audiences. The initial announcement was shared on Facebook 72 times, and liked 60 times, putting it among the top tier of shares on Humanities Washington's Facebook feed. At 53 likes on Instagram it's among the top performing posts we've made on that platform. We received requests for the questions to be put into a book format, and we heard from at least one person that they were reading them around the dinner table.

As the pandemic stretches on and the need for high-quality, meaningful content endures, we plan to produce future iterations of Cabin Fever Questions and Cabin Fever Kids. The response can perhaps be summed up by a one-line email we received in response to a Cabin Fever Questions: *"Now THIS is the kind of email I want to get in these challenging times."*

*"These messages, questions, and ideas are SO important and good! Thank you for thinking of all the needs of the isolated public and providing us with 'food for thought' during a scary time. I've shared your earlier questions (and the ones for deeper thinking too) with friends who had been meeting in 'Living Room Conversations.' Please keep up the important, helpful work, especially when so many organizations have needed to or choose to close down — we know SOMEONE there is thinking and working for the better good!"*

**We thank the reviewers for their time and consideration of Cabin Fever Questions!**