I. Discourse on Method (1-2)

A. Descartes’s Education

1. Why was dissatisfied with his education?

2. In particular, what was his dissatisfaction with philosophy?

3. What does he have to say about mathematics?

B. Was the kind of education Descartes sought in his travels any more satisfactory to him?

C. What are the four rules Descartes proposes for directing his reasoning? In particular, what is the significance of the first rule? Do you think you could follow it (and still believe more or less what you now believe about yourself and the world)?

II. First Meditation - “Concerning Things that can be Doubted”

A. Why does Descartes proceed to doubt everything he currently believes? What is the connection between his decision to doubt everything and his first rule of reasoning (Discourse 2)?

B. What does Descartes find dubitable in what he learns through the senses?

C. What hypothesis leads Descartes to believe that even his knowledge of number and figure (like 2+3=5) could be mistaken?

D. Why does Descartes conclude this meditation by proposing to accept that everything he believes is false, that everything that appears to be true to him is the product of a malevolent god bent on deceiving him?

III. Second Meditation - The Self which cannot be Doubted

A. How does Descartes conclude that he cannot doubt the truth of his own existence (as long as he is thinking of it)? Why could not it be an illusion of the deceiving god along with everything else?

B. Why does Descartes conclude that the “I” whose existence he cannot doubt is only “a thing which thinks”? Why does he believe his discovery has helped him to understand what is meant by terms like “mind” and “understanding”?(84)

C. How does Descartes extend his understanding of himself as “a thing which thinks” to a thing which also “doubts, which understands ... and which perceives” (85) In what sense can he assert that my perception is not subject to doubt (and so a part of the “I”’s indubitable existence) when he has already argued that we can doubt anything we learn about the world through the senses?

IV. Third Meditation - Clear and Distinct Ideas, The Existence of Corporeal Objects and God

A. Clarity and Distinctness as a Criterion for Truth (91-93)

1. Why is Descartes convinced “as a general principle that everything which we conceive very clearly and very distinctly is wholly true”? (92) Do you see a connection between this principle and the first rule of reasoning he adopted in the Discourse?
2. How does the hypothesis of a deceiving god (which he has not, remember, refuted as a possibility) complicate Descartes’s acceptance of the principle of clarity and distinctness as a sufficient criterion for the truth of an idea?

B. The Existence of the World independent of our Minds (93-96)

1. Why does Descartes consider our “direct experience” (95) of the independence of our sensations from our will to be an insufficient proof of the existence of objects external to our minds in much the way we conceive/perceive them to exist?

2. Why does Descartes consider our natural inclination to believe in the existence of objects independent of our minds insufficient to establish their existence?

C. The Existence of God (and a non-deceiving God at that!) (96-108)

1. Why is there nothing in our ideas of corporeal objects that could not have arisen from the mind itself or why is it conceivable for Descartes that the cause of our ideas of corporeal objects could be the mind itself and not some object independent of the mind? (Hint: it is important to know here exactly what Descartes thinks we conceive clearly and distinctly in our ideas of corporeal objects.)

2. What is it about our idea of God that could not have arisen from the mind itself or why does Descartes believe that the idea of God demands a cause at least as real as what the idea itself refers to - a really existent God, in other words?

3. Having proven the existence of God, how does Descartes prove that God could not be a deceiver and, thus, decisively refute the possibility of a deceiving God which has been causing him so much trouble?

V. Sixth Meditation - The Existence of Corporeal Objects and the Distinction between Mind and Body

A. How does Descartes establish that corporeal objects can exist?

B. What arguments does Descartes consider (and reject) for the actual existence of corporeal objects in much the way we conceive/perceive them to exist?

C. How, on the basis of his argument for the existence of a God who is not a deceiver, does Descartes finally establish that corporeal objects must exist in, more or less, the way we conceive them to?

D. Why does Descartes believe the mind cannot be identified with the body?