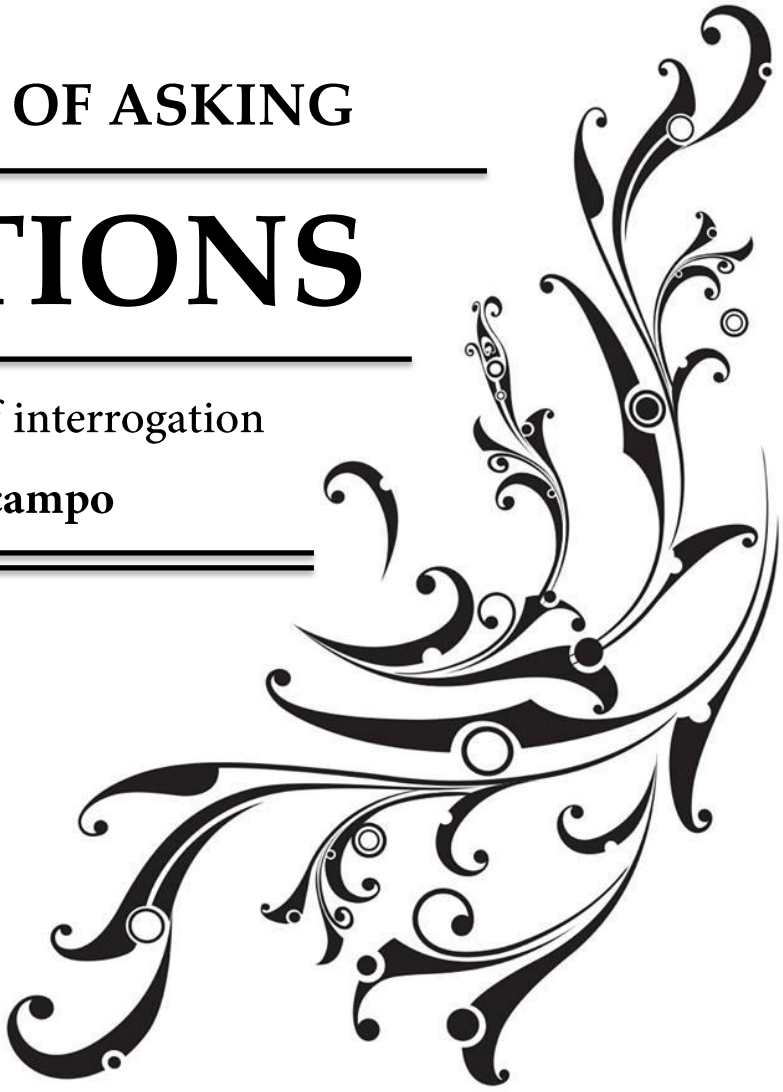
TECHNIQUES OF ASKING

QUESTIONS

Learn the methods of interrogation

By **Rashid A. Ocampo**



“Always stick to the story.
It was when you started backtracking
that people got in trouble. Interrogation 101.”
— Nicholas Sparks, *The Lucky One*

Open Questions

Definition

An open question can be defined thus:

An open question is likely to receive a long answer.

Although any question can receive a long answer, open questions deliberately seek longer answers, and are the opposite of closed questions.

Using open questions

Open questions have the following characteristics:

- They ask the respondent to *think* and reflect.
- They will give you *opinions* and *feelings*.
- They hand control of the conversation to the *respondent*.

This makes open questions useful in the following situations:

Usage	Example
As a follow-on from closed questions, to develop a conversation and open up someone who is rather quiet.	*What did you do on you holidays*? *How do you keep focused on your work*?
To find out more about a person, their wants, needs, problems, and so	*What's keeping you awake these days*? *Why is that so important to you*?

on.	
To get people to realize the extend of their problems (to which, of course, you have the solution).	*I wonder what would happen if your customers complained even more*? *Rob Jones used to go out late. What happened to him*?
To get them to feel good about you by asking after their health or otherwise demonstrating human concern about them.	*How have you been after your operation*? *You're looking down. What's up*?

Open questions begin with such as: *what*, *why*, *how*, *describe.*

Using open questions can be scary, as they seem to hand the baton of control over to the other person. However, well-placed questions do leave you in control as you steer their interest and engage them where you want them.

When opening conversations, a good balance is around three closed questions to one open question. The closed questions start the conversation and summarize progress, whilst the open question gets the other person thinking and continuing to give you useful information about them.

A neat trick is to get them to ask *you* open questions. This then gives you the floor to talk about what you want. The way to achieve this is to intrigue them with an incomplete story or benefit.

Closed Questions

These are two types of questions you can use that are very different in character and usage: open and closed questions.

Definition

There are two definitions that are used to describe closed questions. A common definition is:

A closed question can be answered with either a single word or a short phrase.

Thus 'How old are you?' and 'Where do you live?' are closed questions. A more limiting definition is:

A closed question can be answered with either 'yes' or 'no'.

Thus 'Are you happy?' and 'Is that a knife I see before me?' are closed questions, whilst 'How are you?' and even 'How old are you?' are not, by this definition, closed. This limited definition is also sometimes called a 'yes or no' question, for obvious reasons.

Using closed questions

Closed questions have the following characteristics:

- They give you *facts*.
- They are *easy* to answer.
- They are *quick* to answer.
- They keep control of the conversation with the *questioner*.

This makes closed questions useful in the following situations:

Usage	Example

As opening questions in a conversation, as it makes it easy for the other person to answer, and doesn't force them to reveal too much about themselves.	*It's great weather, isn't it*? *Where do you live*? *What time is it*?
For testing their understanding (asking yes/no questions). This is also a great way to break into a long ramble.	*So, you want to move into our apartment, with your own bedroom and bathroom -- true*?
For setting up a desired positive or negative frame of mind in them (asking successive questions with obvious answers either yes or no).	*Are you happy with your current supplier*? *Do they give you all that you need*? *Would you like to find a better supplier*?
For achieving closure of a persuasion (seeking yes to the big question).	*If I can deliver this tomorrow, will you sign for it now*?

Note how you can turn any opinion into a closed question that forces a yes or no by adding tag questions, such as "isn't it?", "don't you?" or "can't they?", to any statement.

The first word of a question sets up the dynamic of the closed question, signaling the easy answer ahead. Note how these are words like: *do*, *would*, *are*, *will*, *if*.

Open and Close

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By this definition 'Are you happy?' and 'Is that a knife I see before me?' are closed questions, whilst 'What time is it?' and 'How old are you?' are not. This causes a problem of how to classify the short-answer non-yes-or-no questions, which do not fit well with the definition for open questions. A way of handling this is to define 'yes-no' as a sub-class of the short-answer closed question.

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Chunking Questions

Chunking is a simple technique to use during questioning to vary the level of detail of information you get.

Chunking down

Sometimes the person you are talking with is speaking at a very high level, covering general ideas and themes. Leaders often like to think this way, with grand plans and visions.

Sometimes you deliberately started this way, getting a big picture before you dive into detail.

Chunking down is getting more detail by probing for more information about the high-level information you already have. The goal is to find out more, fill in the empty gaps in your picture, test the reality of the situation, and so on.

The more you ask chunking questions, the more you will find further detail. Keep going and you'll soon end up in the weeds. In fact if you go too deep, you can get lost. A tip: try to stay within three chunking levels for most of the time, digging deeper only on topics of particular interest where you want to bottom out the subject.

Chunk down by asking questions such as:

- *How did you that*?
- *Why did that happen*?
- *What happened about...*?
- *What, specifically,...*
- *Tell me more about...*
- *What is the root cause of all this*?

Chunking up

Sometimes the person you are talking with is already down in the details. Some people (most engineers, for example) are happiest when they have their teeth sunk into the grit of a tangible

problem. Yet it can also help them if they come up for air some time and see the big picture -- and maybe find they were digging in the wrong place...

To chunk up, you are doing the opposite of chunking down - looking for a more generalized understanding. This includes looking for overall purpose, meaning, linkages, etc.

Chunk up by asking questions such as:

- *What does this mean*?
- *Let's look at the bigger picture...*
- *How does that relate to...*?
- *What are we trying to achieve here*?
- *Who is this for*? *What do they really want*?

Up and down

You can use both methods together as a way of building a broad understanding. For example:

1. Start at a high level of chunking to define the initial problem.
2. Chunk down to find possible project goals.
3. Chunk up to review and agree the project.
4. Chunk down to build an understanding of the problem.
5. Chunk up to look for problems in the overall system.
6. Chunk down to find specific actions to address.
7. etc.

Clear Questions

Sometimes you want to use questions that not clear for specific reasons, but most of the time, when you are seeking honest answers, you will want to ask questions that allow the other person to answer exactly how they feel.

Even when your intent is for clear answers, it is easy to ask what you think is a nice and easy question and then find that they are confused and perhaps even answer a completely different question. Here are a few things to remember.

Non-leading questions

Leading questions have their place, but not if you want to get unbiased answers. Think carefully about how the other person may interpret the question.

Non-emotional questions

Questions that display emotion may lead the other person towards seeking to calm you down. This may also lead to them getting empathetically wound up. The stronger the emotion, the greater the effect.

Questions that lead them into emotional states will also have an impact on their responses. If not for this question then possibly for subsequent ones.

One way of avoiding emotion is to talk in the third person, taking yourself and especially them out of the picture. For example, rather than saying:

"Do other drivers make you feel angry?"

You might say instead:

"Have you seen people being annoyed by other drivers?"

Avoid jargon

Jargon is helpful for people who specialize in the same subject as it allows them to talk in 'shorthand'. It is sometimes useful to use it with other people to signal your expertize. Most of the time, however, it just annoys other people who think you are trying to look good and increase your status at their expense.

Avoid complex language

Academics and writers love to play with big words. It is their medium and utilization of complex verbiage creates essential stimulatory excitation for them. It also often falls into a form of jargon.

Sadly or otherwise, most of us have a very limited vocabulary. Of the 25000-plus words in the English language, only about 2000 (or less!) are used in many everyday conversations.

The Columbo Technique

Lieutenant Columbo, as played by Peter Falk in the 1970s television series 'Columbo', uses a questioning technique that has been successfully adopted by more than just policemen.

Columbo uses two steps to his method: (a) Get them talking, and then (b) Slip in the real question.

Get them talking

Columbo starts with casual open questions, just to put the other person at ease and get them freely talking. His shabby dress and ambling gait signals that he is harmless. When he talks, his confused demeanor further indicates a level of apparent incompetence, confirming the first impressions of harmlessness.

He is friendly and a welcome respite from the more threatening other policemen who are often around (making this a subtle use of the good-cop, bad-cop 'Hurt and Rescue' routine). His inconsequential chatter loosens their tongues and before long they are happily engaged in distracting conversation.

Slip in the real question

When the other person is sufficiently relaxed and Columbo has achieved good bonding, he slips in a question about what he really wants to know.

One of the tricks he uses is to phrase the question indirectly. If he wants to know whether a person drives a red car, he picks up something red and talks about a car he used to have that was the same shade of red. The conversation might go something like this:

"This is a nice clock. You know, I used to have a car exactly the same color as this. Chevvy, it was."

"Hey, I've got a red Chevvy!"

"Have you? Well, you know mine was a pretty good one."

"Well mine's a '56. Special convertible!"

"There aren't too many of those around."

"Yeah, I got it from a guy down on 52nd Street."

And now Columbo has found a very useful clue without the other person every realizing that they have given the game away.

One last thing

The other variant that Columbo used, again when the other person's defenses were down, would be to add one last question just as he is leaving.

"Oh, ah, is that your cousin's car outside?"

The person being questioned has already reached closure on the session and is looking forward to the complete closure of being left alone. Columbo's question thus catches them off their guard and they answer him without thinking, just to get him out of the way.

And one last thing: 'One last thing' statements (not questions) can also be used to leave the person in a state of tension as Columbo drops a big gotcha just before he leaves (and without letting the other person achieve closure by responding).

"...oh yes, I forgot -- your cousin said he lent you the car last week."

Double Bind Questions

Description

Double bind questions are questions that, whichever way you answer, the result is the same.

Hence you are 'damned if you do, and damned if you don't'.

A common structure of a double-bind question is of the form:

assumptive of bad thing + question about frequency

Thus you might take a statement about the person doing something wrong, such as stealing, then assume that they are doing this thing and consequently turn the question to how *often* then are doing it.

By framing the question as closed, the other person is thus expected to answer only yes or no and cannot deny the assumption.

Example

Are you lying again?

Have you stopped beating your wife?

When do you want to help us?

Discussion

The double bind as a notion originated in studies of schizophrenia, where sufferers of this debilitating condition become trapped between two mutually exclusive demands (which can be rooted in excessive childhood requirements by parents and teachers).

As a persuasive device, it is somewhat coercive in nature as it seeks to deny the person questioned free choice.

The best response to a double-bind question is to treat it as an open question and respond to the assumption rather than the closed question.

What makes you think I might lie?

I have never beaten my wife and never will. I find assault of others completely repugnant, and assault of women especially so.

Double binds also may occur where a command is given and the person commanded feels that by complying they are giving in to the other person (which damages the ego), but by not complying they risk punishment (which also damages the ego).

Echo Questions

Description

Echo questions repeat what they have said back to them, in the form of a question.

Repeated questions

If they ask a question, you can ask it straight back by repeating what they said and leaving either a verbal prompt to reply or a silence at the end of your question.

Them: *Can we go out*?
You: *Can we go out*? *What do you think*?

Repeated statements

Statements or parts of sentences may be echoed back as a question, showing your interest and seeking more information about this.

Them: *I think we should go out tonight and have dinner at Rossini's*.
You: *Have dinner at Rossinis*?

Discussion

Echo questions are a good way of bouncing back a question to the other person. By reflecting their words to them, you are avoiding adding any of your bias. Their words are familiar to them and should make sense and their answer should let you know what that sense is.

This is particularly useful when a tactical game of some sort is being played, such as when it seems they already have an answer and are checking to see if you agree with them. The method is also helpful when you do not want to answer the question for some reason.

Echo questions are also useful for probing, picking out a part of what they say and seeking more information. You can provide focus in this by putting emphasis on key words about which you seek a response.

Empowering Questions

Sometimes, when people are acting in un-empowered ways that diminish their ability to act, you can help them get their life back with empowering questions.

Challenging limiting belief

Many of us have limiting beliefs which stop us from thinking and acting in ways that could help us achieve our potential. Questions that can help here should highlight the belief and offer challenges to help the person consider limitations and alternative.

Why do you think that?

Do you really believe that?

Who else believes that?

What else could you believe?

What if you believed something different?

What's the worst thing that could happen if you did? *What's the best thing*?

Exceptions to extremism

When people do not want to argue about something they tend to use comments that push everything to extremes. This is in order to

Everybody's got one.

You always do that.

I'm totally depressed.

It is as if they are

Finding the exception

A way to address extreme statements is to find one or more exceptions. This is best done by asking questions:

Is there anybody (other than you) you who hasn't got one?

Do I always do it? Every time? Can you remember me not doing it?

Could you be even more depressed? Might there be someone more depressed than you?

From possibility to action

Sometimes people deal in impossibilities. Perhaps because they are afraid or failure or maybe due to other limiting beliefs or maybe even laziness, they just declare things impossible.

Jeff wouldn't like that at all.

We just don't have the time.

It'll cost far too much.

I'm not good enough for that.

I just don't know.

A simple way of breaking this mindset is to inch forward into possibilities.

What if we could find another person to help?

How can we do it for less money?

What if you just did it anyway?

If you did know, what would you say?

Funnel Questioning

Funnel questioning seeks further information either that goes into more specific detail or becomes more general.

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="5">More information about more topics.

Less information about specific topics</td><td><==
Decreasing detail</td><td rowspan="5">More information about fewer topics.

Less information about more topics.</td></tr>
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<tr><td>Increasing detail ==></td></tr>
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Increasing detail

You can use questions to find out increasing detail about some particular topic of interest. This narrows the funnel, giving you more information about a smaller area.

Increasing detail is similar to deductive reasoning, where thinking goes from general to more specific.

Say 'Tell me more about'

Asking 'tell me more' is a very open and general question that also focuses the other person on a particular area, giving you more information about this. As an open request it allows the other person more leeway in what they say, and gets you more detail. This causes a slower convergence, which may not be a bad thing as it can provide richer, more accurate information.

Person: *I was leaving the building and had to wait until a red truck moved before I could get to my car.*

You: *Tell me more about the red truck.*

Person: *It was a Malters truck, I think, with a long yellow stripe down the side.*

You: *What do you remember about the yellow stripe.*

Use focus words

Using words like 'specifically', 'actually' or 'particularly' gives the person subtle direction to give you more detail in a particular direction. Use these alongside Kipling questions such as 'What', 'How' and 'When'.

You said that the person told you they were leaving. What, specifically, did they say?

When exactly did you go home?

Who in particular seemed interested in the presentation?

Decreasing detail

The reverse of narrowing the funnel is to broaden the funnel, asking questions that give you less specific information and more information about more general topics.

Decreasing detail is similar to inductive reasoning, where thinking goes from specific to more general.

Use broadening questions

Use questions that give you less detail about a small area and more information about related topics. Hence ask 'Who else', 'What else', etc.

What other things are you planning on doing?

Who else will be there?

Use process questions

Process questions ask about how things are done, asking for more detail about the process.

How does that work in practice?

What's the theory behind this?

Use vague questions

You can also use vague questions. When the real purpose of the question is not clear, the other person has more leeway to answer the question in any associated way.

So what do you think? *What else*?

Group Questioning

When you are asking questions of a group, whether it is a studio audience, a focus group a class of students or something else, there are a number of traps into which you can fall.

Who are you asking?

When you ask within a group, you can ask in a number of directions. Be clear about this so people in the group know how to answer. A general question asked to thin air may get no answer as people either think it is rhetorical or are not sure if you asking them.

Ask an individual

When asking an individual, use their name, point to them, say 'the person in the red hat' or otherwise ensure that they know you are asking them in particular.

Give them a moment or two to realize that they are being asked a question. A way of doing this is to first indicate that you are asking them a question, or even ask if you can ask. For example:

'Jeff, can I ask you a question about this?'

Ask a selection

To ask a subset from the group, first qualify them, and also let them know how they should make themselves visible. For example:

'Who here has got a Toyota car? Please put your hands up.'

Asking everyone

Even if you are asking the group as a whole, again give them a prompt to let them know that they should wake up (if they were daydreaming) and start thinking. You can do this by asking for a volunteer:

'Who can tell me what this means?'

Keeping them with you

It is easy in a group to go to sleep or otherwise zone out. Keep them with you by being interesting and ensuring they are engaged at all times.

Scanning

Keep looking around to see whether people are showing interest, confusion, agitation, etc. And then respond accordingly, of course. Ask those who look confused or agitated what the problem is, or ask them something to engage them (but beware of tirades, of course).

Pointing

Point yourself at everybody from time to time. This does not need a finger - all you need is to point your body. Range back and forth looking down lines and diagonals of people (all in the line will think you are looking at them). Look into eyes - not just scanning but pausing on people but not staring, of course.

Rehearsing

Help them think by talking about what they perhaps should be thinking. This may mean musing about meaning, summarizing understanding so far, making tentative conclusions and so on. Then look out to see if they are with you, of course.

Repeating

When you have an answer from someone, it is often good to repeat it back to the group as many will not have heard it clearly. A way of doing this in combination with testing your understanding of the answer is to repeat it back to the person who answered in the form of a question. Thus:

'Thanks, Jim, so you think we should all learn to fly, is that right?'

Engaging

Engage individual in short conversations, but beware of being dragged into something longer. Also beware of falling into a comfort zone of talking only with those who you like. Engage the whole group allowing multiple inputs with such as:

'Who else has an opinion on this?'

Steering

A key element of working with a group is steering them in the direction you want them to go.

Reward and punishment

Asking individuals focuses attention of everyone else on that individual, and how you respond to them will signal to others what to do next. If you criticize them, then few others will volunteer. If you praise or otherwise reward them (and this may be as simple as showing interest and offering thanks), then they and others will be more motivated to respond to further questions.

Attention

The attention you pay to what is said is a signal to everyone about what you really think of them all. If you pick up and praise them on a particular point, then the conversation will turn in that direction.

'That's a great point about long-term cost, Sue. Who else can add something about this?'

Concluding

To steer a group towards the end of a session, summarize the whole session and perhaps allow a few more inputs to let people get out what is on their mind at the moment, whilst also blocking any new topics.

'We have five minutes left. Does anyone have any last comments to make?'

Notice the word 'last', which signals that the conclusion is rapidly approaching. The time comment is also a very clear signal.

Always end, by the way, with thanks. It may also help to tell them what will happen next (if this is relevant to them).

Interrogation Questions

Here are a set of question types that can be used through an interrogation of any kind.

Opening questions

Start off the interrogation with easy closed questions that the other person can answer. Stay off the main topic at least until they are talking freely.

The purpose of these questions is to break the ice whilst creating a degree or rapport.

Are you warm? *Would you like a cigarette*? *Have they treated you well*?

Ensure you establish yourself as the person who asks questions. If they ask questions back and especially if it seems as if they are trying to take control, either ignore them or give short or non-committal answers, whilst retaining a friendly or neutral manner. If you do allow questioning, do so with a clear purpose, for example to deliberately let them think they are not in any trouble, and such that you can provide a shock to them at a designed point.

Free narrative questions

Name a subject, for example a time and place, and then ask the other person to tell you what they know about this. Then stay silent and do not interrupt or probe during the answer. Let them tell you about the situation in their own words.

I hear you were on the platform when the person near you fell onto the rails. Could you please describe what happened?

Show a steady mild interest (enough to keep them talking) and do not become excited when they get into relevant detail.

Their answer will first tell you the degree to which they are initially ready to collaborate. You can also listen for gaps and contradictions to probe at a later time, as well as indicators of preferences, needs and other motivators.

Direct questions

Follow up the free narrative with direct questions about specific items. Keep the questions free from value-laden words (eg. talk about 'having sex' rather than 'rape') that might imply guilt. Ask one simple question at a time to which a clear answer can be given.

When you fought with the other person, did he hit you? [direct question]

When you attacked the other person, did he try to defend himself? [value-laden question]

The answers to these questions will give you specific detail, filling in the holes of their initial story and exposing areas where they may be unwilling to talk. However, having told you the story beforehand, they are now much more willing to support their original narrative.

Cross-questioning

Ask multiple questions at different times about the same thing to see whether their answers support or contradict one another. You can appear unintelligent or confused as necessary to cloak your repetition.

When you went into the back of the shop, where was Jimmy standing?
...
What did Jimmy do as you were going back there?
...
Sorry, I don't quite understand -- what was Jimmy doing all this while?

If answers are contradictory, carefully probe further, asking more diagonal questions that allow them to expose themselves without necessarily realizing what is happening.

Review questions

Review questions are used to summarize and test your understanding of what you have heard so far. State what you understand and ask for agreement or otherwise.

So Jimmy came out after William, is that correct?

Review points can also be used to 'squeeze the lemon' for any more information.

Is there anything else that you can tell me about this?

What else were you expecting me to ask?

Review questions can be used at natural break points, such as in changes of scene. They are also useful at the end, to summarize.

Reviews can also be used in a deceptive way, asking for agreement of things that you know are

wrong. This tests the person's honesty and may also be used to trick them into thinking that you have missed key points. When doing this, watch their body language and signs of duper's delight.

Kipling Questions

Rudyard Kipling wrote a short poem outlining a powerful set of questions:

I keep six honest serving men
(*They taught me all I knew*);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.

Whenever in doubt as to what to ask, just dip into these questions.

What

'What?' often asks for noun responses, seeking things that are or will be. They may also prompt for verbs when they seek actions.

'What' questions include:

What are you doing?
What shall we do next?
What happened?
What is stopping you from succeeding?
What is the most important thing to do now?

Three 'Whats' that may be asked in sequence to solve problems are:

What are you trying to achieve?
What is the real problem?
What is the solution?

Why

Asking 'why' seeks cause-and-effect. If you know the reason why people have done something, then you gain a deeper understanding of them. If you know how the world works, then you may be able to affect how it changes in the future.

Asking 'why' seeks logical connections and shows you to be rational in your thinking. It can also be a good way of creating a pause or distraction in a conversation, as many people make assertive statements but without knowing the real 'why' behind those assertions.

A reversal of 'Why' is to ask 'Why not', which is a wonderful creative challenge for stimulating people to think 'outside the box'.

Why questions include:

Why did you do that?
Why did that happen?
Why is it important for us to try it again?
Why not give it a try?

When

'When' seeks location in time and can imply two different types of time. 'When', first of all, can ask for a specific single time, for example when a person will arrive at a given place or when an action will be completed. 'When' may also seek a duration, a period of time, such as when a person will take a holiday.

When will you be finished?
When will you give me the money?
When are you taking your holiday? (*next Summer*)

How

'How' seeks verbs of process. They are hence good for probing into deeper detail of what has happened or what will happen.

How did you achieve that?
How shall we get there?
How will you know she likes you?

'How' may also be used with other words to probe into time and quantity.

How often will you see me?
How much do you owe him?

This can be quite effective for diverting attention away from the real question. For example in the first question above, the attention is on 'how often' and 'seeing me' is assumed.

Where

'Where' seeks to locate an action or event in three-dimensional space. This can be simple space, such as *on*, *above*, *under*, *below*. It can be regional space, such as *next door* or *in the other building*. It can be geographic space, such as *New York*, *London* or *Paris*.

If something is going to be delivered or done, then asking 'Where' is a very good companion to asking 'When', in order to clarify exactly what delivery will take place.

Where will you put it?
Where will they be delivered?

Who

The question 'Who' brings people into the frame, connecting them with actions and things. The 'Who' of many situations includes 'stakeholders', who are all the people with an interest in the action. Key people to identify are those who will pay for and receive the benefits of the action. Of course, you also may want to know who is going to do the work and whose neck is on the line -- that is who is ultimately responsible.

Who is this work for?
Who will benefit most from what you propose?
Who else would be interested?

Assumptive questions

Kipling questions provide a simple method of using assumptive questions that act as if something is true, then hide it in a question:

How much do you care? (assumption: you care)
How will you persuade her? (assumption: you will seek to persuade her)
Where will you buy it? (assumption: you will buy it)
When will you make the change? (assumption: you will make the change)

Solving problems

A simple framework for solving problems may be defined by combining What, Why and How, as follows:

1. What is the problem?
2. Why is it happening?
3. How can you fix it?
4. – Fix it! –
5. Why did it work or not work?
6. What next?

Leading Questions

One way of influencing a person is to ask them questions that are deliberately designed to make them think in a certain way. Leading questions either include the answer, point the listener in the right direction or include some form or carrot or stick to send them to the 'right' answer.

Note that not only words can lead the question. You can also lead people by your body Language and voice tone effects, such as with subtle emphasis.

Leading questions are often *directional* in that, whilst they do not indicate an answer, they close off undesirable alternatives and guide the person in a desired direction.

Sometimes leading questions are desirable. At other times, they are very undesirable. It is important at all times to recognize them and only use them when there is a deliberate purpose for doing so.

Assumptive questions

Leading questions can use the assumption principle, for example by moving the subject of the sentence:

"How much will prices go up next year?"

This assumes that prices will go up next year - the subject of the question is about how much prices will go up. In fact it is very difficult to avoid assumptions. Even if you said:

"Do you think prices will go up next year?"

...you are still forcing the other person to think first and possibly exclusively about prices going up (If they answer 'no' then this may mean they will be stable, and a thought about them going down may not have been made).

Linked statements

You can also create leading questions by using the association principle around things you said previously and which are still in the mind of the person being questioned (hint: they will stay there longer if you put emotion into them). For example:

"I really hate this government!!*...What are your thoughts about the XX party*?*"*

You can also put something else of significant leadership within the question (note the social coercion in this statement):

"What do you think about John Richards? *Many people are opposed to him*, *by the way."*

You could alternatively add desirable carrots in the statement:

"Would you prefer to live in Alba or in Barta, *where the crime rate is very low."*

Note how the crime rate in Alba is not mentioned, but the link of low crime with Barta will still make it more desirable.

Implication questions

Asking questions that gets the other person to think of consequences or implications of current or past events links the past with the future in an inescapable chain of cause-and-effect.

"If you go to the party tonight, *what will happen in your examination tomorrow*?*"*

"If you vote for that party, *then what do you think will happen to taxes*? *What happened last time they were in power*?*"*

Ask for agreement

A very direct leading question is where they are closed questions that clearly ask for agreement, making it easier for the other person to say 'yes' than 'no'.

"Do you agree that we need to save the whales?*"*

"Is it true that you are happier now?*"*

Tag questions

Tag questions are short questions that are tagged onto the end of statements. They effectively make a command look like a question. They are short phrases and often include a negative element such as 'Isn't it?' or 'Don't you?' or 'Aren't you?'

Thus you might say:

"That's a good thing to do, isn't it?"

Or:

"You'll come to dinner tonight, won't you?"

Tag questions can used to add a confusion element:

"I wonder if you're feeling better now, aren't you?"

Coercive questions

Questions that force specific answers can include implicit or explicit coercion. Thus:

"You are coming tonight, aren't you? If you aren't then there will be trouble."

"How can you say you won't come?"

"You do love me, don't you?"

Positive Questions

You can get what you want from others by deliberately using leading questions that encourage people to agree with you.

Underlying principles

Positive questioning is based on two principles.

Yes is better than no

Disagreement is a generally uncomfortable experience. It may be considered impolite. When you disagree, you are risking argument, and to argue is to risk failure.

In comparison with the risk and discomfort of disagreement, agreement is generally preferable. When you phrase questions, you should generally make a positive response lead to that which you seek.

(Note that there are some people who delight in disagreement -- if you are dealing with such a person, then you may need to use reverse psychology, creating a situation with which, by disagreeing, they do as you wish.)

Speaking creates

When you say something, then in order to understand what you are saying, the other person has to fully contemplate what you say. So if you say 'do not stand up', then they have to think about standing up in order to decide whether or not to comply, whereas if you said 'stay sitting down' then all they need to do is think about is sitting down (which, in this case, also reinforces their current state).

Consequently, in asking positive questions, you should only say that which you want the other person to contemplate and avoid that which you do not want them to contemplate.

Questions that lead

By using the above questions, the other person can be led into action or otherwise.

Creating positive action

To get somebody to do something positive, ask them by naming the action, and phrased such that saying 'yes' leads to agreement and compliance.

Will you do this work?
I was wondering if you would like to go out with me?
Can you help me take this upstairs?
Will you take a lower sum?

Dissuading action

To get somebody to consider not doing something, whilst appearing to be encouraging them to do it, try using a reversal as below:

Do you mind very much doing this work?
I know you might not want to go out with me, but will you?
Are you just going to sit there watching the football?
Will you move from the price that you have fixed?

Preventing action

To get someone not to do something, use positive framing of the negative task.

Would you prefer to do something else?
Who else do you want to go out with?
Do you want to watch the football?
Do you want me to agree to your price?

Probing

When questioning someone, you may want at times to get into deeper detail about some particular issue or problem.

For example the other person may have indicated that they cannot make a decision today. This could be because they have an objection or simply that there is more information for you to discover, such as the process by which they make decisions.

Spot the signals

Before you start probing, you must spot the signals they are sending that there is more here than meets the immediate eye. Things to look for include:

Vagueness

What we say is often severely abbreviated from what we intend or think. We censor our thoughts or assume that things are already known. This can come out in vague words or statements that signal that there is more here.

For example if they say "I don't know" may indicate uncertainty or doubt. What don't they know? How did they get to 'not knowing'?

Judgment

The other person may well have made decisions which imply an evaluation or judgment of some kind. Either they or someone else has made a decision which can be surfaced and explored for weaknesses.

For example, if a person says "that wouldn't work", then you could explore who decided this.

Clarify the detail

Initially, you may have heard some brief comment or two that made you realize that there is more here to discover.

Use searching questions

Use questions that lead them to tell you more about the area of interest. This may use closed questions for ask specific details and open questions to encourage them to ramble

Who? When? What? Where? Why? How? are all probing questions that can help you dig down into further detail. Using these powerful questions is covered in further detail at the 5W1H page.

Repetition

A simple way of eliciting further information is just to repeat the key phrases they used about which you want more information.

Them: *Afterwards, he whispered to me and I wasn't sure what to say.*
You: *He whispered to you*?
Them: *Yes, he said I was very nice.*

Silence

A non-verbal probe can also be used, for example by raising your eyebrows and tilting your head. This shows you are interested in a particular point and they may give you more detail without you having to say anything.

Make it easy

Make it easy for them to answer. Be nice. Be casual.

Slip the questions in without them noticing. For example you can use assumption in questions to suggest that the problem already exists. You should also beware of 'leading the witness'.

The Columbo Technique may also be used to put them at their ease and then elicit the answer you want without them realizing they have been probed.

Probing questions

When seeking more detail, there are a number of probes you can use, depending on what they are saying and what you want to discover.

Clarification

When they use vague or unclear language, or when you just need more detail, seek to further understand them by asking for clarification.

What exactly did you mean by 'XXX'?

What, specifically, will you do next week?

Could you tell me more about YY?

Purpose

Sometimes they say things where the purpose of why they said it is not clear. Ask them to justify their statement or dig for underlying causes.

Why did you say that?

What were you thinking about when you said XX?

Relevance

If they seem to be going off-topic, you can check whether what they are saying is relevant or salient to the main purpose of inquiry.

Is that relevant to the main question?

How is what you are saying related to what I asked?

Completeness and accuracy

You can check that they are giving you a full and accurate account by probing for more detail and

checking against other information you have. Sometimes people make genuine errors (and sometimes deliberate), which you may want to check.

Is that all? *Is there anything you have missed out*?

How do you know that is true?

How does that compare with what you said before?

Repetition

One of the most effective ways of getting more detail is simply by asking the same question again. You can use the same words or you can rephrase the question (perhaps they did not fully understand it first time).

Where did you go?
...
What places did you visit?

You can also repeat what *they* have said ('echo question'), perhaps with emphasis on the area where you want more detail.

He asked you to marry him??

Examples

When they talk about something vaguely, you may ask for specific examples. This is particularly useful in interviews, where you want to test both their truthfulness and the depth behind what they are claiming.

Sorry, I don't understand. Could you help by giving an example?

Could you give me an example of when you did XXX?

Tell me about a time when you ___.

Extension

When they have not given you enough information about something, ask them to tell you more.

Could you tell me more about that, please?

And what happened after that?

Then...

Evaluation

To discover both how judgmental they are and how they evaluate, use question that seek evaluation:

How good would you say it is?

How do you know it is worthless?

What are the pros and cons of this situation?

Emotional

Particularly if they are talking in the third person or otherwise unemotionally and you want to find out how they feel, you can ask something like:

And how did you feel about that?

When you do this, do be careful: you may have just asked a cathartic question that results in them exploding with previously-suppressed emotion.

Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical questions are not really questions, but statements given in question format.

Public speakers often use rhetorical questions in the middle of speeches. Of course, the audience cannot all answer, but the intent is to engage them in thinking and consider what answer they would give if they could.

In figures of speech, rhetorical questions are known as *Erotema*.

Gaining agreement

Rhetorical questions are often intended to make the listener agree with the speaker as the answer is obviously yes. Even if the listener does not say the word, they will think it. And once they start agreeing they are more likely to keep doing so.

Is the Pope a Catholic?
Is the sky blue?
Is this a great product?

Hedging

We use rhetorical questions sometimes when we want to make a statement but are not confident enough to assert a point. The question format thus allows others to disagree, but is not necessarily seeking agreement.

Isn't that wonderful? *Is it a shade of blue*?

Self-talk

Sometimes when you ask questions, you are really asking them of yourself rather than the other person. this is particularly noticeable when you give the answer soon after asking the question.

What is that? *A bird, I'd say. What type*? *Maybe an eagle*? *I think so. What a lovely flight path.*

Multiple questions

When you ask multiple questions at once, you seldom expect them all to be answered, and perhaps none of them.

They become particularly rhetorical when you do not give time for the other person to answer.

Where have you been? *What time do you think this is*? *Do you think you can come home late like this and nobody notice*?

Terminating statement

Another way that stopping the other person from answering is to put a statement of some sort immediately after the question.

There is hence no space for the person to answer the question and they are directed more by the final statement than the question.

Can you see? *Look there*!

Socratic Questions

Socrates was one of the greatest educators who taught by asking questions and thus drawing out answers from his pupils ('ex duco', means to 'lead out', which is the root of 'education'). Sadly, he martyred himself by drinking hemlock rather than compromise his principles. Bold, but not a good survival strategy. But then he lived very frugally and was known for his eccentricity. One of his pupils was Plato, who wrote up much what we know of him.

Here are the six types of questions that Socrates asked his pupils. Probably often to their initial annoyance but more often to their ultimate delight. He was a man of remarkable integrity and his story makes for marvelous reading.

The overall purpose of Socratic questioning, is to challenge accuracy and completeness of thinking in a way that acts to move people towards their ultimate goal.

Conceptual clarification questions

Get them to think more about what exactly they are asking or thinking about. Prove the concepts behind their argument. Use basic 'tell me more' questions that get them to go deeper.

- *Why are you saying that*?
- *What exactly does this mean*?
- *How does this relate to what we have been talking about*?
- *What is the nature of ...*?
- *What do we already know about this*?
- *Can you give me an example*?
- *Are you saying ... or ...* ?
- *Can you rephrase that, please*?

Probing assumptions

Probing their assumptions makes them think about the presuppositions and unquestioned beliefs on which they are founding their argument. This is shaking the bedrock and should get them really going!

- *What else could we assume*?
- *You seem to be assuming ...* ?
- *How did you choose those assumptions*?
- *Please explain why/how ...* ?
- *How can you verify or disprove that assumption*?
- *What would happen if ...* ?
- *Do you agree or disagree with ...* ?

Probing rationale, reasons and evidence

When they give a rationale for their arguments, dig into that reasoning rather than assuming it is a given. People often use un-thought-through or weakly-understood supports for their arguments.

- *Why is that happening*?
- *How do you know this*?
- *Show me ...* ?
- *Can you give me an example of that*?
- *What do you think causes ...* ?
- *What is the nature of this*?
- *Are these reasons good enough*?
- *Would it stand up in court*?
- *How might it be refuted*?
- *How can I be sure of what you are saying*?
- *Why is ... happening*?
- *Why*? (*keep asking it -- you'll never get past a few times*)
- *What evidence is there to support what you are saying*?
- *On what authority are you basing your argument*?

Questioning viewpoints and perspectives

Most arguments are given from a particular position. So attack the position. Show that there are other, equally valid, viewpoints.

- *Another way of looking at this is ..., does this seem reasonable*?
- *What alternative ways of looking at this are there*?
- *Why it is ... necessary*?
- *Who benefits from this*?
- *What is the difference between... and...*?
- *Why is it better than ...*?
- *What are the strengths and weaknesses of...*?
- *How are ... and ... similar*?
- *What would ... say about it*?

- *What if you compared ... and ...* ?
- *How could you look another way at this*?

Probe implications and consequences

The argument that they give may have logical implications that can be forecast. Do these make sense? Are they desirable?

- *Then what would happen*?
- *What are the consequences of that assumption*?
- *How could ... be used to ...* ?
- *What are the implications of ...* ?
- *How does ... affect ...* ?
- *How does ... fit with what we learned before*?
- *Why is ... important*?
- *What is the best ...* ? *Why*?

Questions about the question

And you can also get reflexive about the whole thing, turning the question in on itself. Use their attack against themselves. Bounce the ball back into their court, etc.

- *What was the point of asking that question*?
- *Why do you think I asked this question*?
- *Am I making sense*? *Why not*?
- *What else might I ask*?
- *What does that mean*?

Tag Questions

Tag questions are small questions added to the end of a statement, for example:

That is a dog, isn't it?

Note how the tag question turns the statement into a question.

The structure of tags

Here are a range of tag questions:

..., won't you?
..., can't you?
..., shouldn't you?
..., don't they?
..., isn't it?
..., won't it?

Note the structural elements:

- The first element contains a verb, often 'to be' or 'to do', and is often a repetition of the verb used in the statement.
- The verb is negated, in the abbreviated form.
- The second element is a pronoun.

Using tag questions

Use tag questions to emphasize and encourage the other person to agree. They turn a bold assertion or command into a question that is difficult to disagree with.

Gaining agreement

Make an assertion and add a tag question:

They will finish, won't they?
I am the best person for the job, aren't I?
This is the best way to do it, isn't it?

Gaining compliance

Start with what you want the other person to do, and then end with a tag such as 'won't you' or 'can't you'.

You will come to the dance, won't you?
You can do this today, can't you?