



ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Content

How to Ask Questions.....	1
Questions for Basic Understanding	2
Questions for Deeper Meaning.....	3

How to Ask Questions

Asking questions is probably the quickest and most reliable way to learn. Surveys show that when facing a problem, 80% of people would rather ask someone for help than spend time searching for information. Surprisingly, even people who don't know you are often willing to spend a little time to provide information or pointers to other experts. A "good question" increases your odds for getting an answer; it helps the responder understand what you are looking for. There are two types of questions:

- **OPEN:** This type of question leads to a rich conversation since it can't be answered in a few words. Typical questions start with "What", "When", "Who", "How" or "Why", etc.
- **CLOSED:** This type of question is primarily seeking facts, selections between alternatives or "Yes/No" responses. They inhibit long discussions as the answer can be given in a few words. Typical questions start with "Are", "Can", "Did", etc. Closed questions provide a good way to shorten a conversation.

Rules for Asking Good Questions

1. **Stop Talking!** You can't multi-task speaking and listening. If you're talking, you're not listening. If you're thinking intently about what you want to say, you're not listening to what is being said. See rules for being an active listener below.
2. **Pay attention.** Do not try to express your opinions, do not interrupt or finish sentences for others. Jot down a few words to remind you of follow-up questions.
3. **Allow periods of silence** to stretch a little. This makes most people uncomfortable. They tend to fill the silence by expanding on or explaining in more depth what they just said.
4. **Repeat the responder's words** in a follow-up question to gain clarification. If you hear "the process becomes erratic if the temperature gets too high", follow up with "what do you mean by too high" or "give examples of erratic".
5. **Prepare**, especially if you are expecting a lengthy response (e.g., open question). Research the topic as much as practical so you know the obvious answers. Draft your initial question(s) before the phone call or interview.

Rules for Active Listening

1. Encourage the speaker; provide comments and paraphrase to show you are listening.
2. Plan a response after the other person has finished speaking, not while they are speaking.
3. Ask clarifying, open-ended questions.
4. Summarize what you heard and how you plan to use it. This is a good test for understanding.

Questions for Basic Understanding

Type of Question	Examples
What	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What needs to be done? • What do you do next?
How	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you do that?
When	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When do you do this? • Is there a certain time this should be done? • What usually happens before you do this? • When would you do it differently?
Why	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you do that? • What happens if you don't do it?
Who	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are the suppliers and customers involved in this? • Who provides information you need to do this work? • Who can answer questions or provide advice? • Who else needs to be kept informed? • Who is responsible or accountable for actions and results?
Desired Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the desired outcome or result? • If there are several possible outcomes, how do you select the right one? • What measures or values indicate that the result is correct? • How do you know when it is not correct? • How can you tell when you are done?
Unusual Situations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are examples of unusual situations or outcomes? • What happens if you don't get the expected result? What do you do? • Why did it happen this way?
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What tools or references are helpful when you do this?
Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much time does it take? • How often should it be done?
Cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much does it cost to do this? • How much does it cost if you run into unusual situations? • How can costs be minimized?
Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there fundamental concepts I should know in order to do this well? • Are there experiences I should have in order to do this well?

Questions for Deeper Meaning

Type of Questions	Examples
Clarification	<p>What do you mean by ____?</p> <p>Could you describe that another way?</p> <p>How do you define this term or idea?</p> <p>Can you give me an example?</p>
Context	<p>What are the component parts or steps and what do they do?</p> <p>How do the parts work together?</p> <p>How are the parts or steps organized, and why in this way?</p> <p>What else does this relate to?</p>
Cause and Effect	<p>What factors should be considered in this case?</p> <p>In what order or priority should these factors be evaluated?</p> <p>What are typical values for these factors?</p> <p>What are abnormal values for these factors?</p> <p>What factors most probably caused this to happen?</p> <p>How can we eliminate possible causes?</p> <p>How can we predict outcomes based on these factors?</p> <p>What happens if we change values for these factors?</p>
Comparison	<p>How is this similar to that?</p> <p>How is this different from that?</p>
Reasoning	<p>How do you know that?</p> <p>Why is this issue important?</p> <p>Why do you think that is true?</p> <p>What would change your mind?</p> <p>How do others look at this?</p>
Assumptions	<p>What are you assuming?</p> <p>How did you come to those assumptions?</p> <p>What would happen if we changed this assumption?</p>
Implications	<p>What does that imply?</p> <p>Based on this, what else is true?</p> <p>How does that follow from what you have said?</p> <p>How is this connected to my question?</p>