



# Questions, Questions and More Questions

**A View from Impact Factory**

**Robin Chandler and Jo Ellen Grzyb**

**Impact Factory Copyright ©2023**

## Questions

A friend was once asked as he left a particularly gruesome Maths exam, whether the questions were difficult. 'No', he said, 'the questions were easy, it's the answers that were hard!'

That may be true in Maths but when it comes to communicating, presenting or influencing, asking the right question can often seem like a black art. Choosing the right **type** of question is often a good starting point.

So, what types of question are there?

You know the sort of thing: open, closed, rhetorical, leading, hypothetical, direct, indirect.

### Closed questions

Closed questions are pretty easy to recognise and to answer – after all it's a straight 'yes' or 'no' isn't it? Well, maybe!

'Do you agree with this proposal?'

Is a closed question.

Closed questions are useful when you want to restrict discussion but they don't give you much information. If you want to open up a discussion open questions are far more useful.

Closed questions come into their own when you are trying to pin people down or clarify the situation.

But one of the problems with closed questions is when the 'asker' poses a closed question, hoping for an open answer! Read on.

### Open questions

Open questions are generally those where any kind of answer is possible. They are most likely to begin with why or how. Tell me, describe to me and explain to me are also very useful.

'What do you think of this document?'

Is an open question.

It's more likely to give you more of a response than a closed one. Whether it's the response you want is another question!

With clever framing of an open question you can make it more focused and use it to direct the conversation to specific areas of interest. 'What exactly are your payment terms?'

With a bit of confidence and a willingness to accept whatever sort of answer you get, an open question can bring all sorts of useful information. In which case, it's really important to listen carefully to the answer.

## Rhetorical questions

The classic definition of a rhetorical question is one where the answer is so obvious no-one is expected to give it. So

‘Do I like chocolate?’ – for those that know me this is rhetorical!

Of course, occasionally you may be the best person to answer a question you have posed, maybe to change the dynamic, to meet time constraints or simply because you know best! In which case the question is still rhetorical because you’re expecting to answer it yourself.

It is a bit of an art as you have to use tone and length of pause to show that it is rhetorical. The pause is still important, as you want the audience to consider their view even if you are going to answer it anyway.

Rhetorical questions can also be used as a dramatic buildup to a big or crucial bit of information you're going to present: "Do you know just how many pickled peppers Peter Piper picked? Well, I'll tell you! He picked a peck of pickled peppers."

## Leading questions

You probably know the classic leading question: ‘When did you stop beating your wife?’ Damned if you have, damned if you haven't!

This sort of question can be useful when influencing people to accept our point of view. ‘This is the generally accepted as best practice, isn't it?’

Best used with caution as they can indirectly put pressure on other people.

## Hypothetical

‘So, speaking hypothetically, if it **was** me that broke the photocopier, would I still have a job?’

The hypothetical question can be useful for sounding people out and exploring options without making any commitment.

## Probing questions

When you think people know more than they're saying, to check how much they do know or to clarify something a probing question comes into its own.

‘Could you explain more about the photocopier?’

But use with care because they can easily make people feel they are being interrogated.

## Direct or indirect that is the question

We often find that when we ask a delegate to introduce questions into their presentation they opt for a direct question. So, there you are quietly sleeping in the front row when the presenter suddenly calls you by name and asks you a question.

'John, what do you think of the rising energy costs in the UK?'

Well that definitely got your attention but what does it feel like? And is that how you want your audience to feel?

If it is, great. If not you might want to ask an indirect question; that is one that is not directed at anyone in particular – anyone can answer.

'So how do you view rising energy costs in the UK?'

As you ask let your eye contact roam around the room and, if it suits your style, you could also use your hands to offer it to the room, palms open and offered out.

Then, as is advisable, 'zip the lip' and wait for a response.

That is not to say that you shouldn't use direct questions, they can be useful when you know someone's views already – maybe from an earlier presentation and you want to refer to them.

'John you mentioned energy consumption as an issue so I assume rising costs are a concern for you?'

You can then broaden this out to make it relevant to others.

## 101 uses of a (live) question

Ever noticed how some people manage to direct a discussion without saying much at all? A well-placed question and others do the work for them. So it's often worth spending a moment thinking about the right question to use rather than the first one that comes to mind.

We've already talked about opening up discussions, and questions are an obvious way of doing that. They have other uses too.

Have you ever sat through a meeting or presentation and not known why you are there? If so you are not alone. Imagine the hours wasted around the world because no one asks a question.

People often hold a meeting or make presentations with a view to finding out what others think about an issue but then are reluctant to ask. If you want to know, asking is the quickest route to finding out.

A well-directed question can also give you valuable thinking time. You make the audience do a bit of work while you gather your thoughts or remember where you wanted to go next.

Speaking of which, questions make an excellent segue between different parts of a presentation. You can use them to set up the next slide or to give a change of direction.

That's all very well but where do we go from here? Well, looking at some of the pitfalls might be a good idea.

### Avoiding pitfalls

It may seem obvious but when you ask a question, give time for a response. We often find that time does strange things when we are presenting, whether formally or round a table. Have you ever asked a question and left what seems like an age for the answer, then panicked and jumped in to answer it yourself?

Many a brilliant, well-timed question is ruined as we leap in to clarify, add more detail or answer it. It may help to think of the question leaving your lips, traveling through the ether and landing on the audience's ears. They then have to interpret the question, consider it against their experience of the world, find an answer, formulate it into words and speak! This without even considering the time it might take to overcome any reluctance to speak.

Pauses are powerful things at any time but especially when you have asked a question.

If however you are faced with a long and deafening silence, there are ways to tease answers from people who are too shy or uncomfortable to pipe up.

One thing to try is to phrase it differently and direct it to someone who looks as though they are not only awake, but paying attention and might indeed, have something to say.

Sometimes asking questions can seem like such a good idea that we roll three or four of them up into one.

Have you ever tried this? What was it like? What sort of information did you get and would you do it again?

The trouble is you might only get an answer to the last one – it's the only one they remember.

So, question away but do bear in mind one of our little maxims – that three questions in a row can feel like the Spanish Inquisition.