

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 do 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, , 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:

- Start at a high level of chunking to define the initial problem.
- Chunk down to find possible project goals.
- Chunk up to review and agree the project.
- Chunk down to build an understanding of the problem.
- Chunk up to look for problems in the overall system.
- Chunk down to find specific actions to address.

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 to seek to calm you down. They 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. Thus, rather than say:

"Do other drivers make you feel angry?"

You might say instead:

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

Avoid jargon

Jargon is useful 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 expertise. Most of the time, however, it just annoys other people.

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 or more 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 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 and signals that he is harmless. When he talks, his confused demeanor further indicates a level of apparent incompetence, confirming the first impressions of harmlessness.

Nevertheless, 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. Chevy, it was."

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

"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 even 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 is thinking of Columbo as leaving 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. Thus, 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 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).

Funnel questioning

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

More information about more topics. Less information about specific topics	<== Decreasing detail	More information about fewer topics. Less information about more topics.
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	==	
	/	
	Increasing detail ==>	

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 question it allows the other person more leeway in what they say and gets you more detail. This causes a slower convergence (but this may not be a bad thing).

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 precision 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. Thus ask 'Who else', 'What else', etc.

*What other things are you planning on doing?
Who else will be there?*

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 you can fall into.

Who are you asking?

When you ask within a group, you can ask in a number of directions - and you should be clear 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. Thus

'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 what they perhaps should be thinking. This may mean musing about meaning, summarizing understanding so far, making tentative conclusions. 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 individuals in short conversations, but beware of being dragged into something longer. Also beware of falling into a comfort zone, talking only with those you like. Engage the whole group allowing multiple inputs 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.

Attention

The attention you pay to what is said is a signal to 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 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).

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 seek **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 creative problem 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 thus are 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?

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' 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 who have 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

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.

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.

Assumptive questions

Leading questions can use **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 - a thought about them going down may not have been made).

Linked statements

You can lead questions using the **Association principle** by things you said previously and are still in the mind of the person being questioned (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 within the question.

"What do you think about John Richards? Many people are opposed to him."

Note the social coercion in this statement.

You could also add desirable carrots in the statement:

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

Note that 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 **cause-and-effect**.

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

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?"

Coercive questions

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

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

Open and Closed Questions

An open question is likely to receive a long answer.

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

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

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 questions

Definition

An open question can be defined as:

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.	<i>What did you do on your holidays? How do you keep focused on your work?</i>
To find out more about a person, their wants, needs, problems, and so on.	<i>What's keeping you awake these days? Why is that so important to you?</i>
To get people to realize the extent of their problems (to which, of course, you have the solution).	<i>I wonder what would happen if your customers complained even more? Rob Jones used to go out late. What happened to him?</i>
To get them to feel good about you by asking after their health or otherwise demonstrating human concern about them.	<i>How have you been after your operation? You're looking down. What's up?</i>

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.

Positive questions

You can encourage people to agree with you by deliberately using [leading questions](#)

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 thus 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. Thus 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 sitting down (which, in this case, also reinforces their current state).

In asking positive questions, you should thus 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

*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 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. 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 into further detail. Using these powerful questions is covered in *Kipling Questions*

Repetition

A simple way of eliciting further information is just to repeat the key phrases they used.

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 assume that the problem already exists, although you should also beware of 'leading the witness'.

Probing questions

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

Clarification

When they are vague or have not given enough information, 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 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 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, 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 what 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 evaluative question:

How good would you say it is?
How do you know it is worthless?
What are the pros and cons of this situation?

Emotional

If they are talking in the third person or unemotionally and you want to find out how they feel, 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.

Tag questions

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

That is a dog, isn't it?

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 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?

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 of

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 thus no space for the person to answer the question and are directed more by the final statement than the question.

Can you see? Look there!

Selling with questions

When selling, you do not need to be always giving your sales pitch. With a smart use of questions, you can get your customer to sell to themselves. Here are a few ways you can use questions. Then go to the [questioning techniques](#) page to find further ideas.

Learning questions

First of all, questions give you useful information. Information is power, of course, and can offer you all kinds of ways to sell. Frame questions to find out more about how and where the customer will be using the product. Find out the problems they have which your products will solve.

*Where will you be wearing this?
How often do you clean the floors?*

Bonding questions

Questions can also help to create [bonding](#) between you and your customer. Show an interest in them by asking them questions to demonstrate that you care, personally, about them. We buy things from people we like. So encourage them to like you.

*What did you do at the weekend? ... I saw the game, too! Wasn't it great?
You look sad – what's the matter?*

Teaching questions

Questions can also be used to teach them about the product, eliciting opinions or perhaps asking rhetorical questions that require no real answer. Teaching questions get the person to think and draw conclusions for themselves.

*Do you know how long this filter will last?
Can you imagine taking this home today?*

Closing questions

You can also ask questions to move a customer towards [closing](#). Closing questions encourage the person to decide that they want to buy what you are selling.

*How would this look like at home?
When would you like to place the order?*

Socratic questions

Socrates was one of the greatest educators who taught by asking questions and thus drawing out (as 'ex duco', meaning to 'lead out', which is the root of 'education') answers from his pupils. 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. His pupils, by the way, include Plato and Aristotle. Plato wrote up much what we know of him.

Conceptual clarification questions

Get them to think more about what exactly they are asking or thinking about. Prove the concepts behind their argument. 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 of 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?*

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, by the way, is to challenge accuracy and completeness of thinking in a way that acts to move people towards their ultimate goal. Don't waste time by doing it for your own gratification. Get your kicks vicariously, from the movement you create.

- *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?*
- *What does that mean?*

Responding to questions

Questioning can be a method of control in a conversation, and when many are asked questions, they respond without thinking of the opportunity that gives them to steer the conversation in the direction they want. Here are a few ways

Pause for thought

Rather than try to answer the question straight away, pause for a moment.

Don't be hurried. Hurrying is a technique used to try and stop you thinking. If the other person is talking fast, it may be because they are a visual thinker and it may be because they are trying to hurry you up.

Pausing for thought can help your credibility too. It seems as if you are taking the other person seriously as you carefully consider their question. This is considered to be normal and polite in some countries (e.g. Japan).

Answer with a surprise

Rather than give the answer they expect, change tack with something outside of the normal range of answers.

Be candid

Tell the truth when it might not be expected. Break with custom. When you are asked 'How are you', tell them. If your answer might be disagreed with, be disarmingly honest. Say things that are supposedly damaging to your own credibility.

Shower them with detail

Give them more information than they expected. If you shower them with lots of detail, it will cause cognitive overload (especially if you use technical detail and jargon). Talking a lot also has a filibustering effect, where you prevent them from saying anything else and use up the time available for the conversation.

Answer with a question

Answering a question with a question is a great way of avoiding answering, at least for the moment. It gives you time to think. Done well, it will result in them trying to answer your question and maybe forgetting the question they were asking in the first place (it is at the very least a good test of how interested and determined they are).

Ask for more detail

Dig further into the topic. Ask them to explain more. Be [Socratic](#) in seeking to get them to answer the question, leading them to the answer with your questions.

Question the question

Challenge the question being asked. Ask whether it is the right question to ask. Suggest there are other questions first (a classic is to chunk up with such as, 'Shouldn't we be talking about why we are here first?').

Question the questioner

Challenge the right of the person to ask the question. Question their legitimacy as a person to ask questions ('Who gave you the right to ask that?').

Ask a completely different question

You can also ask a completely different question. This will usually throw the other person off their tracks, particularly if you persist with further questions on the same track.

Ignore the question

A method used by many politicians is simply to ignore the question and say what you have to say anyway. A typical sharp steer is 'That's a very good question, but what I really want to say is...!'

Ignoring people and their questions is a breach of social rules and hence is a power move. If you can get away with ignoring the question or the questioner, you will have acquired power that lets you repeat this action.

Questioning traps

When questioning another person, there are many traps for the unwary questioner that can lead you into deep water. Instead of digging into their knowledge, you end up digging a hole for yourself.

Here are a few of the things you may want to avoid.

Bias

It is very easy when questioning to let your own values, preferences and biases to leak into what you are asking. This can have a number of unhelpful effects, including most of those below. If in doubt and if you can, get someone else to review your questions before you ask them of your target.

What do you think about the problems that disabled people are causing?

Leading questions

Leading questions are those that nudge, push or shove the other person towards a particular answer and away from other answers. They are a very common form of bias. **Closed questions** can be particularly susceptible to this trap.

Do you think that the government is having problems?
Would you say that this product is well-presented?

Note how the answer is embedded into these question (e.g. 'the government is having problems'). Note also how they questions are fairly general and easy to say 'yes' to.

Do you think that the government is the worst that has ever been?
Would you say that this product will make every surface in your home perfectly clean?

Now it is easy to fall the other way, as you are leading them into saying 'no'. By asking an *absolute* question, you give them lots of space in which 'no' is a correct answer. Saying 'yes' commits them to an extreme position - and few people like to be put into a corner.

Interrogation

Interested questioning can easily turn into the Spanish Inquisition, and unless you have got the other person tied to the chair, they can easily get up and leave, at least psychologically. They might also fight back.

Are you ready for this? Why not? What have you been doing all week?

Listen to both yourself and their answers. If you are talking quickly or their answers are getting shorter, back off for a while or otherwise slow down the proceedings.

Negativity

Sometimes, negativity in questions turns the other person off. Even accidental use of negative words can lead them to feel negative and consequently unwilling to answer further questions.

What problems have you had recently?

For example, if the word 'problem' could tip the other person into thinking negatively, you might use words such

as: difficulty, challenge, complaint, obstacle, hassle, etc. or otherwise phrase the question to help the person answer honestly.

What keeps you awake at night?

Digression

There are many places where you can go in conversation that lead off the area of your main interest. It may be of interest to you and it may be of interest to the other person, but other than a little happiness, it can lose you time, information and commitment.

Privacy

Another quagmire where you can sink without trace is if you get into an area which the other person feels is private and where you are not really welcome.

Look for signs of discomfort and decide whether you really need to stay in this difficult territory (if you are a therapist, this may be a *good* thing!).