



## Developing your skills



## Probing

Probing questions take you below the surface to the "heart of the matter." They operate somewhat like the archaeologist's tools - the brushes which clear away the surface dust and the knives which cut through the accumulated grime and debris to reveal the outlines and ridges of some treasure. This type of response, particularly opened-ended questions, is useful when you are interested in gathering more information from the potential student. Probing questions is all about asking the right question at the right time. Asking the right questions is a skill that is sometimes given the least attention to. Most times, asking the right question would help you to understand the perspective of the student you are talking to and clear any misunderstandings. Everyone can ask questions, but the art of asking the right questions at the right time is a skill that needs to be mastered. These notes dissect the process of questioning, explain the types of questions and helps you understand what type of questions to ask.

### PROBING

When questioning someone, you may want at times to get into deeper detail about some particular issue or problem. For example the student may have indicated that they cannot make a decision about what course to choose. This could be simply because there is more information you need to discover, such as their financial or family problems.

#### 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 student 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 that made you realise that there is more here to discover.

- **Use searching questions:** Use questions that lead them to tell you more about it. This may be closed questions to ask for 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.
- **Repetition:** A simple way of eliciting further information is just to repeat the key phrases they used about which you want more information.
- **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.



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### PROBING QUESTIONS

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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 are vague or have not given enough information, seek to further understand them by asking for clarification.  
*What exactly did you mean by 'X'?*  
*Could you tell me more about Y?*
- **Purpose:** Sometimes students 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 X?*
- **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 there anything you have missed out?*  
*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

*Where did you go?*

*What places did you visit?*

- **Examples:** When they talk about something vaguely, you may ask for specific examples.  
*Could you give me an example?*  
*Tell me about 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?*  
*And what happened after that?*
- **Evaluation:** To discover both how judgmental they are and how they evaluate, use an evaluation question.  
*How good would you say it is?*  
*How do you know it is worthless?*
- **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?

### FURTHER INFORMATION

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- [Learn Direct](#)
- [Changing minds](#)
- [Mind Tools](#)
- [Scottish Gov - Effective Questioning Techniques](#)