



Developing your skills



Questioning traps What to avoid?

There are some types of questions which should be avoided, including leading or multiple questions, 'no win' questions and cliché or discriminatory questions. These can make it much more difficult or confusing for the student to answer and for you to get an accurate picture of the student's real situation. They rarely produce valuable facts efficiently since they do not often relate to the specific criteria you are trying to assess. These notes show a list of questions that you should try to avoid.

QUESTIONING TRAPS – WHAT TO AVOID?

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.

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

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 the other person, but it can lose you time, information and commitment.

Privacy

Another situation 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.

Leading questions

Leading questions are those that nudge, push or shove the other person towards a particular answer. Leading questions are often directional in that, whilst they do not




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indicate an answer, they close off undesirable alternatives and guide the person in a desired direction. They are a very common form of bias.

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 questions (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 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. Leading questions to avoid include:

- **Assumptive questions:** These questions use the assumption principle

"How much will prices go up?"

This assumes that prices will go up - 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?"*, you were 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 by using things you said previously

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

You could also add "desirable carrots" in the statement:

"Would you prefer to live in Alba or in Barta, with a low crime rate?"

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 link current or past events with its consequences or implications in the future in an inescapable chain of cause-and-effect

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

- **Coercive questions:** Questions that force specific answers can include implicit or explicit coercion

"You are coming tonight, aren't you?"
"How can you say you won't come?"
"You do love me, don't you?"

FURTHER INFORMATION

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