



Developing your skills



Questioning techniques

Sometimes you may want to use questions that are not clear for specific reasons, but most of the time, when you are seeking accurate answers; you will want to ask questions that allow students to answer exactly how they feel. However, 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. The following notes aim to help you understand different interview and questioning techniques and how you can use them to engage with potential students, in order to establish a good relationship with them.

QUESTIONING TECHNIQUES

Here are a set of question types that can be used when engaging with students.

Opening questions

Start off the interrogation with easy closed questions that the potential student can answer easily. The purpose of these questions is to break the ice whilst creating a degree of rapport.

Free narrative questions

Pick a subject of conversation and then ask the student to tell you what they're thinking about it. This could be aspirations for the future, past qualifications, etc. Then stay silent and do not interrupt during the answer, let them tell you about the situation in their own words. Their answer will first tell you the degree to which the person is initially ready to collaborate. You can also listen for gaps and contradictions to probe at a later time, as well as indicators of preferences, needs and other motivations.

*Could you please describe what happened?
How do you feel about ...?*

Direct questions

Follow up the free narrative with direct questions about specific items. Ask one simple question at a time to which a clear answer can be given. The answers to these questions will give you specific detail, filling in the holes of their initial story. However, having told you the story beforehand, they are now much more willing to support their original narrative.

Cross-questioning

Sometimes you may need to ask multiple questions at different times about the same thing to see whether their answers support or contradict one another. If answers seem contradictory, carefully probe further, asking more diagonal questions that allow you to get the full story.

Review questions

Review questions are used to summarise what you have heard so far. You can state what you understand and ask for agreement or otherwise, review points can also be used to squeeze for any more information or can be used at natural break points, such as in changes of scene. They are also useful at the end, to summarise.

Positive questions

You can get what you want from others by deliberately using questions that encourage people to agree with you. Disagreement is a generally uncomfortable experience. In comparison with the discomfort of disagreement, agreement is generally preferable. When you phrase questions, you should thus generally make positive statements. For example, 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



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is sitting down. In asking positive questions, you should thus only say what you want the other person to think about and avoid what you do not want them to contemplate.

Clear questions

Always ask clear questions, avoiding leading and emotional questions or the excessive use of jargon, which may not be familiar to the potential student.

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 be misinterpreted, or lead to students getting angry or annoyed. 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 or complex language: Potential students may not be familiar with such terminology.

WHAT TO ASK?

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 about your future?
What is stopping you from succeeding?*

What is the most important thing to do now?

Why

Asking 'why' seeks cause-and-effect and logical connections. It can also be a good way of creating a pause or distraction in a conversation, as students may make assertive statements but without knowing the real 'why' behind those assertions. A reversal of 'Why' is to ask 'Why not', which is a wonderful creative problem for stimulating students to think 'outside the box'. Why questions include:

*Why did you do that?
Why is it important for you?
Why not give it a try?*

When

'When' seeks location in time and can imply two different types of time. 'When' can ask for a specific single time or a duration, a period of time.

*When will you be finished?
When will you be able to start the course?*

How

'How' seeks a process, and are good questions for probing into deeper detail of what has happened or what will happen.

*How did you achieve that?
How shall we get there?*

'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*.

*Where will you put it?
Where will they be delivered?*



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Who

The question 'Who' brings people into the frame, connecting them with actions and things.

- Who is this work for?*
- Who else would be interested?*

OPEN AND CLOSED QUESTIONS

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

1. Closed questions
2. Open questions

1. Closed questions

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?' is a closed question, 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.

Closed questions have the following characteristics:

- They give you facts.
- They are easy and quick to answer.
- They keep control of the conversation with the questioner.

2. Open questions

An open question can be defined as:

An open question is likely to receive a long answer.

Although any question can receive a long answer, open questions deliberately seek longer answers, and are the opposite of closed 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 these questions useful in the following situations:

Usage	Example
CLOSED QUESTIONS	
As opening questions in a conversation, as it makes it easy for the student to answer	- <i>It's great weather, isn't it?</i> - <i>Where do you live?</i>
For testing their understanding	- <i>So, you want to move into our apartment?</i>
For setting up a desired frame of mind, asking successive questions with obvious answers either yes or no	- <i>Are you happy with your current supplier?</i> - <i>Do they give you all that you need?</i> - <i>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>
OPEN QUESTIONS	
As a follow-on from closed questions, to develop a conversation	- <i>What did you do on your holidays?</i> - <i>How do you keep focused on your work?</i>
To find out more about a student, their wants, needs, problems, and so on.	- <i>What's keeping you awake these days?</i> - <i>Why is that so important to you?</i>
To get students to feel good about themselves	- <i>How have you been after your operation?</i> - <i>You're looking down. What's up?</i>



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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 summarise 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.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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