

# Types of Questions

## Question

### **Oxford Dictionary Definition**

noun

a sentence worded or expressed so as to elicit information:

*we hope this leaflet has been helpful in answering your questions*

verb

[with object]

ask questions of (someone), especially in an official context:

*four men were being questioned about the killings*

### **Reality**

Questions are used for many more reasons than to elicit information. They are used rhetorically, to inspire, to create, to direct, to change minds, to provoke discussion, to poke fun and many more.

“Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers.”  
- Voltaire

## Open and Closed Questions

There is a myriad of question types, but they are often categorized into two basic types: open and closed.

For some, a closed question is limited to a simple yes/no answer whereas in other opinions it can also include:

- Multiple choice  
'Did you travel by train, coach or car?'
- Identification of specific information  
'What is your name?'

In either case, closed questions require a short, focused answer. Generally, the questioner has more control with these questions. They can feel like an interrogation if too many are used, or they can be used to draw people into a conversation by offering some easy-to-answer questions.

Open questions are more diverse and allow for much longer responses. They can be used to encourage the one being questioned to do most of the talking or leave them floundering if the question is difficult to understand or has no answer. Open questions can be varying degrees of open so it's better to view them on a scale of possibilities that suit different situations

Closed

Open

Yes/No

Unanswerable

## Essential Questions (Unanswerable Questions)

Essential questions are questions that are central to our lives. They are at the heart of a search for truth and are broad in scope and timeless. They are the most open kind and since they really do ask the big question, they are often unanswerable in a strict sense so can be used to derive a plan or strategy. Teachers may use them to ensure sound reasoning from a student since there is no right or wrong answer. Often, for full participation, **trust** has to be established.

- 'What kind of company/department/team do we want to be?'
- 'How can we make the best decisions together?'

## Hypothetical Questions

These are also question designed to explore possibilities and test relationships. They can be helpful to take people out of the moment of present difficulties to imagine where they would like to be for goal setting.

- 'Imagine yourself a year from now...'
- 'Imagine the release is complete...'

## Leading Questions

A leading question, usually subtly, points the respondent's answer in a certain direction.

- 'How are you getting on with the new finance system?'  
This question prompts the person to question how they are managing with a new system at work. In a very subtle way it raises the prospect that maybe they are not finding the new system so good.
- 'Tell me how you're getting on with the new finance system'  
This is a less leading question, it does not require any judgment to be made and therefore does not imply that there may be something wrong with the new system.

## Telling Questions

Telling questions are designed to gather facts and information that "cast light upon" the main question at hand.

- ‘Describe the best project you were ever involved with.’

## Clarifying Questions

The distinction between clarifying and probing questions is a fine one. Generally clarifying questions should be aimed at ensuring facts or agreements rather than introducing new material. Clarifying questions can be used to make sure our understanding is correct and/or that we have common understanding amongst a group.

- ‘How much time did we spend on...?’
- ‘So are we agreed on...?’

## Probing Questions

Probing questions help us get under the surface toward the more critical issues. It’s important to ask them neutrally so you don’t imply judgment in the question and get a defensive answer.

- ‘Can you explain what you meant by...?’  
This is a little bit softer than “What did you mean by...?”
- ‘Could you tell us a little bit more about...’

## Sorting and Sifting Questions

These questions help us sort through lots of data and information to cull down to the relevant pieces.

- ‘Which information is relevant to this topic?’

## Provocative Questions

These are meant to push and challenge. While they can be used to subdue someone over-taking a meeting, they can also discourage others from talking.

- ‘What point are you trying to make?’

## Irrelevant Questions

Take us off topic and threaten to divert us from the given subject. They can be used as a diversion for a topic we don’t want to talk about. They can take us into new pastures when we are stuck in a rut.

## Divergent questions

Use existing knowledge as a starting point for a new avenue of inquiry.

## Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical questions are often humorous and don't require an answer. Speakers may use them to get the audience to think – questions promote thought. Politicians, lecturers, priests and others may use rhetorical questions when addressing large audiences to help keep attention.

- 'If you set out to fail and then succeed have you failed or succeeded?'
- 'Why isn't phonetic spelled the way it sounds?'

## Funneling

We can use clever questioning to essentially funnel the respondent's answers – that is, ask a series of questions that become more (or less) restrictive at each step, starting with open questions and ending with closed questions or vice-versa.

For example:

- 'Tell me about your current project.'
- 'What do you think are its major goals?'
- 'Tell me more about progress to the major goal?'
- 'Do you and the team think we can make it?'

The questions in this example become more restrictive, starting with open questions that allow for very broad answers, at each step the questions become more focused and the answers become more restrictive.

Funneling can work the other way around, starting with closed questions and working up to more open questions.

For example:

- "How many people were in yesterday's meeting."
- 'What departments were represented?'
- 'Did most of them join in the discussion?'
- 'Do you feel there is a good understanding of the project and status?'
- 'Do you expect any hurdles with the rollout?'

For a counselor or interrogator these funneling techniques can be a very useful tactic to find out the maximum amount of information, by beginning with open questions and then working towards more closed questions. In contrast, when meeting somebody new it is common to start by asking more closed questions and progressing to open questions as both parties relax.