

That's a good question!

How writers can learn to be better questioners

by Dr. Elizabeth Frick

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Agenda

- Why care?
- Who needs discovery skills?
- What types of questions are available to you?
 - Especially for writers
- What to avoid in asking questions?
- How to answer questions most productively?

Questions inventors ask

- “[Blake] Ross began this project by asking himself one simple question:
 - What’s bad about today’s software?”

IEEE Spectrum,
November 2006, p. 28.



Questions entrepreneurs ask

What can I do with holes?



From *The Boulder County Business Report*,
October 27-November 9, 2006, p. 2C

[Why should you care?]

Please share examples of the best question you ever asked in your career.

What question wasn't asked?

SEPTEMBER 30, 1999

Likely Cause Of Orbiter Loss Found

The peer review preliminary findings indicate that one team used English units (e.g., inches, feet and pounds) while the other used metric units for a key spacecraft operation. [Full Story](#)

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What question wasn't asked?

- “Airbus A380 ...two years behind schedule.... [because] Airbus factories in Germany and France were using incompatible design software.”
- Cost = billions of lost profits

Business Week, October 23, 2006, p. 46.



[Why should you care?]

Please share examples of your expensive, unasked questions.

Quotes about questions

Discovery consists in seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought.

Albert von Szent-Gyorgyi

The most important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing.
Albert Einstein

We thought that we had the answers.

It was the questions we had wrong.

U2

Computers are dumb. They only give you answers.

Albert Einstein

Why should you care?

- You'll save time by preparing questions.
- You'll get the information you need.
- You'll get the right answer to the right question.
- You'll save money.
- You'll avoid unasked, expensive questions.

Who needs discovery skills?

WRITERS!

Media
Clients
Judges
Lawyers
Consumers
Investors
Parents
Salespeople
Children
HR/Hiring teams
Physicians
Engineers
Focus group researchers
Therapists
Patients
Voters
Politicians
Scientists
Pollsters
Programmers
Project managers
Learners
Survey creators
Trainers

Classical questions

Questions have been important throughout history:

- Cicero's *De Inventione* asks:
 - Quis (who)
 - Quid (what)
 - Quomodo (how)
 - Ubi (where)
 - Quando (when)
 - Cur (why)

Marcus Tullius Cicero, 106-43 B.C.



Types of questions

- Permission
- Open-ended
- Closed
- Catchall
- Checking
- Probing
- Encouragers
- Restatement/paraphrase
- Reflecting

Permission questions

Demonstrate your positive intent in asking questions

- Show respect and help you build trust

- Let me ask you this:

- Could you tell me how you will use this _____?

- Can I get some more information about your past experience with such and such a _____?

Open-ended questions

- Stimulate thought
- Encourage continued conversation
- Cannot be answered in few words or with simple yes-no answer
 - What are some of the unique characteristics of the _____?
 - Why would you pick one _____ over any other?
 - Describe the texture of the _____ you want built.

Open-ended questions

- “What...?” will get factual responses
- “How...?” will explain processes or sequences
- “Why...?” will elicit reasons
- “Explain....”
- “Describe....”
- “Amplify....”



Closed questions

- Elicit “yes” or “no” answer
- Elicit verifiable data
- Preclude continued conversation
 - What diameter do you need?
 - Is the _____ hollow?
 - What is the piece price of XXX?
 - Does it bounce?

Catchall questions

- Invite additional information
- Elicit repetition (verification)
- Elicit another viewpoint
 - Would you like to tell me anything else that I might have missed?
 - What haven't we discussed that might be relevant?
 - What else is important for me to know?

Checking questions

- Help you summarize or synthesize
- Help clarify conflicting information
- Useful if answers have diverged from expectations
 - Please explain that a little further...
 - Help me understand your intention...
 - Tell me more about...

Probing questions

- Help you explore more in a certain direction
- Encourage more detail
 - Why is that?
 - How would that look?
 - What if....?
 - Tell me more about...
 - What about...?
- Silence is a good probe.

Encouraging questions

- Encourage speaker to keep going
 - Un huh...
 - I see...
 - Oh, really...?
- Silence is a good encourager.

Restatement questions

Restatement/paraphrase

- “Listening” type questions
- Keep communication open while you clarify perceptions
- Graceful way to check up
 - Let me play this back to you...
 - Here’s what I have heard so far. Let me state it in my own words to make sure I “get” it...

Reflecting questions

- Repeat key words to bring rambling speaker back to the point
 - “You’ve talked a lot about **X** and its relationship to **Y**. If we don’t ever build **Y**, what might we have to change in **X**?”

Good questioning strategy:

Relate to interviewee

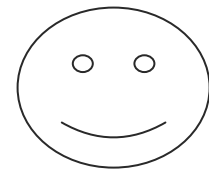
- "I care about your issues."
- "I am honest."
- "I do not have an axe to grind."
- "I want to understand your truth."
- "I meet my commitments."

[To assume = ?]

- We often create our own reality
- We make things up
- Example
 - Clue: House

[“I know something you don't know...”]

Exercise: You will ask questions until the person you are questioning reveals to you something about them that you could never have known unless you asked them brilliant questions.



[Good questioning strategy]

- Lean toward audience.
- Focus on them when not writing.
- Take notes.
- Tape record if possible.

Good listening strategy

- Study non-verbals.
 - Adjust your body language.
- Nod head if appropriate.
- Look them in the eye if appropriate.

After the interview

- Leave a door open for the SME to contact you if he/she thinks of anything else.
- Ask for the right to do that yourself (get in touch afterwards with further questions)

What should you avoid?

Grilling

Aim for dialogue, not interrogation

Leading questions

Don't use questions to state your opinion

Two questions in one (double-barreled)

Separate out

Cultural insensitivity

Not every culture likes being questioned

Inadequate wait time

Count 10 seconds

What should you avoid?

Impulse to editorialize Don't say, "You seemed incensed at that situation..."

Statement masquerading as a question

(Directed at the President): "You have been accused of letting the 9/11 threat mature too far, but not letting the Iraq threat mature far enough. Could you respond to that general criticism?"

Exercise

1. List, for five minutes, questions you have.
 - Specific questions about one topic or
 - Just a list of questions as you think of them
2. Then, share with your neighbor and ask them to add questions.

Learn to question

- Observe, observe, observe!
- Listen, listen, listen!
- Practice, practice, practice!
- Hang out with a 2-year old
- Write down questions all day
- [Play 20 Questions online](#)

Learn not to question

- Sometimes, you should make statements rather than questions
 - "Axel, can I have a kiss?"
 - "I need you to _____"

[The truth about questions...]

The size of your question determines the size of your answer.

Mark Victor Hansen



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- September 26: (noon) ACEC-Colorado (American Council of Engineering Companies)
- September 26: (evening) BWA (Boulder Writers Alliance)
- October 18: WhiteWave, Broomfield
- November 10 PACT (Professional Association of Computer Training, Minneapolis)
- November 14 IAAP (International Association of Administrative Professionals)
- November 28 BWA

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