

Asking questions in meetings and seminars

Meetings

Benefits of asking a question in a meeting

- Clarify stuff... both for you and for confirmation we are all on same page.
- To learn things.
- Prompt conversation.
- Transfer ideas to other person(s).
- To address a topic or aspect that hasn't yet been discussed.
- Demonstrate engagement and understanding.
- Build trust. Expose limits of your knowledge and imply that you value their opinion.

Types of questions

- Mirror question. Repeat same question that was asked to you.
- Closed vs open questions.
- Technical question: getting more detail.
- Perspective: what are implications of what is being discussed, how does it link to other thing X.
- Expansion question: elaborate on something.
- Zoom out question: think about big picture of problem etc
- What is the motivation/rationale for caring about this thing
- Trying to test other person's skills or knowledge (e.g. in interview)

How to ask good questions

- Be concise. Don't ramble.
- Ask only one question at a time. If you ask multiple questions, some of them will get lost or de-emphasised.
- Tone is important. Quality answers more likely if you ask politely rather than evoking a defensive reaction.
- Tone of question may also convey form of response you want: formal vs informal, etc.
- Pace of speaking. Slower is usually better.
- Look someone in the eye when asking. Shows engagement and respect, similar to tone.
- Depending on purpose of meeting (e.g. interview), maybe harsh/grilling tone is useful in order to provoke a reaction from person.

Seminars

Why might you not ask a question in a seminar?

- Fear of being judged by audience or speaker. Maybe question is obvious or not interesting.
- Feeling like you don't understand the content well enough to ask a question.
- Maybe I zoned out and the speaker did say it but I missed it.
- I am not interested enough to bother asking a question.
- Given limited time, maybe my question is not as important as someone else's.
- The speaker responds in an annoying way that puts you off asking a question.

Benefits of asking a question in a seminar

- Way of introducing yourself to speaker and demonstrating your interest.
- Encourages the speaker to explain stuff in more simple terms.
- Give the speaker a new perspective.
- If you are the first to ask a question, this can prompt others by leading the way (especially if you are junior, not a man, not white, etc).
- To address something the speaker missed out on (could either be something they understand or not).
- To impress others in the audience.
- Demonstrate engagement, understanding and appreciation to the speaker (nothing worse than silence at the end of a talk).
- Use as a tool to get their agenda across. Fight back against something the speaker said, in order to convince the audience.
- Get to practise asking questions!

Tips for constructing seminar questions

- Give context to your question, anchor it in something speaker said: “You said X, but what about Y?”
- Start with “If I understood what you said correctly...”. Shows respect, offers some flexibility to speaker when answering.
- Be confident, clear and loud. If audience doesn’t hear, speaker may not repeat. Fake it if you have to!
- Word the question in your head before speaking. In addition to improving question quality, can help with anxiety, making it easier for you to ask the question.
- Small questions are ok if relevant for a central issue.
- Prioritise questions that will benefit others in the audience.
- Don’t be afraid to ask! Usually a way to frame question to mitigate your fears. For example, start with: “Sorry if this a naive question, but...”