

Basics

We learn about life through asking questions. In current times, when vast amounts of information is easily accessible, we can develop ourselves by being curious and asking the right questions. Many people are afraid to ask questions, but the more you question, the better you get at it, and the better answers you get.

The academic context

Asking questions means being in control of your learning, instead of being passive and simply receiving whatever information is given to you. Being on the other side is also highly beneficial: by answering questions about your knowledge, you are forced to re-evaluate it and challenge your beliefs.

Key features

Asking questions

- It's important to know the best time to ask questions: in lectures, for example, is it OK to interrupt the speaker? Is it better to ask at the end? If you don't know, ask!
- In more informal contexts, like conversations, tutorials and seminars, it's often OK to interrupt the speaker. You can either say something (see phrases below), or just lean forward and open your mouth slightly.
Can I ask something quickly?
Sorry to butt in, but ...
Excuse me, I was wondering ...?
- If you ask a question at the end of a presentation or lecture, refer to a specific section/part, or a specific idea that was mentioned, so that the speaker knows what you're asking about.
You mentioned ... What does that mean, exactly?
- You can ask direct questions (*What do you mean by ...?*) or indirect ones (*I'd like to know what you mean by ...*).

Managing questions

- Many speakers fear the Q&A (question and answer) session at the end of a presentation because they can't rehearse it. You can, however, prepare for it. Think about what the audience can ask you, and think of suitable answers.
- Make it clear at the beginning if you would prefer to take questions at the end, or if the audience can interrupt you during the lecture.
- Listen to the question carefully, and ask for clarification if needed.
So you want me to explain ...?
Do you mean in relation to A or B?
- Make sure the rest of the audience heard and understood the question. Otherwise your presentation becomes a one-to-one discussion.
- If someone asks you a question that is particularly interesting, congratulate them.
That's a great question. I'm glad you asked.
- Quite often you will have to deal with difficult questions you would like to think a bit about. Here are some strategies you can use:
 - Buy some time.
That's a very interesting question. Give me a minute to think about it.
 - Throw back the question, or see if others want to answer.
I'm not sure, actually. Do you have an opinion?
Does anybody else have any ideas on that?

Challenges / difficulties

Many people are afraid of asking a stupid question, but there is no such thing: if you don't know something and would like to, it's a perfectly valid question.

If you are asked something you don't know, don't be afraid to admit it. No one knows everything! You can say something like *I don't know the answer to that, but I'll find out and get back to you.* (Make sure you *do* get back to the person, though!)

How can I develop this skill?

As with most speaking skills, the quickest way to develop is to practise in real life. If you don't know something and you want to, ask about it.

To practise answering questions, try giving a presentation to one or two other students, as in Exercise 6 on the Worksheet. Think in advance about what they could ask and what you could say in response. Remember: if there's a question you can't answer, that's OK. Being able to say clearly that you *don't* know something is essential in the academic world – and in life generally!

Learning outcome

Being able to ask questions will enable you to fill the gaps in your learning. Managing questions appropriately will convey an image of a confident and competent person to your colleagues and teachers.

Theory to practice

Read the transcript from a presentation about the city of Shenzhen, and prepare three questions you can ask Daiyu.

You can ask about:

- anything she said you need clarification or more details about
- anything related to the topic she didn't mention

Transcript

My name is Daiyu. I was born in 1972, and I am from the city of Shenzhen in Southern China. My city has changed so much in my lifetime it's incredible. When I was a child it was just a fishing village, but Shenzhen has become a very important world city. In 1980, the Chinese government made it a 'special economic zone' and it began to change very quickly. The population has grown so much! In 1979, it was about 314,000. Now it is more than ten million. In just five years, from 1990 to 1995, the population grew from 1,214,000 to 4,491,000.

Most of the people in Shenzhen have moved from other parts of China, and millions of them leave the city at the weekend and go back to see their families.

But, of course, it's not just the population that has grown. Thirty years ago there weren't any tall buildings in Shenzhen, but today there are 23 buildings over 200 metres high. My favourite is the Shun Hing Square. Workers finished building it in 1996, and at that time it was the tallest building in Asia.

It's difficult to say if all these changes have been positive or negative. A lot of things have improved, of course. We have better roads and an international airport, and we even have a metro system. It opened in 2004. And all the development has created a lot of jobs. But not everything has been good. Pollution has got worse and, of course, the city is more crowded now.

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____

Ways to get more practice

The best way to improve your questioning techniques is being curious. In your lessons and in everyday situations such as watching the news, think about what the speaker is saying, and ask yourself: did I understand everything they said? What are they not saying that might be relevant to this issue? Then write down some questions. If you are in a class, you can ask the teacher. If not, try researching on the internet.