

## Asking Questions



Image is free for use by Pixabay at Creative Commons by Robin Higgins.

Questions are perhaps the most commonly used, yet least appreciated, teaching tool. They are important in any teaching situation, but they can be particularly useful in small groups for stimulating discussion, promoting enquiry and assessing the knowledge base of students. It is so easy to ask questions that we often don't recognise that we are doing it, yet it is important to get right for it to be effective. It's important to be mindful of what you actually want to do with a question: what is its **purpose**? Do you want to test a students' knowledge or to extend their thinking? Could students feel that your question is a '**trick question**' or might it lead the discussion to an awkward dead-end? There are many ways of classifying questions: one way is to think of them as '**convergent**' (**closed**) or '**divergent**' (**open**). Closed questions are of value as they can facilitate recall, they are usually easy to understand and they often have straightforward responses. A down side is that having a binary answer, or a limited range of responses, can make them feel 'high risk' for novice learners to respond to. In small group teaching, effective open questions can be a great way to promote interaction. It also encourages active, deep learning, as students need to reflect and formulate their responses.

It can be difficult to ask really good, open questions spontaneously, so you could prepare some questions in advance of your teaching session. When preparing your questions, it is worth bearing in mind that there will always be different knowledge levels across any learner group, so try to prepare a **range of questions**, so you have something for everyone. Make sure none of your questions are actually "trick questions", as these are unlikely to elicit any responses. Not all questions beginning with the word, '*What*' are necessarily closed, and not all questions beginning with, '*How*' or '*Why*' are open, so when you have formulated a question, ask yourself what you think its function really is.

**PTO**

**Top tips**

1. Try to avoid closed questions, or questions which have a right or wrong answer.
2. Try to encourage discussion with open questions.
3. Be wary of asking questions which students will think you know the answer to.
4. Allow for thinking time: students will want to formulate potential responses, rule out 'wrong' responses and do a 'self-check' before they speak out.
5. Permit conferring: eg 'buzz groups' can help. See the 'Facilitator Skills' handout.

Perhaps replace this question ...	... with this one.
"When you place a 2222 call, who thinks Anaesthetics are informed?"	"What personnel are contacted in the event of a 2222 call?"
"What is the treatment for ...?"	"Tell me what you think we should do next"
"So this is a case of what?"	"What do you think all these things might mean?"
"Have you been on your (insert specialty) attachment yet – did you enjoy it?"	"Have you been on your (insert specialty) attachment yet – what was it like?"

Look at the following questions. First, decide if they are; open or closed, judgemental or non-judgemental, leading or reflective. Now, have a go at making them feel 'safer' to answer:

1. "What's the diagnoses?"
2. "Who can tell me what thrombocytopenia is?"
3. "What's wrong with this X-ray/blood result/other"
4. "You say you didn't manage the patient's aggression very well. What does the rest of the group/team think?"