

# Asking questions in class

Questioning is one of the most common activities in both large group and small group learning. Questions may be used for a variety of purposes.

There are at least six common types of questions one may encounter in learning situations.

## 1. Rhetorical questions

The speaker uses question word order and usually with rising intonation, to focus the listener's attention on the information to be presented. No answer is expected.

*Example:*

*“Is that all that we need to know?” (The lecturer continues after a brief pause.) “Of course not. We also need to find out.....”*

## 2. Clarifying questions

Often these are used to make sure that one understands what the other has said.

*Example:*

*“Do you mean that this is the same kind of problem that we had at the last tutorial?” (A puzzled student asked.)*

*“I’m not very clear about your question. Is it something related to.....?”*

## 3. Confirming questions

When one speaker thinks s/he understands what another one has said but is not certain, a confirming question may be used.

*Example:*

*“So, if I miss the test, there won’t be any makeup exam and I will just fail, huh?” (An upset student asked)*

*“So you are asking\_\_\_\_\_.” (The lecturer rewords what s/he thinks the question is.)*

## 4. Information-seeking questions

This type of question is used to elicit information from others. It can further be divided into the following:

### (a) Recall questions

Used to determine what information has been remembered. Usually one correct answer is expected.

*Example:*

*“What is the formula for water?”*

### (b) Descriptive or comparative questions

Faced with this type of question, the respondent has to organize the data s/he has gathered, compare and contrast aspects of it.

*Example:*

*“How does poetry writing in early Tang dynasty differ from that of the Sung dynasty?”*

## 5. Questions to stimulate thinking

These questions are used to promote different kinds of thinking. They are particularly useful to lecturers or TAs to achieve specific teaching goals.

Several types of questions are involved.

### (a) Explanatory questions

This kind of question urges for searching of reasons behind actions, events or outcomes and analysis of the reasons so that an explanation can be given.

*Example:*

*“Why is it important to check... first before we proceed to... in this experiment?”*

### (b) Synthesising or summarising questions

Respondent has to recall some unrelated ideas, knowledge or features, formulate and/or identify their relationships and come up with a conclusion.

*Example:*

*“Under what circumstances might a particular invention prove commercially viable?”*

### (c) Questions of judgment

Respondent has to decide which of the two or more alternatives is the best according to clearly specified criteria. S/he has to evaluate the quality of a relationship or conclusion.

*Example:*

*“Which of the following strategic planning models would most likely be applied in organization A and achieve its set mission?”*

## 6. Open-ended questions

This type of question aims to generate divergent thinking and creative answers based on possible predictions.

*Example:*

*“If you were the Governor of Hong Kong, what would you do to introduce democracy to the mass? Where would you begin?”*

Questioning is a technique that both teacher and students have to learn. There is no best type of question. Different types of questions can serve different purposes. A user guideline is: practise using a variety of questions, both for yourself and others.

**Quotable quotes** *“I have always told my students that their education is more about learning to question my answers than to answer my questions.” Prof. Louis Schmier, Dept. of History, Valdosta State College, USA*