

## English Corner

### How to ask good and effective questions



**Dr. Mable Chan** is a lecturer at the Department of English, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She was awarded the Faculty Award for Outstanding Teaching in the 2005/06 academic year and has vast experience teaching academic and business English to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Her book 「職時上位：名人英語全面睇」, which is about business English, is now available. In this column she advocates using simple and concise English for business writing.

Having covered written genres for a number of issues, let's turn to spoken discourse and start examining how to ask questions. Asking questions is an important skill in our daily life. We ask questions to elicit information from friends, students, teachers, colleagues or bosses, in both informal and formal situations. Finding out how to ask good questions and avoid bad questions can help you obtain reliable information for whatever purpose.

#### **(I) Good questions for good answers**

Asking the right questions plays a very important role in interviews for example, and this in turn determines whether the interview is effective or not. Try to follow the framework shown below in asking questions and eliciting effective responses.

##### **1. Open questions**

Open questions are used to get the subject talking and open up topics. They leave an open field for the interviewee to elaborate on the answer; this can be about their knowledge and qualifications, work experience or professional competence.  
e.g. "Tell me about..."

##### **2. Probing questions**

After asking open questions, probing questions can be asked to clarify information and find out precisely the information means. These are questions which are used to fill in the details and tease out details of a specific topic. You can ask as many probing questions as you like.  
e.g. "Why exactly did you do that?"  
"How did you report it?"

##### **3. Closed questions**

The next step should be making use of closed questions to establish single and specific facts.  
e.g. "How long did you work in the company?"  
"How many people were there in your marketing team?"

#### **4. Reflective questions**

The final step is to check through restatement. You can repeat or rephrase what the interviewees said or implied to obtain further information.

e.g. “You didn’t seem to like working in the company?”

#### **(II) Ineffective questions**

There are the types of questions we need to avoid. Consider the following examples.

##### **1. Leading questions**

Leading questions lead the subject to give the answer you want but not necessarily the true answer.

e.g. “So you are familiar with doing market research?”

“I suppose you like marketing?”

##### **2. Hypothetical questions**

Hypothetical questions give you hypothetical answers. You can use them to explore the interviewee’s values or beliefs, but they will not help you establish the candidate’s competence or ability.

e.g. “What would you do if .....?”

##### **3. Multiple questions**

Asking multiple questions at the same time shows that you have not determined what to ask. The interviewee will usually only answer the last question, because that is the only question that can be recalled. The candidate may also only answer a question to which he/she believes can give a favourable answer.

e.g. “So who assigned the job to you? What have you learned from the mistake? Do you like working in a team?”

**Quiz:**

Rephrase the following questions if necessary to make them more effective in obtaining more reliable information.

1. Can you work under pressure?

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2. Do you like working in a team?

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3. I don't expect you'll do this again?

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4. Did you check out the details completely?

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5. How would you handle angry customers?

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6. Would you stay with us if we found you a place in marketing?

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7. Most students seem to like Mable. What are your feelings about her?

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**Answer:**

1. Can you work under pressure?

Could you please tell us how you work under pressure?

**Remark:** The interviewee must answer 'yes' to the original question. This fails to find out how the candidate can work under pressure, and is ineffective in getting reliable information (i.e. the competence/ability of the candidate).

2. Do you like working in a team?

Could you please tell us how you worked in a team in marketing a product?

**Remark:** If this is not simply about preference but ability, a closed question is not effective.

3. I don't expect you'll do this again?

What have you learned from this incident/mistake?

**Remark:** The original question is a leading question and should be avoided.

4. Did you check out the details completely?

How did you check out the details?

**Remark:** The original question is a yes / no question which only elicits a yes or no answer. If you want to know the details, change the question type or add a follow-up question.

5. How would you handle angry customers?

Have you got experience handling angry customers? Could you tell us more about it?

**Remark:** Asking a hypothetical question like this is not effective. A hypothetical question will only give you a hypothetical answer. The interviewee can give you a perfect answer based on what he knows from a textbook about handling angry customers but he may not have had experience or ability in doing so.

6. Would you stay with us if we found you a place in marketing?

**Remark:** This is again a hypothetical question. It is alright to use it to find out what people think, but you need to be aware that the answer is also hypothetical. If there is an eventual opening in marketing, the interviewee may not necessarily stay.

7. Most students seem to like Mable. What are your feelings about her?

What are your feelings about Mable?

**Remark:** The first question is a leading one. You should avoid including information that lead people to give a favourable answer.