

Asking Good Questions

Tips for Asking Good Questions (and getting good answers)

Every Panel is like a team of investigators, gathering as much information together as possible. The thing is, none of us know which fact is going to end up being vital, or which personal story is going to change our whole perspective. All we know is: better information from more perspectives = better recommendations and more influence.

But how do we get the best information? Great questions are the key. Question-and-answer periods are your chance to dig in – to clarify what a speaker is saying, to understand how they reached their conclusions, or to figure out why they believe what they believe. Here are a few tips we've learned over the years.

Tip 1: Stay Genuinely Curious

This is the most important and the most difficult. But as hard as it may be at times, taking a curious and open-minded approach to every person and every idea right now will be a huge benefit later.

Here's why: Everyone knows that it's only possible to make a strong argument *for* something if you fully understand it. What's easy to forget is – that's true for arguing *against* things, too. Plus, who knows, you might surprise yourself and change your mind about things. But you'll never know if that's even possible unless you try to have a genuinely open mind first.

Tip 2: Work Backwards

The best questions don't start off as questions. They start off as needs, or gaps, or curiosities. So, before writing any questions down, start by thinking about:

- What information do I want to know?
- What's most important for me to understand right now?
- What else might this person be able to talk about?
- What's missing?

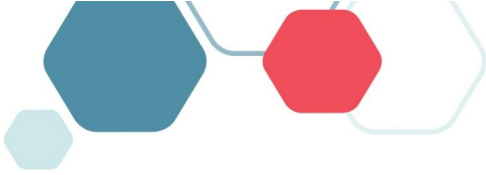
Tip 3: Keep Questions Focused

Questions with multiple parts often get unsatisfying answers.

Tip 4: Provide Context - But Only Sometimes

Beginning a question with some background about why you're asking it can sometimes be helpful, but it also isn't always the right choice. For example, questions like

"Yesterday, someone told us ____. What are your thoughts on that?" or
"I understand that ____, but can you clarify ___?" or



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"You mentioned that _____. Could you tell me more about that?"
can be excellent if you'd like the speaker to be more specific.

But sometimes, you may choose to leave out the context on purpose, in order to encourage folks to answer more freely. In fact, very simple and open questions like

"What are your thoughts on _____?"
are sometimes the most brilliant questions of all because they can be very revealing.

Tip 5: Avoid Opinions or Statements Disguised as Questions

These are also called "leading questions." For example: *"Don't you think that _____?"* or *"I think _____ and _____. Isn't that right?"*

Instead, try using open-ended questions or give equally weighted options. For example:

"Do you think _____ or _____ or something else?"

Here's why opinions, statements, and leading questions aren't awesome: By stating your point of view so clearly, you've revealed to the person answering the question exactly how you want them to respond.

Whether they agree or disagree with you, it doesn't do much good. That's because:

- They will spend their time just agreeing or disagreeing, rather than offering new, potentially interesting information.
- They won't be as honest in their answer – again, whether they agree or disagree with you – since they already know what you think the answer should be.

In cases where you feel it's important to ask about the person's views on a particular opinion you've heard from someone else, try a question like:

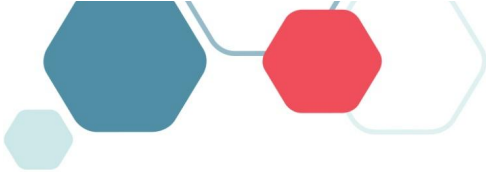
"I have heard the view that _____. What do you think of this?"

Tip 6: Try Out Comparative Questions

Sometimes, Panelists use comparisons to help learn about the context around a topic. As long as these aren't leading questions – and depending on the expertise of the person being asked – these can be great. For example:

"In your experience, is _____ typical in other cities/states/etc.?"

"How does this cost/timing/size/etc. compare to _____?"



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Interview with a Space Alien 🛸

To put these tips to the test, let's imagine a situation where the Panel is questioning an alien from outer space. Hey, who knows what topics Panels could be working on in the future!

Some of these questions might be awesome, some less than awesome. Your task will be to write them better. Then, think about what else you'd like to know (Tip 2) and write a question or two of your own.

1. You say you come here in peace, but all I see is you disturbing the peace – like when you apparently showed up at the farmer's market and everyone ran away. What are you really here for?
2. We've heard two conflicting reports from other speakers about your plans for a zero-gravity theme park on the edge of town. Could you clarify your intentions around that proposal?
3. What are your thoughts on the new spaceship parking rules downtown?
4. I get that your planet has a different atmosphere, but why can't you at least try to breathe our air here? You've been here for like six months.
5. Okay, I've got a few things. How long have you really been here? How long do you plan to be here? Why did you pick our town to settle down in? Seems like an odd choice to me.
6. Instead of "take me to your leader," you asked to speak to a representative Panel of everyday folks. Tell me more about why you made that request.

7. -----
