

Questions play integral roles in every interview and often dominate the process. Technology editor Jamie McKenzie writes, “Questions may be the most powerful technology we have ever created” because “they allow us to control our lives and allow us to make sense of a confusing world” by leading “to insight and understanding.”<sup>1</sup> Questions need not be complete sentences with question marks at the end. They are *words, phrases, statements, or nonverbal acts that invite answers or responses*.

Questions are literally the “tools of the trade” in interviews and have unique characteristics, perform specific functions, and enable you to perform tasks efficiently and effectively. Each type of question has a name (just like golf clubs, screw drivers, or wrenches) that makes it easier for you to select at the proper time.

**The objectives of this chapter** are to introduce you to the types of questions, their specific uses and limitations, and common question pitfalls to avoid. Let us begin with the most fundamental types of questions: open and closed.

**A question is any action that solicits an answer.**

## Open and Closed Questions

Open and closed questions vary in the amount of information they solicit and degree of interviewer control. Information ranges from a single word to lengthy descriptions, narratives, and reports of statistical data. Control ranges from minimal for open-ended questions to maximum with closed questions.

**Open questions invite open answers.**

### Open Questions

**Open questions** vary in degree of openness in which respondents have considerable freedom to determine the amount and kind of information to give.

#### *Highly Open Questions*

Highly open questions place virtually no restrictions on the interviewee.

- Tell me about Prague.
- What do you remember about the tornado hitting your school on that April afternoon?
- Describe the Australian Outback for me.



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■ Open questions let the respondent do the talking and allow the interviewer to listen and observe.

Interviewees can volunteer and elaborate.

and are easier to answer. They encourage respondents to talk and to determine the type and amount of information to disclose. The lengthy answers open questions generate, reveal what respondents think is important and encourage them to provide details and descriptions you might not think to ask for. Such answers are likely to disclose knowledge level, uncertainty, intensity of feelings, perceptions, and biases.

### *Disadvantages of Open Questions*

Interviewees can pick and choose, reveal and hide.

A single answer may consume a significant portion of interview time. On the one hand, respondents may give unimportant or irrelevant information, and on the other may withhold important information they feel is irrelevant or too obvious, sensitive, or dangerous. Keep respondents on track and maintain control by tactfully intervening to move on.

## **Closed Questions**

**Closed questions** are narrowly focused and restrict the interviewee's freedom to determine the amount and kind of information to provide.

### *Moderately Closed Questions*

Moderately closed questions ask for specific, limited pieces of information, such as:

- What are your favorite classes?
- Which North Carolina beaches have you visited?
- At what times of the year do you prefer to travel?

Restricted questions lead to restricted answers.

### *Moderately Open Questions*

Moderately open questions are more restrictive but give respondents considerable latitude in answers.

- Tell me about your study abroad experience in Prague.
- What were you thinking as the ceiling of the hallway began to rain down on you?
- Describe the Australian Outback at dusk.

### *Advantages of Open Questions*

**Open questions** show interest and trust in the respondent's ability to disclose important information

### *Highly Closed Questions*

Highly closed questions may ask interviewees to pick an answer.

Highly closed questions are very restrictive, often asking respondents for a single piece of information.

- When were you in Haiti?
- What is the interest rate on your student loan?
- Where were you born?

### *Bipolar Questions*

Bipolar questions offer polar opposites for answers.

Closed questions are **bipolar** when they limit respondents to two polar choices, sometimes polar opposites.

- Did you attend the in-service workshop in the morning or afternoon?
- Do you usually take U.S. 31 or I-65?
- Are you a conservative or a liberal?

Some bipolar questions ask for an evaluation or attitude.

- Do you approve or disapprove of changing time zones?
- Do you like or dislike dark chocolate?
- Are you for or against the state mandated testing of elementary school children?

A yes or no question is likely to generate a yes or no answer.

The most common bipolar question asks for a yes or a no response.

- Have you received a flu shot?
- Are you going to the state conference?
- Do you have a top secret clearance?

Closed questions provide control and direction.

### *Advantages of Closed Questions*

Closed questions enable you to control the length of answers and guide respondents to specific information. They require little effort from either party and allow you to ask more questions, in more areas, in less time. Brief answers are easy to record and tabulate.

Closed questions stifle volunteering.

### *Disadvantages of Closed Questions*

Answers to closed questions often contain too little information, requiring you to ask several questions when one open question would do the job. They do not reveal why a person has a particular attitude, the person's degree of feeling or commitment, or why this person typically makes choices. Interviewers talk more than interviewees when asking closed questions, so less information is exchanged. Interviewees have no opportunity to volunteer or explain information, and they can select an answer or say yes or no without knowing anything about a topic.

Figure 3.1 illustrates the major advantages and disadvantages of open and closed questions. As you narrow a question, the amount of data decreases. As the amount

**Figure 3.1** *Question options*

Advantages and Disadvantages of Question Types	Type of Questions			
	Highly Open	Moderately Open	Moderately Closed	Highly Closed
Breadth and depth of potential information	10	7	4	1
Degree of precision, reproducibility, reliability	1	4	7	10
R's control over question and response	1	4	7	10
Interviewer skill required	10	7	4	1
Reliability of data	1	4	7	10
Economic use of time	1	4	7	10
Opportunity for E to reveal feelings and information	10	7	4	1
	10 High	7 Above average	4 Average	1 Low

of data decreases, your control increases, less time and skill are required, and the degree of precision, reliability, and reproducibility increases. On the other hand, as you open up a question, the amount of data increases and interviewees may reveal knowledge level, understanding, reasons for feeling or acting, attitudes, and hidden motives.

**Combinations often lead to the best results.**

Interviewers may include open and closed questions with varying degrees of constraint to get the information desired. For instance, an interviewer might follow up a bipolar question such as “Are you familiar with the village master plan?” with an open-ended question such as “What do you know about this plan?” An open-ended question such as “Tell me about your internship at C-SPAN” may be followed up with a more closed question such as, “What was your first assignment?”

## Primary and Probing Questions

Primary questions make sense out of context.

**Primary questions** introduce topics or new areas within a topic and can stand alone even when taken out of context.

- How did you prepare for the Bar exam?
- Tell me about your experiences when hiking the Appalachian Trail.
- Which U.S. President of the last century do you admire most?

Probing questions make sense only in context.

All examples of open and closed questions presented earlier are primary questions.

Questions that dig deeper into answers that may be incomplete, superficial, suggestive, vague, irrelevant, or inaccurate are called **probing questions**. Unlike primary questions that can stand alone and make sense, probing or follow-up questions make sense only when connected to the previous question or series of questions.

### Types of Probing Questions

#### *Silent Probes*

Be patient and be quiet.

If an answer is incomplete or the respondent seems hesitant to continue, use a **silent probe** with appropriate nonverbal signals such as eye contact, a head nod, or a gesture to encourage the person to continue. Silence shows interest in what is being said, and is a tactful way to communicate disbelief, uncertainty, or confusion. An exchange might go like this:

1. **Interviewer:** How was your dinner at The New Age Restaurant last night?
2. **Interviewee:** It was not too bad.
3. **Interviewer:** (silence)
4. **Interviewee:** The salmon was not cooked as thoroughly as I like, but the side dishes were excellent.

#### *Nudging Probes*

A nudge replaces silence with a word or phrase.

Use a **nudging probe** when a silent probe fails or words seem necessary to get what is needed. It nudges the interviewee to reply or to continue, and is simple and brief.

I see.	And?
Go on.	So?
Yes?	Uh-huh?

A common mistake is the assumption that all questions must be multiple-word sentences. A lengthy probing question may stifle the interchange or open up a new area or topic, the opposite of what you want.

Ask rather than assume.

#### *Clearinghouse Probes*

A **clearinghouse probe** discovers whether a series of questions has uncovered everything of importance on a topic or issue. It encourages respondents to volunteer

information you might not think to ask for and to fill in gaps your questions did not elicit. It literally clears out an area or topic, such as the following:

- What have I not asked that you believe is important in this case?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

A **clearinghouse probing question** enables you to proceed to the next primary question or to closing the interview confident you have gotten all relevant and important information. It is virtually impossible to anticipate everything an interviewee might be willing or able to reveal.

### *Informational Probes*

Pry open vague, superficial, and suggestive answers.

**Informational probing questions** ask for additional information or explanation. If an answer is **superficial**, ask a question such as:

- How exactly was the contract worded?
- Tell me more about your relationship with the sheriff.

If an answer is **vague** or **ambiguous**, ask a question such as:

- You write that you went to a small college. How many students were enrolled at that time?
- You say you were upset with the judge's decision. How upset were you?

If an answer **suggests** a feeling or attitude, ask a question such as:

- Do I detect a note of anger in your answer?
- You appear to be confused by the zoning board's rejection of your request.

### *Restatement Probes*

Restate or rephrase to get complete answers.

An interviewee may not answer a question **as asked**. Restate tactfully all or part of the original question, perhaps with vocal emphasis to focus attention on important words.

1. **Interviewer:** Why are you interested in pursuing graduate work at the University of Illinois?
2. **Interviewee:** I want to do graduate work at a major research institution where I can teach while doing research.
3. **Interviewer:** I see. And why at the **University of Illinois**?

If an interviewee **makes a mistake** while replying, use a restatement probe that avoids embarrassing or judging the interviewee.

1. **Interviewer:** Who do you believe is the best quarterback in the NFL?
2. **Interviewee:** Brett Farve.
3. **Interviewer:** Who do you believe is currently the best quarterback in the NFL?

When an Interviewee seems **hesitant** to answer, your question may be unclear or difficult to answer. Restate the question in a clearer, easier to answer wording.

1. **Interviewer:** You have received several teaching awards, what is your philosophy of teaching?
2. **Interviewee:** I'm not sure I have a teaching philosophy.
3. **Interviewer:** What do you believe are the essentials of effective teaching?

If a question has more than **two parts or options**, an interviewee may answer only one part or select only one option. Restate the part or option left unanswered.

1. **Interviewer:** When you heard the tornado approaching, what were your first thoughts and actions?
2. **Interviewee:** My first thought was that it sounded exactly like a freight train approaching, and it took a few seconds to realize that it was a tornado.
3. **Interviewer:** And what were your first actions?

### *Reflective Probes*

Reflective questions verify and clarify.

Ask a **reflective probing question** when it appears necessary to **clarify** or **verify** an answer to be certain you have received it as intended. Avoid any wording or nonverbal signals interviewees might interpret as an attempt to lead or trap them into giving a desired answer.

- Those were the **gross** incomes from last year?
- By former President Bush, you are referring to President **George W. Bush**?
- Are you implying that immigrant workers are **not taxpayers**?
- You seem to be saying that you will **not go pro** after this year?

A reflective probe differs from a restatement probe in that the first seeks to clarify or verify an answer while the second seeks to obtain more information following a primary question.

### *Mirror Probes*

Mirror questions summarize to ensure accuracy.

The **mirror probing question** is different from the reflective probing question because it **summarizes a series of exchanges**, not just the immediate response, to ensure **understanding** and **retention** of information, instructions, elements of a proposal, prescribed regimens, and procedures. The purpose is to avoid problems in interviews caused by memory, assumptions, and interpretations. For instance, you might use a mirror question when interviewing a tour agency about a Caribbean cruise:

1. **Interviewer:** Okay, as I understand it, we would stop in the Bahamas, Aruba in the Dutch Antilles, and Costa Rica, and go through the Panama Canal.
2. **Interviewee:** That's correct except that your ship would only go through the lock at Cristobal and into Gatun Lake. If you want to go all the way through the canal to the Pacific Ocean, you would need to make arrangements on an optional excursion.

## Skillful Interviewing with Probing Questions

Skillful probing leads to insightful answers.

The skillful use of probing questions is essential to the success of most interviews. Do not stick to a list of questions unless required to do so, anticipate answers prematurely, or be impatient to move on. Listen carefully to each response to determine if the answer is clear and complete. If not, determine in a few seconds what is unsatisfactory about an answer and phrase a probing question. Probing questions discover more relevant, accurate, and complete information and heighten the other party's motivation because you are obviously interested and listening.

Be patient and be persistent.

Probing questions can cause problems. If a person does not respond immediately, you may jump in with a probing question when none is needed. Phrase probing questions carefully and be aware of vocal emphasis. Stanley Payne illustrates how the meaning of a simple “Why” question can be altered by stressing different words.<sup>2</sup>

*Why* do you say that?

Why *do* you say that?

Why do *you* say that?

Why do you *say* that?

Why do you say *that*?

A “simple” why question may unintentionally communicate disapproval, disbelief, mistrust, and cause the other party to become defensive and reluctant to disclose openly. A poorly phrased probing question may alter the meaning of the primary question or bias the reply. Be tactful and not demanding.

### Exercise #1—Supply the Probing Question

Supply an appropriate probing question for each of the following interactions. Be sure the question probes into the answer and is not a primary question introducing a new facet of the topic. Watch assumptions about answers, and phrase probing questions tactfully.

- Interviewer:** What did you think of the President's “State of the Union Address?”

**Interviewee:** It was about what I expected.

- Interviewer:** Are you looking for an internship for this summer?

**Interviewee:** Sort of.

- Interviewer:** Who are you going to vote for in the presidential election?

**Interviewee:** I don't know.

- Interviewer:** How was the concert?

**Interviewee:** It was awesome.

- Interviewer:** What is your management philosophy?

**Interviewee:** (silence)

- Interviewer:** What did you do at Amazon?

**Interviewee:** I processed returns and things like that.



7. **Interviewer:** How much did your trip to Australia cost?  
**Interviewee:** A ton.
8. **Interviewer:** Why did you decide to study civil engineering?  
**Interviewee:** I like to work outdoors.
9. **Interviewer:** Who did you cheer for in Super Bowl 50?  
**Interviewee:** The Green Bay Packers.
10. **Interviewer:** I understand you think the end of the world is coming soon.  
**Interviewee:** That's partially true.

## Neutral and Leading Questions

**Neutral questions** enable respondents to decide upon answers without direction or pressure from questioners. For example, in an open, neutral question, the interviewee determines the length, details, and nature of the answer. In a closed, neutral question, the interviewee may choose between equal choices. All questions discussed and illustrated so far have been neutral questions.

Leading questions direct interviewees to specific answers.

Interviewer bias leads to dictated responses.

Loaded questions dictate answers through language or entrapment.

An apparent bipolar question may in reality have only one pole.

The **leading question** may **intentionally** or **unintentionally** suggest the answer the interviewer expects or prefers, so the interviewee gives this answer because it is “easier or more tempting” to give that answer.<sup>3</sup> This is called **interviewer bias** and may occur because of the way a question is phrased, how a question is asked nonverbally, the interviewee’s desire to please a person of authority, or a conspicuous symbol the interviewer is wearing such as a cross or star of David, a political button, or a police uniform. What may appear at first glance to be a bipolar question is actually a **unipolar question** because one option is made less acceptable than the other. Introductory phrases such as “According to the Constitution,” “As we all know,” or “All true conservatives (liberals) believe that” are likely to lead respondents to give acceptable answers rather than express their true beliefs, attitudes, or feelings.

The **loaded question** is an extreme form of leading question that virtually dictates a desired answer. The use of extreme language is a common way to load a question. This includes name-calling, emotionally charged words, expletives, and unequal options that may lead an interviewee to choose the least onerous choice. Entrapment is another way to load a question. An interviewer may ask a no-win question such as the iconic “Are you still beating your wife” question. Interviewees cannot reply without seeming to admit to an onerous or illegal act.

Regardless of their potential problems in interviews, leading questions are useful and often necessary question tools. Recruiters use them to see how applicants respond under stress. Sales representatives use leading questions to persuade customers to make decisions. Police officers ask leading and sometimes loaded questions to provoke suspects into revealing information and truths. Journalists ask leading questions to prod reluctant interviewees into responding. A counselor may use a loaded question such as “When was the last time you were drunk” to show that a range of answers is acceptable and none will shock the interviewer.

Leading questions have legitimate functions.

Do not confuse neutral **reflective** and **mirror** questions with **leading** questions. Recall that reflective and mirror questions ask for clarification and verification for accurate understanding and information. If they lead an interviewee by accident to give an answer you appear to desire, they have failed to perform their designed task.

The questions below illustrate the differences between neutral and leading questions. Distinguish leading from loaded questions. What makes one more extreme than the other?

### Neutral Questions

1. Have you ever smoked pot?
2. How did this river tour compare with the last one?
3. Have you ever cheated on an exam?
4. Do you want a diet Coke?
5. Do you enjoy skeet shooting?
6. What were your reactions to the video on texting while driving?
7. Are you a conservative or a liberal?
8. How do you feel about working out?
9. Are you going to the staff meeting?
10. How do you feel about legalizing gay marriage in this state?

### Leading Questions

1. When did you last smoke pot?
2. Wasn't this river tour better than the last one?
3. Have you stopped cheating on exams?
4. I assume you want a diet Coke.
5. You like skeet shooting, don't you?
6. What were your reactions to that stupid video on texting while driving?
7. Are you a conservative or a socialist?
8. Do you hate to work out as much as the rest of us do?
9. You're going to the staff meeting, aren't you?
10. How do you feel about legalizing gay marriage in this state that would destroy the family as we know it and end our religious freedom?

Figure 3.2 compares types of questions available to interviewers and interviewees, including open and closed, primary and probing, and neutral and leading questions.

### Exercise #2—Identification of Questions

Identify each of the following questions in four ways: (1) open or closed, (2) primary or probing, (3) neutral or leading, and (4) whether it is a special type of question tool: bipolar, loaded, nudging probe, clearinghouse probe, informational probe, restatement probe, reflective probe, or mirror probe.

1. What did you do during the interim semester?
2. Are you saying that you joined the Army to escape the farm?
3. Did you vote in the last primary election?
4. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your position at CVS?
5. Quitting your job in the middle of a recession was stupid, wasn't it?
6. I see.

**Figure 3.2** *Types of questions*

		Neutral		Leading	
		Open	Closed	Open	Closed
Primary	How do you feel about the new core requirements?	Do you approve or disapprove of the new core requirements?	Most top students favor the new core requirements; how do you feel about them?	Do you favor the new core requirements like most top students I've talked to?	
Probing	Why do you feel that way?	Is your approval moderate or strong?	If you favor the core requirements, why did you initially oppose them?	I assume you favor the new core requirements because you're graduating in two months.	

7. You are concerned about this problem, aren't you?
8. **Interviewer:** What did you see first when you came upon the accident?  
**Interviewee:** It was a nightmare.  
**Interviewer:** I'm sure. What did you see first?
9. Okay, it sounds like planning for the lecture is set. As I understand, you are taking care of publicity, Jane is handling travel and housing, Fallon is arranging for a dinner prior to the lecture, I will introduce the speaker and handle the Q and A session, and Zack is setting up the reception in the atrium immediately following the lecture. Is all of this correct?
10. And then what happened?

### Common Question Pitfalls

**Phrase questions carefully to avoid common pitfalls.**

Interviewers and interviewees have a variety of question tools that enable them to gather information and insights into experiences, reactions, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings, but they must phrase each question carefully to avoid common **question pitfalls**. Each pitfall makes it more difficult to perform interview tasks efficiently and effectively.

**Avoid unintentional bipolar questions.**

### The Unintentional Bipolar Question

The bipolar question is designed to elicit a yes or no answer or a choice among two poles such as conservative or liberal, like or dislike, approve or disapprove, and agree or disagree. The problem arises when you **unintentionally** ask a bipolar question when you want a lengthy answer or when there are more than two choices from which a

respondent may choose. Be aware of these common phrases that open **bipolar** rather than **open** questions: *Do you, Did you, Are you, Have you, Will you, Were you, Can you, Would you, Is there, and Was it?* If you want an open-ended answer rather than a bipolar one, open your question with words and phrases such as: *What, Why, How, Explain, and Tell me about?*

### The Yes (No) Question

Obvious questions generate obvious answers.

The yes (no) question pitfall occurs when you ask a question that has only one obvious or acceptable answer, either a yes or a no. For instance, a physician trying to persuade a patient to stop smoking might ask, “*Do you want to die?*” Or a counselor might ask a student, “*Do you want to graduate?*” Listen carefully to how you are phrasing each question so you do not waste time asking the obvious.

### The Tell Me Everything Question

The tell me everything question is the opposite of the intentional bipolar question and the yes (no) question. This pitfall occurs when you ask an extremely open-ended question with no limits or guidelines. When you ask a question such as “*Tell me about yourself*” or “*Tell me about your study abroad experiences in China,*” a respondent may have difficulty determining where to begin, what to include, and when to end an answer. Focus a question on a particular part of self or specific experiences that are most important for the interview.

### The Open-to-Closed Question

Ask an open question and then stop.

The open-to-closed pitfall occurs when you ask an open question and then switch it to a closed question, often bipolar, before the interviewee can reply. For instance, you may ask “*Tell me about your trip to New York,*” and then interject “*Did you visit the 9/11 memorial?*” The interviewee is most likely to limit the answer to the memorial, and you lose a significant amount of important information. Avoid this trap by preparing questions in advance of the interview and thinking through each question carefully before asking it.



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### The Double-Barreled Question

The double-barreled question pitfall occurs when you ask a question with two parts or topics such as, “*Tell me about your trips to Rome and Venice*” or “*Which colleges do you support financially and why did you choose these?*” Respondents may address each part superficially rather than give a long answer, answer only the part they can recall, or answer the part they want to answer. If you do not repeat the portion that is unanswered,

■ How you ask a question may bias the answer you receive.

Ask one question at a time.

you will get only one answer instead the two needed. You may have to ask several probing questions to get the information you would have received by asking two separate questions.

Push only when there is a need to push.

### The Unintentional Leading Question

The leading question pitfall occurs when you **unintentionally** ask a question phrased to influence an answer instead of a neutral question. You may be unaware that you did this verbally or nonverbally or that interviewees gave answers they **thought you wanted to hear**. Avoid this pitfall by phrasing and asking questions nonverbally that are clearly neutral. Listen carefully to every question and ask yourself “How would I reply to this question?”

Don't guess; ask!

### The Guessing Question

The guessing question pitfall occurs when you try to **guess** information instead of **asking** for it. A string of guessing questions may fail to accomplish what a single open-ended or informational question can. For instance, instead of asking “*Were you in your car when you saw the accident?*” ask “*Where were you when you saw the accident?*” Instead of asking “*Did you attempt to apply CPR?*” ask “*What did you do?*”

Curiosity may be fatal to interviewers.

### The Curious Question

The curious question pitfall occurs when you ask for information you do not need. For example, are you merely **curious** about a person's age, marital status, income level, or religious beliefs that have nothing to do with the interview and its stated purpose. The interviewee has the right to say this information is none of your business or to ask the purpose of the question. If a question may **appear** to be irrelevant, explain why this information is relevant and necessary.

What does the interviewee know of relevance to this topic?

### The Too High or Too Low Question

The too high or too low pitfall occurs when you fail to prepare questions that take into consideration the interviewee's levels of knowledge and expertise. Questions above these levels may cause embarrassment or resentment for appearing uninformed, ill-informed, uneducated, or unintelligent. Questions below these levels may be insulting. Know whether a respondent is a layperson, novice, or expert on a topic or issue and phrase your questions accordingly.

Delve into inaccessible areas only when necessary.

### The Don't Ask, Don't Tell Question

The don't ask, don't tell pitfall occurs when you delve into information and emotions that interviewees may be incapable of addressing because of social, psychological, or situational constraints. For instance, we learn at an early age that it is more socially acceptable to be humble rather than boastful. So when we are asked to assess our beauty, intelligence, creativity, or bravery, we are most likely to pose an “Aw shucks” attitude or make a joke of our answer. We are told that there is an appropriate time and place for everything but that some areas are usually off limits or taboo such as sex,

personal income, religious convictions, and certain illnesses. For instance, we find it easier to discuss physical rather than mental illnesses. Explain why a question is essential to ask, and delay “touchy” or “taboo” questions until you have established a comfortable climate and positive relationship. Phrase questions carefully to lessen social and psychological constraints and to avoid offending interviewees.

Gender and cultural differences may affect social and psychological *accessibility*. Research indicates that women disclose more information about themselves, use more psychological or emotional verbs, discuss their personal lives more in business interactions, have less difficulty expressing intimate feelings, talk more about other people’s accomplishments and minimize their own, and appear to be more comfortable when hearing accolades about themselves.<sup>4</sup> Cultures also differ in readily accessible areas. Learn as much as you can about an interviewee prior to an interview to determine what can and cannot be asked and how it should be asked.

Avoid common question pitfalls by planning questions prior to the interview so you do not have to create them on the spot in the give-and-take of the interaction. Think before uttering a question, stop when you have asked a good open question instead of rephrasing it, use bipolar questions sparingly, avoid questions that are too open-ended, ask only necessary questions, ask for information at the interviewee’s level, avoid complex questions, and be aware of the accessibility factor in questions and answers. Know the common question pitfalls well enough that you can catch yourself before tumbling into one.

Avoid pitfalls by preparing and thinking.

### Exercise #3—What Are the Pitfalls in These Questions?

Each of the following questions illustrates one or more of the common question pitfalls: unintentional bipolar question, yes (no) question, tell me everything question, open-to-closed question, double-barreled question, unintentional leading question, guessing question, curious question, too high or too low question, and don’t ask, don’t tell question. Identify the pitfall(s) of each question and rephrase it to make it a good question. Avoid a new pitfall in your revised question.

1. Do you like or dislike catfish?
2. You’re concerned about the stock market, aren’t you?
3. Tell me about General Electric.
4. Tell me about your trip to the Normandy beaches; were they different than you expected?
5. Did you like the band concert?
6. (asked during a recruiting interview) Are you a registered Republican or Democrat?
7. Would you label yourself as a genius?
8. (asked of a student) Do you want to fail my class?
9. Did you join the Air Force ROTC to become a fighter pilot?
10. Tell me about LaSalle and the courses you are taking.

**ON THE WEB**

Browse an Internet site to locate a variety of question–answer interactions that vary in intensity from happy to sad, cooperative to uncooperative, friendly to hostile, and understanding to patronizing. Identify the different types of primary and probing questions in these interactions. Which question pitfalls can

you identify? Which of these pitfalls were accidental and which purposeful? Use search engines such as the Knight Ridder Newspapers (<http://www.kri.com>), CNBC (<http://www.cnbc.com>), and CNN (<http://cnn.com>).

**Summary**

You have a limitless variety of question tools to choose from, and each tool has unique characteristics, capabilities, and pitfalls. Knowing which question to select and how to use it is essential for interviewing effectively and efficiently. Each question has three characteristics: (1) open or closed, (2) primary or probing, and (3) neutral or leading. Open questions are designed to discover large amounts of information, while closed questions are designed to gain specific bits of information. Primary questions open up topics and sub-topics, while probing questions probe into answers for more information, explanations, clarifications, and verifications. Neutral questions give respondents freedom to answer as they wish, while leading questions nudge or shove respondents toward specific answers.

Phrasing questions is essential to get the information needed. If you phrase questions carefully and think before asking, you can avoid common question pitfalls such as curious; don't ask, don't tell; double-barreled; guessing; open-to-closed; tell me everything; too high, too low; unintentional bipolar, and unintentional leading.

**Key Terms and Concepts**

Bipolar question	Loaded question	Reflective probe
Clearinghouse probe	Mirror probe	Restatement probe
Closed question	Neutral question	Silent probe
Curious pitfall	Nudging probe	Tell me everything pitfall
Don't ask, don't tell pitfall	Open question	Too high, too low
Double-barreled pitfall	Open-to-closed pitfall	Unintentional bipolar
Guessing pitfall	Primary question	Unintentional leading
Informational probe	Probing question	Yes (no) pitfall
Leading question	Question pitfalls	

**Student Activities**

1. Watch an interview on C-SPAN that lasts at least 15 minutes. Which types of questions does the interviewer employ? Which seem to be the most effective? How does the relationship between interviewer and interviewee appear to affect question types and responses? How does the situation appear to affect question selection and responses?

2. Prepare two sets of 10 questions each, one with all neutral questions and one with four of the questions rephrased as leading questions. Conduct six interviews, three with all-neutral questions and three with the mixture of neutral and leading questions. Compare the answers you received and determine how types of questions may have influenced these answers. Why do you think some interviewees ignored the direction you provided in leading questions while others did not?
3. Create a list of closed questions, including bipolar questions, on a topic of importance in your state. Interview four people: a friend, a family member older than you, an acquaintance, and a stranger selected at random. Which ones gave you the shortest, least revealing answers? Which ones volunteered the most information regardless of question type? What does this tell you about using closed questions and the relationship between parties?
4. Listen to several interviews on television, including ones with politicians, company representatives, sports figures, and people who have experienced a crisis. Identify the question pitfalls exhibited in the questions asked and how they seemed to affect responses. Which were the most common pitfalls? Did you identify question pitfalls not covered in this chapter?

## Notes

1. Joyce Kasman Valenza, "For the best answers, ask tough questions," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 20, 2000, <http://www.joycevalenza.com/questions.html>, accessed September 26, 2006.
2. Stanley L. Payne, *The Art of Asking Questions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 204.
3. Robert L. Kahn and Charles F. Cannell, *The Dynamics of Interviewing* (New York: John Wiley, 1964), p. 205.
4. Lillian Glass, *He Says, She Says: Closing the Communication Gap between the Sexes* (New York: Putnam, 1993), pp. 45–59; Kory Floyd, *Interpersonal Communication* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011), p. 99.

## Resources

- Anderson, Rob, and G. Michael Killenberg. *Interviewing: Speaking, Listening, and Learning for Professional Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Devito, Joseph A. *Interviewing Guidebook*. Boston: Pearson Education, 2010.
- Payne, Stanley L. *The Art of Asking Questions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- Powell, Larry, and Jonathan H. Amsbary. *Interviewing: Situations and Contexts*. Boston: Pearson Education, 2006.