

The Art of Asking Good Questions

By Dr Eilene Basu

1. Introduction

Why good questions matter (in interviews, meetings, emails, mentorship, etc.)

Quote: *“Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers.” – Voltaire*

“What makes a question powerful?”

“Have you ever been asked a question that changed your perspective?”

2. Types of Questions

Open vs Closed

Leading vs Neutral

Factual vs Reflective

Examples:

Closed: “Do you like this project?”

Open: “What do you think could improve this project?”

3. Power Techniques

The Rule of Three (asking 3 layers deep)

“What” and “How” > “Why” (less defensive)

Use silence strategically (ask, then wait)

Avoid multi-part or vague questions

READING PASSAGES

Passage 1: “The Questions That Shape Us”

(Theme: Questions in Personal Growth)

"At every turning point in life, questions act like invisible road signs. Some people ask: 'What's expected of me?' Others dare to ask: 'What do I expect from myself?' This subtle shift in language alters outcomes drastically. Great leaders, thinkers, and innovators have all had one thing in common—the ability to ask better questions. Socrates' entire method of teaching was built not on telling, but on asking. He never gave direct answers; instead, he led his students to find their truths through layers of inquiry. The irony? We live in an era of answers—instant Google results, rapid-fire opinions, and chatbots. Yet it is the questioners who remain rare—and valuable..."

Discussion Qs:

What's the central idea of this passage?

How does the author contrast modern information access with ancient questioning?

Passage 2: “The Interviewer’s Superpower”

(Theme: Journalism & Questioning)

"When Barbara Walters sat across from world leaders and Hollywood stars, she wasn't armed with a script—she came equipped with curiosity. She knew when to pause, when to push, and when to stay silent. It wasn't just about asking, 'What's next in your career?' It was about: 'When did you realize fame had a cost?' These weren't just interview questions—they were trust bridges. In every great interview, there lies a pattern: ease, empathy, and then excavation. By the time the tough question arrives, the subject feels safe enough to answer honestly. It's less about prying, more about unlocking."

Discussion Qs:

What interviewing techniques are discussed here?

How does empathy play a role in questioning?

Passage 3: "The Quiet Skill of Smart Learners"

(Theme: Academic and Workplace Questioning)

"In a university lecture or corporate meeting, the best learners aren't the ones who write the most—they're the ones who raise their hands at the right moment. But asking good questions takes courage. Many fear looking 'dumb.' This fear silences potential insights and innovation. The best questions come not from knowing, but from noticing. When someone says, 'This plan is foolproof,' the thoughtful mind wonders: 'What's the backup if it fails?' Smart questioning reveals not just critical thinking—it shows initiative. And employers value that more than any GPA." Discussion Qs:

Why do people hesitate to ask questions?

What makes a question "smart" in a professional setting?

4. VOCABULARY TABLE

Word	Meaning
Inquisitive	Eager to ask questions or learn
Perceptive	Having a good understanding of things

Digressive	Departing from the main subject
Provocative	Causing thought or strong reaction

Ambiguity	Unclear or having more than one meaning
Nuance	A subtle difference in meaning or tone
Rhetorical	Asked for effect, not requiring an answer
Assertive	Confident and direct in speech or behavior
Reflective	Deeply thoughtful
Curiosity	Desire to learn or know
Clarify	Make (a statement or situation) clear
Interrogate	Ask questions aggressively or thoroughly
Explore	Examine or investigate systematically
Deliberate	Done consciously or intentionally
Elicit	To draw out a response or

	reaction
--	----------

Open-ended	Not limited to one possible answer
Insightful	Showing deep understanding
Specificity	The quality of being precise
Implication	A conclusion that can be drawn
Reframe	Change the way something is expressed
Precision	The quality of being exact
Redundant	Unnecessary repetition
Facilitate	Make an action or process easier
Decode	Interpret or make sense of something
Inquiry	The act of asking for information
Paraphrase	Rewording for clarity
Introspective	Examining one's own thoughts or feelings
Sincere	Genuine or honest
Delve	Investigate or research deeply
Concise	Giving a lot of information in

few words

5. IDIOMS & EXPRESSIONS

Idiom	Meaning
Ask away	Feel free to ask
Beat around the bush	Avoid the main topic
Burning question	An urgent or important query
Call the shots	Be the one who makes decisions
Cut to the chase	Get to the point
Get to the bottom of it	Discover the real cause or truth
Grasp at straws	Make a desperate attempt
Hold your tongue	Stay silent
Keep someone on their toes	Keep alert and ready
Put someone on the spot	Force someone to answer or decide suddenly
Raise eyebrows	Cause surprise or disapproval
Read between the lines	Understand the hidden meaning
Shoot the breeze	Casual conversation, not deep questioning

Stir the pot	Provoke or incite conversation or conflict
	or conflict
Think on your feet	React quickly in a conversation or situation

6. SPEAKING PRACTICE

Activity 1: Open-Ended Fire Drill

Each mentee must ask their partner 5 open-ended questions about their dreams, struggles, or opinions. No yes/no questions allowed. Then switch roles.

Activity 2: Interview Role-Play

Pairs act as interviewer and guest. One scenario:

You're applying to a startup. What questions will you ask the CEO?

Each interviewer must come up with at least 3 strong, well-phrased questions.

7. ASSIGNMENT

Title: *"Questions That Matter"*

Part 1:

Write 5 open-ended questions you would ask:

A mentor in your field

A recruiter in your dream job

A public figure you admire

Part 2:

Choose one of your questions and write a paragraph (~150 words) explaining:

Why you chose it

What insight you hope to gain

How it could lead to a deeper conversation

8. SELF READING - SAMPLE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. Career & Work

Q1: *“What motivates you to keep going during tough projects?”*

A: “I’m driven by a sense of ownership. When a project gets hard, I remind myself of the impact it’ll have if it succeeds. Also, I love problem-solving—it keeps me sharp.”

Q2: *“How do you decide if a job is the right fit for you?”*

A: “I look at growth potential, the team culture, and how aligned the job is with my long-term goals. Salary matters too, but it’s not the only factor.”

2. Self-Reflection & Personal Growth

Q3: *“What’s one mistake you made that taught you something valuable?”* A: “I once rushed into a leadership role before I was ready. It humbled me and taught me to listen more than I speak. Now, I lead with patience.”

Q4: *“If you could go back and give your younger self advice, what would it be?”* A: “I’d say: ‘Take more risks. Fail faster. Trust your instincts.’ I played it too safe in my early 20s.”

3. Learning & Curiosity

Q5: *“What’s something new you learned recently that excited you?”*

A: “I’ve been learning about behavioral economics—it’s fascinating how people make irrational decisions. It’s changing how I think about communication and design.”

Q6: *“When you don’t understand something, what’s your process for figuring it out?”* A: “I break it down into smaller parts, research each part, and ask someone smarter than me. I’ve learned to not be afraid of looking ‘dumb’—it’s part of learning.”

4. Leadership & Decision Making

Q7: *“What’s the hardest decision you’ve made as a leader?”*

A: “Letting go of a team member who wasn’t a fit, despite being likable. It was painful but necessary for the team’s health.”

Q8: *“How do you handle feedback, especially if it’s critical?”*

A: “I used to get defensive, but now I take a breath, listen, and ask follow-ups. Feedback is free growth advice if you’re brave enough to take it.”

5. Creativity & Innovation

Q9: *“Where do your best ideas usually come from?”*

A: “Strangely, in the shower or while walking. When my brain is relaxed, ideas surface. I jot them down quickly or they disappear.”

Q10: *“What’s the biggest creative risk you’ve taken?”*

A: “Quitting my safe job to build a business around storytelling. It was terrifying—but it’s also the most fulfilling thing I’ve done.”

6. Relationships & Empathy

Q11: *“What does being a good friend mean to you?”*

A: “Someone who shows up, even when it’s inconvenient. And who listens without trying to fix everything.”

Q12: *“How do you rebuild trust after it’s broken?”*

A: “By taking accountability, not defending myself, and being consistent over time. Trust is a long game.”

7. Global & Social Topics

Q13: *“What’s one social issue you deeply care about, and why?”*

A: “Access to education. I believe it’s the most powerful equalizer—and millions still don’t have it.”

Q14: *“How do you think technology is changing how we connect with others?”* A: “It’s a double-edged sword. We’re more connected and yet lonelier. Real connection takes time and intention, which tech can’t automate.”

8. Future & Vision

Q15: *“Where do you see yourself five years from now?”*

A: “Hopefully building something that helps others grow—maybe my own mentorship platform. But I’m also open to surprises.”

Q16: *“What kind of legacy do you want to leave behind?”*

A: “That I made people feel heard. That I asked the right questions, and helped others believe in themselves.”

1.I appreciate your feedback, thank you. However, I found a few of the points that you mentioned to be a bit ambiguous, and I would love some clarification if you don't mind please.

2.Her argument was well thought out and captured the nuance of a very complex issue

3.Rhetorical question

When he asked if anyone enjoyed the meeting, it was clearly a rhetorical question

4.I was assertive in the meeting, i made my points firmly but RESPECTFULLY

5.REFLECT ---- LIGHT MIRROR

REFLECTIVE ___ thoughtful, deep thinking, past experiences

After the class, Shah wrote a reflective feedback about what went well in the class

6.You delegated the work

7.Adj- intentional (DELIBERATE) --- her choice of words was deliberate to avoid misunderstanding

VERB- TO THINK ----- THE jury took hours to DELIBERATE before reaching a verdict

8.To elicit responses, to elicit thoughtful answers

9.DELVE- Before your research project, you MUST delve deep into the

10.SHOOT THE BREEZE- after work we sat on the park bench and _____ for a couple of hrs

11.GRASP AT STRAWS ----- HE WAS _____ trying to explain why the project failed

12.After getting asked difficult questions, he had to think on his feet to answer those unexpected questions