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*How we change what others think, feel, believe and do*



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## Open and Closed Questions

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These are two types of questions you can use that are very different in character and usage.

### Closed questions

#### Definition

There are two definitions that are used to describe closed questions. A common definition is:

*A closed question can be answered with either a single word or a short phrase.*

Thus 'How old are you?' and 'Where do you live?' are closed questions. A more limiting definition is:

*A closed question can be answered with either 'yes' or 'no'.*

Thus 'Are you happy?' and 'Is that a knife I see before me?' are closed questions, whilst 'How are you?' and even 'How old are you?' are not, by this definition, closed. This limited definition is also sometimes called a 'yes or no' question, for obvious reasons.

#### Using closed questions

Closed questions have the following characteristics:

- They give you *facts*.
- They are easy to answer.
- They are quick to answer.
- They keep control of the conversation with the questioner.

This makes closed questions useful in the following situations:

Usage	Example
As opening questions in a conversation, as it makes it easy for the other person to answer, and doesn't	<i>It's great weather, isn't it?</i> <i>Where do you live?</i> <i>What time is it?</i>

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force them to reveal too much about themselves.	
For testing their understanding (asking yes/no questions). This is also a great way to break into a long ramble.	<i>So, you want to move into our apartment, with your own bedroom and bathroom?</i>
For setting up a desired positive or negative frame of mind in them (asking successive questions with obvious answers either yes or no ).	<i>Are you happy with your current supplier?</i> <i>Do they give you all that you need?</i> <i>Would you like to find a better supplier?</i>
For achieving closure of a persuasion (seeking yes to the big question).	<i>If I can deliver this tomorrow, will you sign for it now?</i>

Note how you can turn any opinion into a closed question that forces a yes or no by adding tag questions, such as "isn't it?", "don't you?" or "can't they?" to any statement.

The first word of a question sets up the dynamic of the closed question, signaling the easy answer ahead. Note how these are words like: do, would, are, will, if.

## Open questions

### Definition

An open question can be defined as:

*An open question is likely to receive a long answer.*

Although any question can receive a long answer, open questions deliberately seek longer answers, and are the opposite of closed questions.

### Using open questions

Open questions have the following characteristics:

- They ask the respondent to think and reflect.
- They will give you *opinions* and *feelings*.
- They hand control of the conversation to the respondent.

This makes open questions useful in the following situations:

Usage	Example
As a follow-on from closed questions, to develop a conversation and open up someone who is rather quiet.	<i>What did you do on your holidays?</i> <i>How do you keep focused on your work?</i>
To find out more about a	<i>What's keeping you awake</i>

person, their wants, needs, problems, and so on.	<i>these days?</i> <i>Why is that so important to you?</i>
To get people to realize the extend of their problems (to which, of course, you have the solution).	<i>I wonder what would happen if your customers complained even more?</i> <i>Rob Jones used to go out late. What happened to him?</i>
To get them to feel good about you by asking after their health or otherwise demonstrating human concern about them.	<i>How have you been after your operation?</i> <i>You're looking down. What's up?</i>

Open questions begin with such as: what, why, how, describe. Using open questions can be scary, as they seem to hand the baton of control over to the other person. However, well-placed questions do leave you in control as you steer their interest and engage them where you want them.

When opening conversations, a good balance is around three closed questions to one open question. The closed questions start the conversation and summarize progress, whilst the open question gets the other person thinking and continuing to give you useful information about them.

A neat trick is to get them to ask *you* open questions. This then gives you the floor to talk about what you want. The way to achieve this is to intrigue them with an incomplete story or benefit.

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