



Puppies are cute. Puppies with questions? Super cute. (image from Giphy)

Better Questions for Better Design Feedback

You've shared your design. Now what?



Dan Brown [Follow](#)

Feb 28, 2019 · 5 min read ★

What is the single worst question to ask after presenting a design? If you think “What did I do with my life?” you might be right. The one I am thinking of, though, is:

“So what do you think?”

You may have heard that it's good to keep questions **open-ended**. “So what do you think?” is very much open-ended. But what it fails to do is coach your critics on what you need to take the design forward.

“So what do you think?” asks for validation. It reveals your need to get things right. It implies that you're more interested in admiring your work than in hearing others' insights because you're not offering a real invitation to critique. Maybe you're saying that you don't really want to know what people think. Or perhaps it's a confession that you'll be satisfied with vague input you'll subject to interpretation.

Simply put, to ask “So what do you think?” demonstrates that you think of your work as a finished product, not as a springboard for discussion.

Presenting Design = Explaining + Asking

You start a design presentation with a recap of objectives. You describe the foundational, underlying concept. You spell out the overall structure of the design. Then you highlight important areas that illustrate how you met user needs. But if you only describe the design, your presentation is incomplete.

After the describing and explaining, you **ask your first question**.

Your presentation isn't done until you've asked pointed questions

about the work. While we're at it, let's make them good questions.

Asking good questions depends on good preparation. When you're showing a design, you're not just showing the complete picture. You're showing a set of interconnected decisions, which have a **source** or a **rationale**, and a **confidence level**. You're more confident about some decisions (how you *prioritized* the regions on the screen, for example) and less about others (how you *labeled* those regions).

Through Confidence, Questions

The more you're aware of your decision-making, the better prepared you are. Keep a catalog, even just in your head, of **how** and **why** you made certain decisions. Here are some common decisions when designing a screen (in descending order of confidence):

- I removed this other content because it distracted from the purpose of the page.
- I chose this label because I thought it conveyed the breadth of content in this category.
- I wasn't sure where to put this, but it seemed important.
- I have no idea why I did this, but it fit nicely with the rest of the design.

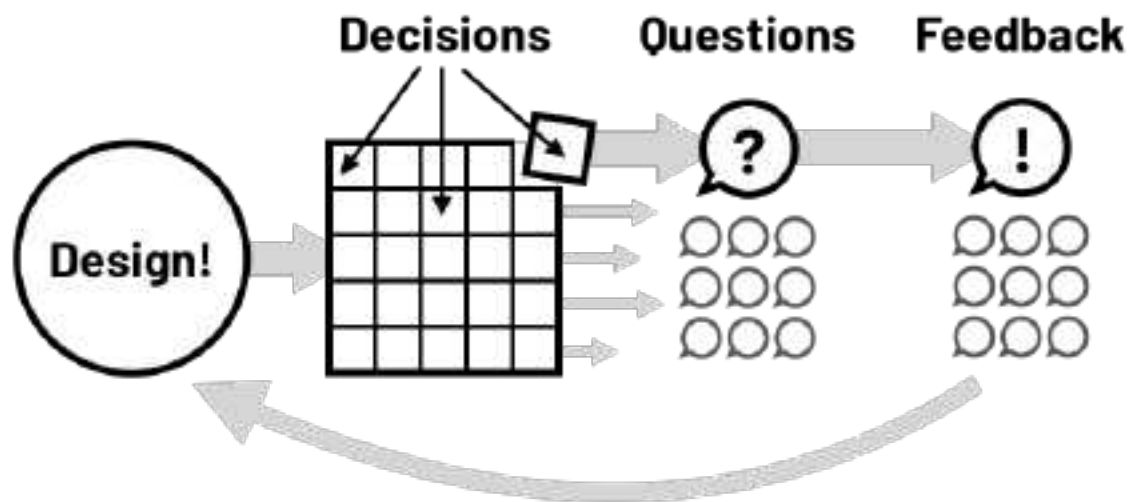
Regardless of your level of confidence, **decisions bring opportunities to ask questions**. Every decision comes with underlying assumptions or inputs. Those are the things you ask questions about:

- Does the position of this element effectively convey the

importance to users?

- Where would *you* put this element?
- Is there sufficient emphasis on this information?
- How does this information support the screen's purpose?
- Does this label adequately cover the range of content?
- What other content can we remove because it's distracting?

Each question relates directly to a design decision. Whether you're trying to validate an assumption, or see how someone else might interpret it, you can use the decision to drive a line of questioning. But to do this, you need to be aware of how you made your decisions.



The design process produces decisions, interrelated and connected. These decisions in turn seed questions, which produce specific, details, and directed feedback, that becomes another input into the design process.

Instead of asking for a value judgment (“what do you think?”) these questions draw people into the design process. They ask participants not just what works and what doesn’t, but also to think about how

and why the product should be one way and not another. Questions like these value deliberation and rationale over subjective judgments.

Curiosity, Skepticism, Humility

Your mindset is the attitude you use to interpret the world and decide how to act within it. **Carol Dweck** laid the groundwork for mindset through her work on growth and fixed mindsets. I've extended the idea to collaborative and creative mindsets for designers.

Asking “So what do you think?” represents the antithesis of the creative mindsets. It says:

- I'm not interested in specifics. (Indifference)
- If you say “it looks good” I believe you. (Certainty)
- If I expose too much of my process, you'll see that I'm making some of this up. (Pretension)

It's sometimes hard to cultivate a productive mindset. After all, you may be going against the grain of your personality, pushing against decades of psychology. But the process of design, not to mention personal growth, comes with its uncomfortable parts. Instead, you can adopt **behaviors** that reflect the essential creative mindsets.

- **Ask questions:** Instead of tending toward explanation or defensiveness, use feedback as an opportunity to probe further about someone's thoughts. (Curiosity)
- **Don't take feedback at face value:** Instead of assuming you understand what someone means, get them to explain their thoughts, even if it means defining basic terms like “color” or

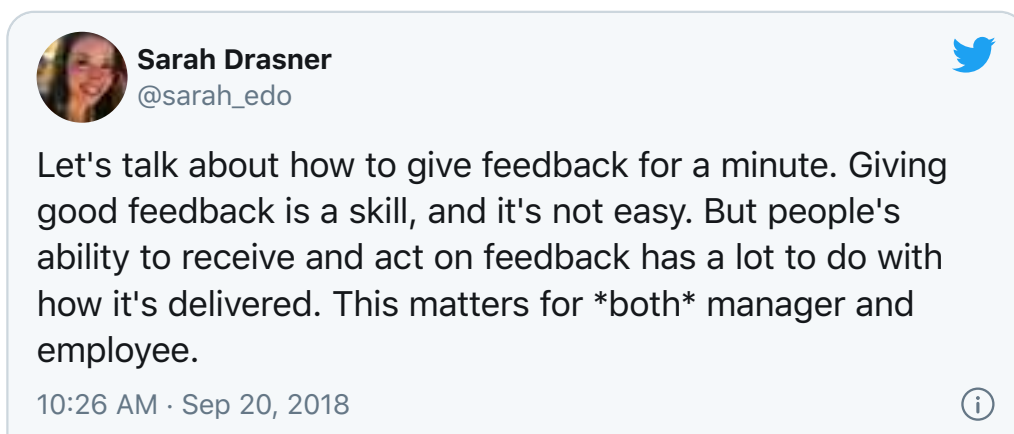
“location”. (Skepticism)

- **Express your assumptions:** Instead of concealing where you lacked confidence, highlight the areas you need the most help. (Humility)

It’s difficult to say, “I’m going to be curious now,” and then follow through with that. It’s hard, but not impossible, to say, “I should ask a question.” But let’s get back to asking good questions.

Giving and Getting

“So what do you think?” should seem quaint now. A design presentation is incomplete if it doesn’t end with questions. More importantly, it is our responsibility, as designers, to establish a framework for others to participate in the design process. Giving critique doesn’t come naturally, and isn’t taught in schools. But, we know it to be important. So, we get advice like this:



I love seeing prominent people in tech talking about this stuff. Yes, the people we work with should be great at **giving** feedback. And, yes, they need tools for how to do that.

But as the designer on the team, and especially as the design lead on the team, you can't expect anyone to know the right way to critique my work. My role, then, is **getting** it out of them, coaching them. How? By asking better questions, those that directly tie to your decisions.