

# Common pitfalls in Q&A

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(a developing document)

## Why this matters

As an experimentalist, you probably spent ~1% of your total PhD time in practicing Q&A attack/defense. Too bad because you will be primarily evaluated on that (the interview day: a 50 min job talk, many hours of Q&As).

Many times I see one mishandled question ruined the entire job interview. If you think this is tough, think about celebrities / politicians on TV.

## Common problems

**Dancing around.** Not giving answer directly. Esp this is a yes/no question. For any question, always give the answer in the first sentence, then explain as needed.

**Concede hastily.** You should know exactly what your contributions are and defend. When people (mistakenly) ask "Is your contribution/idea just ...?", too many times I heard you say a quick "yes". That comforts you but destroys the whole talk.

**Adding complexity.** When A was asked, you give A+ or A++ to explain, where A+ and A++ are details and never planned as part of your talk! Now you created new confusions for the audience you have to clean up.

**"That's a good question".** Avoid that. It may comfort you but does not convey useful messages. You sound weak.

## Advices

*These advices help avoid miscommunication. They cannot help limitations in your knowledge (which comes from extensive reading & debating).*

**Assuming impatient audience.** Always assume your audience wants to get the key points as soon as possible. They are not there to enjoy your talk like stand-up comedy. Be simple.

**Put yourself in other people's shoes.** Sometimes you get some weird/surprising questions. Do people have wrong assumptions/mental models about your work? Quickly detect that, call it out, and go from there.

**Call out incorrect assumptions.** Related to above. Especially, if you see people trivializing your contribution, immediately call out.

**Do they know what they are asking?** Often, people are good at shooting clear questions. Some people may be just "thinking aloud". If you are not 100% sure, you can paraphrase the question and ask for confirmation.

**Agree, then disagree.** Confirm what was right first. This helps soften any hostile sentiment. You can see this a lot in political debates/interviews on TV.

**Be ready to give a short answer.** For yes/no questions that seek quick clarification, just do that and resume your original talk.

(TODO: how to handle hostile audience?)