

Responding to questions effectively

The aim of this guide is to give you some practical strategies for handling and responding to questions during or at the end of an oral presentation.

Other useful guides from Learning Development: *Planning an effective presentation*

Introduction

Many presenters fear the question and answer session at the end of their presentation because they feel that they are losing control of their input (speaking seems so much safer). However, it is important to remember that the questions are a vital part of the presentation for the whole audience as they allow for clarification and consolidation of learning. The presenter can enhance the effectiveness of the question and answer session by treating it as a formal part of the presentation that requires as much careful planning and control as the delivery of the core material.

Plan to take control

The background work that you undertook whilst planning your presentation is the key to handling questions effectively. If you have defined a precise focus for your presentation and have explored this thoroughly in your background research and planning, you are more likely to be able to respond to questions with precise answers. If you have been unfocused in your preparatory work, this will come across in the way you answer questions.

When planning your presentation, you will need to:

- identify when questions will be invited in your talk and plan to inform your audience of this;
- plan to leave plenty of time for questions so that the audience doesn't feel rushed (this might involve having to reduce the content of your talk);
- prepare prompts for questions that are open and straightforward: *"That's the end of my presentation. I would now like to stop and take questions from the audience"*.

As a further part of your planning you may decide to:

- define the topics for discussion: *"Have you any questions on the four principles that I've outlined?"*;
- avoid answering questions that fall outside of the remit of your talk: *"I'm afraid that really falls outside of my objectives for today's presentation. Perhaps we can resume discussion of that particular point later?"*

Responding to questions

One of the main problems with question and answer sessions is that the presenter's nerves frequently force an inappropriate response. This could be because a question has been misinterpreted or that only key words from the question have been heard rather than the full content. The following steps will help you respond more effectively to questions from your audience.

Step one: listen

It is important to listen to all parts of a question before drawing premature conclusions about your 'best' response. Frequently questions can change direction at the last moment, particularly if the questioner is thinking on her/his feet. This can throw you if you have already started to leaf through your material for the 'appropriate' response. Remember that questioners will frequently try to make a point whilst asking their question: "*Surely a more meaningful interpretation of X is that it?*" It is therefore important to both hear the content of the question and try to decipher the questioner's intention.

Step two: understand

If you are worried that you haven't understood a question, clarify the area of enquiry *before* going any further. Check for direct confirmation by paraphrasing the question back to the questioner "*You want me to explain the process of ...?*" or check that your reply will be heading in the right direction "*Do you mean in relation to factor X or factor Y?*".

Step three: communicate and involve

It is important to remember that even though you are taking a question from one member of the audience, as a presenter, you are still responsible for the interest and engagement of the other audience members. This is particularly important in large groups as the audience will become bored if the presentation descends into a series of one-to-one discussions. To involve the rest of the audience (and avoid potentially extended dialogue with the questioner) make sure the whole audience has heard and understood the question by outlining the area of enquiry: "*I've been asked to outline my thinking behind ...*"

Step four: respond

When you reply to a question, direct your answer to both the questioner and other members of the audience. Try to keep your responses as focused as possible. This will help keep them brief and preserve space for other questions. To avoid going into too much detail, stop and check back with the questioner to see if you have answered his/her query: "*Does that explain why we chose to ...?*".

Allow follow-up questions

A particularly effective technique encourages your audience to ask questions after the event has finished through email discussion or telephone comments. This shows a particularly high level of respect for your audience's ideas and implies that the topic still has much further scope for enquiry.

Things to avoid

When handling questions and answers, you will still need to be as polished and professional as you have been for the main delivery of your presentation. There are some common dangers that are useful to avoid.

Answering the question you wished you'd been asked

A common trick played by politicians, this strategy ignores the precise nature of the question and uses a predetermined answer to the broad topic area. If handled ineptly, this technique is very obvious to the audience and frustrating to the questioner.

Making a second 'mini' presentation

This is the process whereby you make a lengthy response, including all the information you'd left out in planning the main presentation. Remember, you left that information out for a reason! Your unplanned response will be unstructured and rambling, so keep things focused and brief (check the time as you respond). You can always offer to forward lengthy detail after the event.

Passing the blame

"*That wasn't my idea, my supervisor did the preliminary work, I've simply attempted to ...*" Passing the blame to others comes across as weak and evasive. If an idea from the audience is a good one, acknowledge its value. If it isn't, make a polite rebuttal and move on.

Defensive answers

Occasionally, questions can really put you on the spot, but it is important to remain calm and in control. An aggressive or defensive reply will be seen as weakness on your part and will spoil the effect of an otherwise successful presentation.

Handling difficult questions

It is important not to start responding to a difficult question before you have thought about the answer. Repeating the question and asking for clarification will help create some space for your thoughts.

Sometimes you will need to think about a question for a moment before responding. You may be able to buy a little bit of thinking time to help focus your response. Useful strategies include searching for an appropriate visual aid to help focus your response or simply pausing for a moment or two to think. For even more time, suggest that you'll come back to the topic later (but don't forget to do this).

Sometimes questions are too difficult to answer. Don't worry about admitting that you don't know something or haven't considered an alternative approach. An enthusiastic "*That's an interesting idea, I'd not thought of that*" is much more positive than a mumbled "*I don't know*". Remember that a presentation is a two-way process and it is important to show that you are learning from your audience as well.

Occasionally, questions will fall outside of the remit of your talk and it would be too much of a diversion to tackle them in front of the whole audience. Respond positively to any such questions and suggest that they best be tackled by a quick chat after the event.

Finally, you can come across a questioner who disagrees strongly with your argument. Although this can feel very awkward, remember that you are still responsible for the whole audience and that you cannot allocate all of your question time to one individual (no matter how passionate her/his views). If you feel that you have answered the initial question, announce that you will move on and suggest that you might continue discussion after the presentation. If the questioner persists, use an assertiveness technique called 'broken record' to assert your position calmly: "*I'm afraid I need to move on ... I do need to move on ... I would like to move on now.*" Your final sanction is to take another question or even close the presentation.

Summary

Question and answer sessions are important elements of any presentation. Plan for the question session by determining when you will be inviting questions and specifying any themes that you would like questioners to pursue. Clearly announce the start of your question session and involve all audience members in the way that you repeat and respond to questions. Make sure you respond to the question being asked and have practiced methods for dealing with awkward questions. Avoid common pitfalls by responding to questions positively and enthusiastically whilst keeping your answers brief and focused. Above all, don't be afraid to admit what you don't know: it is better to admit the limits of your knowledge than attempt an uninformed answer.

This study guide is one of a series produced by Learning Development at the University of Leicester. As part of our services we provide a range of resources for students wishing to develop their academic and transferable skills. You can find us on the 2nd floor of the David Wilson Library

0116 252 2004 | studyhelp@le.ac.uk | www.le.ac.uk/succeedinyourstudies