

Asking Clarifying Questions

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss the ways in which various types of clarifying questions can help you get the information you need to better understand a situation. The areas of focus include:

1. The Four Types of Clarifying Questions
 - a. Yes/No Questions
 - b. Short Answer Questions
 - c. Leading Questions
 - d. Open-Ended Questions
2. When and How to Use Clarifying Questions

1. The Four Types of Clarifying Questions

Knowing when and how to ask the right kinds of questions is a very important skill in communication, and it's also a very key skill in conflict resolution.

There are four different kinds of questions you can use to get information and clarify your understanding of a situation:

- Yes/no questions
- Short answer questions
- Leading questions
- Open-ended questions

1a. Yes/No Questions

The **yes/no question** is a very simple way to confirm facts. You simply want a yes or no answer to confirm that something happened.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You might say to your neighbor, "Did you visit that new restaurant last weekend?" You're just asking for a simple yes or no response.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If your boss has relayed a set of complex instructions to you, you might summarize what they said and ask, "Did I get that right?" You are asking your boss to confirm whether your understanding of your instructions is correct.



TERM TO KNOW

Yes/No Question

A question used to confirm facts, answered by a yes or no.

1b. Short Answer Questions

The **short answer question** is not to confirm information but to reveal a few more facts with a short response. It could be a single word or just a short sentence.

➦ **EXAMPLE** You might say, “Was it difficult to find parking at that new restaurant?” Yes or no, or very short answer: “We drove around the block a couple times, but we found a place.” You’re getting a few more facts than you would with a simple yes or no.



TERM TO KNOW

Short Answer Question

A question used to reveal facts, answered by a single word or brief statement.

1c. Leading Questions

The **leading question** is a very interesting kind of question because of the way it’s phrased. It’s a bit like the yes/no question in that you want to confirm something, but what you want to confirm is your own belief or assumption.

➦ **EXAMPLE** You might say something like, “Don’t you think the prices are a little high for the food you get at that restaurant?” You clearly have an opinion about the restaurant’s prices and food, and you are putting the assumption that you’re going to get agreement from your neighbor into the way you phrase the question.



TERM TO KNOW

Leading Question

A question asked to confirm or disconfirm an assumption or belief of the asker, usually phrased with the speaker’s belief as part of the question.

1d. Open-Ended Questions

An **open-ended question** is a question that you ask when you want to elicit more information and receive a detailed response to something.

There is no bias in this type of question, and more than a yes or no response is required.

➦ **EXAMPLE** You might say to your neighbor, “Tell me, how did you like that restaurant?” or “What was your experience when you went to the restaurant last weekend?” Now you’ve invited your neighbor to simply tell you what their experience at the restaurant was like. When you ask an open-ended question, you want someone to talk, and you want more information.



TERM TO KNOW

Open-Ended Question

A question asked to elicit a detailed explanation of a situation, answered with a detailed statement.

2. When and How to Use Clarifying Questions

All four of these kinds of questions do have a purpose, and you can use them to get different kinds of information.

- *Yes/No Question:* In a conflict situation, you can confirm facts about what happened with a yes/no question.

➞ **EXAMPLE** “Was Joe with you at the school yard when the fight broke out? Yes or no?”

- *Short Answer Question:* You might want to glean a little more information by using a short answer question.

➞ **EXAMPLE** “Were any of your friends involved in the fight? How many of them were involved?”
You want to know the particulars of the people involved in the conflict.

- *Leading Question:* Perhaps you want to use a leading question to check out an assumption of yours.

➞ **EXAMPLE** “Was bullying involved at all in what happened in the schoolyard fight?” or “Don't you think bullying was involved in the fight that broke out?” You're asking a question to get the person to talk about the impact of bullying on the fight.

- *Open-Ended Questions:* Or you have the open-ended question that you can use to get a more detailed response.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You might ask, “What do you think caused the fight?”

Any of these questions can be very useful, depending on the kind of information you want to receive. However, a very important thing to remember is how you ask the question:

- *Do you want get information in a way that shows you're truly curious and unbiased?*
- *Do you simply want to know more?*
- *Are you asking a question in a very challenging way that could put someone off?*

➞ **EXAMPLE** You're talking to someone who is going to buy a new car, and you say, “Don't you think that car is a little expensive for you to buy right now?” That's a leading question and is clearly challenging because it could put the person you're talking on the defense.

Instead you might ask the question in a more open-ended fashion: “Can you tell me what went into your decision to buy a new car? Why did you choose this car?” Now you're inviting the person to tell you why they made that specific choice.



It's important to remember that leading questions can sometimes come across as challenging because they incorporate your own belief, assumption, or bias into the question. Therefore, you need to be careful when you use those kinds of questions.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that there are **four types of clarifying questions** that you can ask when you want to better understand a situation: yes/no questions, short answer questions, leading questions, and open-ended questions. You now understand that **when and how to use clarifying questions depends** on the specifics of the conversation. However, all four of these question types can be helpful in getting the right kind of information at the right time. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



TERMS TO KNOW

Leading Question

A question asked to confirm or disconfirm an assumption or belief of the asker, usually phrased with the speaker's belief as part of the question.

Open Ended Question

A question asked to elicit a detailed explanation of a situation, answered with a detailed statement.

Short Answer Question

A question used to reveal facts, answered by a single word or brief statement.

Yes/No Question

A question used to confirm facts, answered by a yes or no.