

Using Questions in Training

“The novice teacher shows and tells incessantly; the wise teacher listens, prods, challenges, and refuses to give the right answer.”

Teachings of Lao Tzu

Since the goal of training is to get people to change their knowledge, skill, or behavior, we have to get away from lecturing, which keeps the audience in a passive listening mode, and instead get the audience into an active listening, thinking, learning mode. Questions change a person’s brain from a passive to active mode; use questions frequently.

Techniques for asking questions:

- After you ask a question, count to seven to allow time for the attendees to formulate their questions and to get over their discomfort about speaking up in a group.
- Ask questions to which you really want an answer. Questions such as “*Does anybody need more time?*” in the middle of an exercise rarely yield useful results. Instead, try “*How many have completed up to number three?*” and then ask for a show of hands.
- Don’t put anyone on the spot. Question answering should be voluntary. If someone is not participating in a class and you are certain they know the answer to a question, it might be OK to ask them to answer an easy question.
- When you ask a question, solicit answers from several people before you give your opinion. The idea of asking the question is to get them involved--not for you to give the correct answer. However, if you are using a question to check understanding and they are clearly confused, it is appropriate to step in and clarify.
- At the beginning of a training, use questions as a mini “needs assessment” to get to know the group. Three or four questions related to your topic that can be answered by a show of hands help you get to know your audience and allows them to see the experience level in the room. This can keep you from making erroneous assumptions about your audience and may also help participants feel less awkward about their level of expertise.

How many of you have used X before?

How many of you can explain Y?

How many have been in your job for one year? three years? Over five years?

How many of you have been a manager before?

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Use questions to:

- Wake people up. Questions encourage two-way communication and get everyone involved. Each individual can formulate his/her own answer, even though only a few are likely to speak up.
Who should you consider partnering with for teen programs?
- Check understanding.
What's the best way to troubleshoot in a Word document?
If someone has answered your question (correctly or incorrectly), it's useful to ask the group, "Do you think that's correct? Does anyone have a different answer?"
- Get people to think about how they feel.
How many of you are happy with your collection development policy?
Should supporting the public on the public access computers be part of your job?
- When something is controversial and you want the controversy out in the open.
Should your library be using filters?
- To find out the experience level in the room.
How many of you have done original cataloging
How many of you use keyboard shortcuts?
How many used advanced search features in Google?
- For humor.
How many of you think you should be the one to decide when a change happens?

Techniques for answering their questions:

- Listen to the question, and then restate it to the group so everyone can hear it.
- Treat all questions equally and without judgment. Never make anyone "wrong." If they ask about something you've just discussed, this is your clue that maybe you weren't clear enough and further explanation is required. Or you can ask someone in class to explain, to see if someone else's explanation works better.
- If you don't know the answer, ask them if *they* know the answer.
- Sometimes it's necessary to defer the question until later to avoid being sidetracked. Try saying something like, "We'll be covering that this afternoon." If the questioner is troubled by this response you can write the question on the board, so everyone can see it won't be forgotten.