



Oral presentations: Dealing with questions

What is the purpose of question time?

Question time is a period of time usually at the end of an oral presentation when audience members ask questions or make comments about what you have presented. In most cases there will be a set amount of time for questions. Sometimes, the arrangements for questions will be informal and you will be able to answer questions during the presentation. At other times, it might be quite formal and questions will be directed through a chairperson.

Question time allows members of the audience to:

- ask for more information on particular ideas
- state their own views.

Question time also allows you to:

- discuss material that you were not able to include in your main presentation
- get feedback and suggestions from staff and other students about your work
- find out the ideas and views of others about your subject matter.

Preparing for question time

When preparing for question time, think about who will be in your audience and try to anticipate likely questions and possible answers or responses.

The nature of the audience

Some members of the audience might be experts, while others will be there simply to gain insights into the nature of other students' work. To include the wide range of audience members you will need to answer questions in simple language, using examples if you have any. Advanced technical language that is specific to your subject may be a barrier unless you know that you have an audience who are all specialists in your field.

Prepare answers for likely questions

Once you have thought about your audience, you can anticipate the kind of questions they are likely to ask. You will know the strengths and weaknesses of your work well enough to guess some of the questions that might arise, and you could place these into two categories.

(1) Questions you want to answer

There may be elements of your work that you have not included in your main presentation, either because you have not had time or because you thought they were not directly relevant to your main theme. You can refer briefly to these ideas during your main presentation, and then say, "I will say more about that during question time if people are interested." In this way, you can invite people to ask questions on particular subjects.

(2) Questions you do not want to answer

There may be particular areas of your work that you are not confident with, and are worried that people will ask you about them. It is a good idea to decide how you will deal with this before the presentation begins. You may want to say during your presentation "this is an area that I haven't done much work on so far, but I plan to investigate it". By doing this, you are giving the audience an indication that you have thought about the particular subject, but cannot

answer questions on it. If people do ask questions, you can say “As I said earlier, I have not done a full investigation of that issue yet”.

Of course, there is no way of preparing answers to or strategies for every question. So rather than being disheartened when you get a question that you were not prepared for, you may find that some unexpected questions will provide you with an opportunity to develop your own ideas. If you find yourself saying something that you hadn't thought of before, it means the question period is going very well, and that you are interacting with the audience in a positive way. There will inevitably be gaps in your presentation, and in your knowledge of the material raised during question time. If you are asked for factual knowledge that you do not have, it is better to admit that you don't know, or hadn't thought about the answer, than to make something up.

Responding to questions

Speak with confidence

It is normal to feel nervous during question time as you cannot be sure what people are going to ask. Adopting a positive attitude toward your work and the audience can help you feel more confident, but there are also ways of interacting with the audience that can help to make the experience more enjoyable.

Use eye contact and positive body language

Try to maintain eye contact with the person who has asked the question. If you do this, you will appear confident, and you will also be able to tell when the person is satisfied with the answer that you have provided. It is also useful to identify any nervous habits you might have (fidgeting, playing with a pen, pacing up and down) and try to control these habits. You could ask a friend or colleague to be in the audience and provide feedback on these elements of your presentation.

Some students may feel uncomfortable when educators or other students look directly at them and ask a question. In Australian society, however, asking a question is generally considered to be a positive and friendly act rather than a sign of aggression. Similarly, direct eye contact is considered a sign of confidence and openness. When someone asks you a direct question, it usually means they are interested in what you have said and want to know more about your subject.

Manage the allocated time

You can control the amount of time you spend answering each question. In a 5 to 10 minute question period, you will probably have time for 4 or 5 questions, if you keep your answers to a maximum of two minutes. Alternatively, you may decide that one question is so relevant that you can devote a whole 5 minutes on it. If you think that a particular question requires an answer that is longer than you have time for, you can always give a partial answer and then say, “I can speak with you about this more after the presentation”.

Strategies for managing difficult questions

You might get asked a complicated question and need time to think about your answer. In this case, it is better to take your time, rather than to start speaking before you are ready. You can ask for a moment to think about your answer. Alternatively, you can ask the person to re-phrase the question. This will give you time to think while they speak – and their use of language might help you to formulate the answer.

You may get some questions that you don't understand, or that are unclear as to the answer that is required. This is often the case with multi-part questions. In this case, it is appropriate to say to the person, “I didn't quite understand that question” or “Can you be more specific about what you would like me to comment on?”

If you are asked a question that you do know how to answer, but can't think of the right words, you can say, "I'll return to your question later". Once again, asking the person to re-phrase the question can be a useful strategy, as the language that the person uses will often remind you of what you are trying to remember.

Take the pressure off yourself

It is reassuring to know that question time is designed to encourage discussion rather than to be a test of your own knowledge, and there is no expectation from the academic staff that you will know the answer to every possible question that might arise. In most cases, questions will be on more general issues, and answers will take the form of thoughts or opinions, rather than basic facts.

Involve others in the discussion

You are not the only person participating in the question session, and in a good question and answer session, you will learn something, as well as the audience. If you feel during the question session as though you are being put under pressure, you can try to involve other members of the audience in a discussion about your subject. You can do this by asking questions of members of the audience after you have finished your own answer. If the session is going well, this kind of interaction will happen without any effort on your part – a member of the audience may respond to what someone else in the room has said. If you find the audience members speaking with one another as well as you, you can be assured that you have created a good discussion.

Focus on members of the audience who are interested

You may notice, during your presentation as well as during question time, that some members of the audience appear restless, tired, or in a hurry to leave. There is no need to feel concerned by this; it happens to all public speakers at some stage. Not all audience members will be interested in what you are saying and some of them might not understand it. Concentrate on making eye contact with members of the audience who already appear to be interested, rather than trying to make sure that everyone is paying attention.

A checklist for managing questions

When a question is asked, take a moment to run through a mental checklist to help you decide the best way to answer. You can use the one provided here, or design one of your own that suits your needs.

- Do I understand the question? Do I need it to be rephrased or repeated?
- Is it actually a question, or just a comment? Does it need to be answered?
- Does it seem to be a constructive or an intimidating question?
- Is it a question I am prepared for?
- Is it relevant? How long should I spend answering it?
- What kind of response is required – repetition, clarification, or comment?

So, if you feel as though you are being put under pressure during question time, remember that working through a checklist like this one can help to remove much of your anxiety, because it can remind you that you have a wide variety of options and strategies available to you. You can use whichever strategies suit you, so that you can come away from your question period feeling as though you have gained knowledge and insights, as well as having informed your audience.

Sources

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