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These are two types of questions you can use that are very different in character and usage.

Closed questions

Definition

There are two definitions that are used to describe closed questions. A common definition is:

A closed question can be answered with either a single word or a short phrase.

Thus 'How old are you?' and 'Where do you live?' are closed questions. A more limiting definition is:

A closed question can be answered with either 'yes' or 'no'.

Thus 'Are you happy?' and 'Is that a knife I see before me?' are closed questions, whilst 'How are you?' and even 'How old are you?' are not, by this definition, closed. This limited definition is also sometimes called a 'yes or no' question, for obvious reasons.

Using Closed Questions

Closed questions have the following characteristics:

- They give you *facts*.
- They are easy to answer.
- They are quick to answer.
- They keep control of the conversation with the questioner.

This makes closed questions useful in the following situations:

Usage	Example
As opening questions in a conversation, as it makes it easy for the other person to answer, and doesn't force them to reveal too much about themselves.	It's great weather, isn't it? Where do you live? What time is it?
For testing their understanding (asking yes/no questions). This is also a great way to break into a long ramble.	So, you want to move into our apartment, with your own bedroom and bathroom?
For setting up a desired positive or negative frame of mind in them (asking successive questions with obvious answers either yes or no).	Are you happy with your current supplier? Do they give you all that you need? Would you like to find a better supplier?
For achieving closure of a persuasion (seeking yes to the big question).	If I can deliver this tomorrow, will you sign for it now?

Note how you can turn any opinion into a closed question that forces a yes or no by adding tag questions, such as "isn't it?", "don't you?" or "can't they?" to any statement.

The first word of a question sets up the dynamic of the closed question, signaling the easy answer ahead. Note how these are words like: do, would, are, will, if.

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Open questions

Definition

An open question can be defined as:

An open question is likely to receive a long answer.

Although any question can receive a long answer, open questions deliberately seek longer answers, and are the opposite of closed questions.

Using open questions

Open questions have the following characteristics:

- They ask the respondent to think and reflect.
- They will give you *opinions* and *feelings*.
- They hand control of the conversation to the respondent.

This makes closed questions useful in the following situations:

Usage	Example
As a follow-on from closed questions, to develop a conversation and open up someone who is rather quiet.	What did you do on you holidays? How do you keep focused on your work?
To find out more about a person, their wants, needs, problems, and so on.	What's keeping you awake these days? Why is that so important to you?
To get people to realize the extend of their problems (to which, of course, you have the solution).	I wonder what would happen if your customers complained even more? Rob Jones used to go out late. What happened to him?
To get them to feel good about you by asking after their health or otherwise demonstrating human concern about them.	How have you been after your operation? You're looking down. What's up?

Open questions begin with such as: what, why, how, describe.

Using open questions can be scary, as they seem to hand the baton of control over to the other person. However, well-placed questions do leave you in control as you steer their interest and engage them where you want them.

When opening conversations, a good balance is around three closed questions to one open question. The closed questions start the conversation and summarize progress, whilst the open question gets the other person thinking and continuing to give you useful information about them.

A neat trick is to get them to ask *you* open questions. This then gives you the floor to talk about what you want. The way to achieve this is to intrigue them with an incomplete story or benefit.

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Probing

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When questioning someone, you may want at times to get into deeper detail about some particular issue or problem.

For example the other person may have indicated that they cannot make a decision today. This could be because they have an objection or simply that there is more information for you to discover, such as the process by which they make decisions.

Spot the signals

Before you start probing, you must spot the [signals](#) they are sending that there is more here than meets the immediate eye. Things to look for include:

Vagueness

What we say is often severely abbreviated from what we intend or think. We censor our thoughts or assume that things are already known. This can come out in vague words or statements that signal that there is more here.

For example if they say "I don't know" may indicate uncertainty or doubt. What don't they know? How did they get to 'not knowing'?

Judgment

The other person may well have made decisions which imply an evaluation or judgment of some kind. Either they or someone else has made a decision which can be surfaced and explored for weaknesses.

For example, if a person says "that wouldn't work", then you could explore who decided this.

Clarify the detail

Initially, you may have heard some brief comment or two that made you realize that there is more here to discover.

Use searching questions

Use questions that lead them to tell you more about the area of interest. This may use [closed questions](#) for ask specific details and [open questions](#) to encourage them to ramble

Who? When? What? Where? Why? How? are all probing questions that can help you dig down into further detail. Using these powerful questions is covered in further detail at the [5W1H page](#).

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Make it easy

Make it easy for them to answer. Be nice. Be casual.

Slip the questions in without them noticing. For example you can use [assumptive questioning](#) to assume that the problem already exists, although you should also beware of 'leading the witness'.

The [Columbo technique](#) may also be used to put them at their ease and then elicit the answer you want without them realizing they have been probed.

When seeking more detail, there are a number of types probes you can use, depending on what they are saying and what you want to discover.

Clarification

When they are vague or have not given enough information, seek to further understand them by asking for clarification.

What exactly did you mean by 'XXX'?
What, specifically, will you do next week?
Could you tell me more about YY?

Purpose

Sometimes they say things where the purpose of why they said it is not clear. Ask them to justify their statement or dig for underlying causes.

Why did you say that?
What were you thinking about when you said XX?

Examples

When they talk about something vaguely, you may ask for specific examples. This is particularly useful in interviews, where what you want to test both their truthfulness and the depth behind what they are claiming.

Sorry, I don't understand. Could you help by giving an example?
Could you give me an example of when you did XXX?
Tell me about a time when you ____.

Extension

When they have not given you enough information about something, ask them to tell you more.

Could you tell me more about that, please?
And what happened after that?

Then...

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Evaluation

To discover both how judgmental they are and how they evaluate, use evaluative question:

How good would you say it is?
How do you know it is worthless?
What are the pros and cons of this situation?

Emotional

Particularly if they are talking in the third person or otherwise unemotionally and you want to find out how they feel, you can ask something like:

"And how did you feel about that?"

When you do this, do be careful: you may have just asked a cathartic question that results in them exploding with previously-suppressed emotion.