

# TIPS FOR DEALING WITH QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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So, you've survived the actual presentation; now comes the trickier section: the final questions and answers. However, although you can't know what issues will be raised, you can still prepare for this part, as you can for your presentation, helping you to feel more in control of the unknown.

This part is as important as the presentation itself. If your answers are shaky and hasty then your audience will be left feeling unsure about your credibility, no matter how good your presentation was.

## ■ Know the topic's background

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It's all very well having a perfect presentation prepared in which you know the contents of all your slides; but, you should also have a good knowledge of the background to what you'll be presenting. You can learn about this while creating your presentation. If you know what your focus is from the beginning, it'll be easier to know what to hone in on. Having this insider knowledge will give you the tools you need to address the main questions put to you, and allow you to provide more concise answers. If, on the other hand, your preparations were ill-defined, this will undoubtedly be reflected in how you respond to questions.

## ■ Prepare for possible questions

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Although you can't know for sure what questions will pop up, you can attempt to guess. There are a number of ways in which you can achieve this:

- ▶ Consider who will be in your audience, especially in regard to any professors or supervisors: what are they particularly interested in?
- ▶ Attend other presentations (especially, if possible, presentations in which the professor(s) and/or supervisor(s) who'll be attending yours are present).
- ▶ Get your peers, friends and/or family to watch your presentation and ask you questions.
- ▶ Consider the main focus of your presentation: is it the methodology? Or a particular theory? Whatever it is, you'll probably get questions honed in on this part.

## ■ Responding to questions

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Despite all your best efforts to prepare for this section of the presentation, nerves can take hold and cause your responses to be less than eloquent. However, remember these following steps on the day, and you should be hitting those answers out of the park.

### ▶ Listen to and understand the question

This may seem obvious, but this is the easiest part to mess up. As your brain

is still most probably running on overdrive after trying to remember all you wanted to say in your presentation, it can be easy to misinterpret the question, miss key words, or only catch a few words rather than hearing the whole content.

Make sure you hear the *whole* question. When someone is asking a question off the top of their head, they can change track part way through and so throw you off the course you initially thought they were taking. Therefore, establish that you've understood both the contents and the aim of the question before attempting to answer it. If this means that you need to ask the questioner to repeat their question, then ask them to repeat the question. In fact, a good habit to get into is asking for the question to be repeated. This can help in a number of ways:

- you can double check that you heard the question correctly
- you can make sure that everybody in the audience heard the question
- it gives you extra time to think of an answer

If you're still not sure what they want from you, ask them to clarify their meaning: "Do you mean that you want me to explain about...?" or "Do you mean in relation to...?"

► **Pause**

This might only consist of a deep breath, but taking a slight pause can help you to ground yourself and allow you to consider possible answers. If the question was lengthy, your audience won't be expecting you to respond immediately.

► **Keep your response focused**

It can be easy to just start spouting out as much information as possible on the area you were asked and end up giving a second mini-presentation, but resist the urge. Keep focused and to the point. If you're unsure of whether you answered comprehensively enough, simply ask the questioner.

► **Don't forget the rest of the audience**

Even though only one person asked you a question, don't forget to make sure that the rest of the audience heard it and that you respond to *all* members as opposed to only the questioner.

## ■ Handling those difficult questions...

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It may happen that you're asked a difficult question. Don't respond immediately: *think* about how you could reply. By asking the questioner to repeat their enquiry and/or asking for clarification you can give yourself a little extra time to collect your thoughts.

This is where additional slides can come in handy. If you know that there are a few areas of your topic or research that are difficult to explain, have extra slides ready that you can refer to.

It could be that you simply don't know the answer: that's okay! You're not expected to know *everything*. However, avoid responding with just an "I don't know". Instead, say "That's an interesting point – I hadn't considered that before" or "I'm not sure of

the answer, but I can get back to you”. This shows that you’re learning from this experience as well as your audience.

## ■ What to avoid

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There are a few pitfalls you should try and avoid during your questions and answers.

- ▶ **Don’t answer the question you *wish* you’d be asked.** This is a very common ruse of politicians...It’ll simply waste time, as the questioner will most probably just repeat their question, and could even end up losing you marks.
- ▶ **Don’t become defensive.** Questions can put you on the spot, but an aggressive response will make you appear inept. Take a deep breath and remain calm and in control.
- ▶ **Don’t be tempted to bluff your way through an answer.**
- ▶ **And don’t lie.** Be honest. If you don’t know the answer, you don’t know the answer.