

ASKING AND ANSWERING QUESTIONS

Guidelines for Asking Good Questions:

A good, substantive question involves critical thinking, and focuses on the substance or content of what a person has said. A question like "Would you repeat what you said about X," or "What do you mean by Z," is not a substantive question because it involves no critical thinking on the questioner's part (however, these questions could be leading to a substantive question).

Here are some important guidelines for asking good questions:

- 1) The critical thinking required in asking a good, substantive question involves making a careful analysis and evaluation of the content of another person's presentation, focusing on things like:
 - a) the soundness of the overall thesis,
 - b) the arguments used to support the thesis,
 - c) the evidence provided to support each argument,
 - d) the conclusions reached by the presenter,
 - e) information the presenter left out of the presentation that was important.
- 2) Your question(s) should NOT be framed in such a way that they create a trap for the speaker. Rather, they should raise important points that require the speaker to respond in an intelligent fashion, perhaps clarifying, elaborating, or illustrating a point made in the presentation.
- 3) Always ask your questions in a professional, friendly manner. Your goal is not to have the presenter look bad, or to demonstrate your superior intellect. Rather, you should help the presenter by encouraging him or her to strengthen some of the weaker points in the presentation, or to emphasize an important point that was not given enough attention in the presentation. You may also challenge some of the conclusions the speaker reached if his or her logic or evidence does not support those conclusions adequately.
- 4) Since the question you ask a presenter may come as much as 20 to 30 minutes after he or she made the presentation, you may need to provide some context or a brief reminder what the issue was or what point you are addressing. Providing this context helps both the person who is answering the question and helps the rest of the audience understand what you are talking about.

Guidelines for Answering Questions:

Question and answer periods are important in the process of a presentation because the listener is able to give you verbal feedback during this phase. But presenters sometimes get anxious because the questions and answer period may seem like an oral exam. The keys to minimizing these feelings are to prepare well in advance, and to follow these important guidelines for answering questions:

1) The presenter or moderator should open the question and answer period by announcing that the group is ready for questions. He/she should indicate how they will recognize questions. For example: "Please raise your hand if you have a question to ask." If the presenter or moderator indicates how he/she will recognize questions, this will maintain your control of the floor, and audience members won't tend to shout out questions at random.

2) After listening carefully to the questions, restate or rephrase the question for the entire audience. This step has several benefits:

- a) it allows you to listen carefully to the question, rather than forcing you to formulate an answer to what you think the question will be;
- b) while you are restating you will have time to think of an appropriate answer (because we think much faster than we speak);
- c) you also involve the entire audience, keeping everyone interested and making sure that everyone heard and understood the question.

3) Direct your answer to the question to everyone, not just to the person who asked the question. Be brief and honest in your answers (no one can be expected to know everything).

4) When you are finished answering a question, don't look back at the person who asked the question. If you look back at the person who asked the question upon completing the answer, you are handing the floor back to them, rather than keeping control of the floor yourself. If the person who asked the last question does have follow-up questions, he or she can ask to be recognized again.