

Asking Questions For a Change



*how to ask
purposeful questions*

Why Do Questions Matter?

There are many reasons why you might want to ask purposeful questions. Questions are a great way to engage and connect with your readers, to draw them into your writing.

If you're writing to a group of **employees** you might want to gather opinions on a topic, or open some issues up for debate.

Writers on the **internet** have learned that questions help to generate comment, conversation and the exchange of ideas and opinions.

Coaches might ask questions to help their clients access powerful, resourceful states, or to open up new lines of thinking.

The *way* that you ask questions changes the results that you get – and the way you ask the questions will be driven by the intention that you set.

This e-book will show you how to set that intention – and ask questions on purpose.

1/ Create Some Space

Before you jump in and start asking questions, make sure you've created enough space – for your readers to participate, and for you to be clear on your purpose.

1. Leave room for your reader You might be squeezing your reader out with too many words, too much visual clutter, too many questions asked at once, or too much expertise. If it already looks like you've got all the answers, why would your readers want to spend time thinking about your questions?

2. Get clear on your purpose Underlying all questions is the desire to have a conversation, person to person, human to human. Think about how you'd do that in real life. Focus on one person you're talking to. How would you open the conversation? How could you show them that you were interested in what they had to say?

3. Think about the bigger purpose, beyond for example 'to get comments' or 'to engage my employees'. What will those comments and conversation, those responses to your questions help you to do? More importantly: how will it change things for your readers? What difference will your questions make to them?

2/ The Purpose That's Driving Your Question

"Please don't interrupt me when I'm asking rhetorical questions" (Mission Impossible III)

Not all questions demand an answer.

There are lots of different reasons why we ask questions, and getting clear on your reasons - getting clear on the *purpose* that's driving your questions - will help you phrase them to get the response that you're looking for.

Writing With A Clear Purpose In Mind

Sometimes we write questions quite naturally, without thinking about it all.

Consider for a moment the questions you ask when you genuinely need to know the answer. You're not asking to prompt a conversation but because you need help to do something (and you probably need it now).

The words come tumbling out, quick and fast:

- Does anyone know someone who can help me with a question on self-publishing?
- Is there a way that I can transfer all the content from a website to a blog?
- What's the best free software that I can use to edit my photos for flickr?

We focus on the end result: what we want to do, what we want help with, how to phrase the question so we're most likely to get a helpful response, and so we don't waste people's time.

What's interesting is how keen people are to respond to these direct and specific requests. Why might that be? It's probably because people:

- Like to be helpful
- Can see how they can add value
- Enjoy sharing resources or expertise
- Aren't wasting time waiting for you to get to the point
- Connect with the genuine request for help

It's the purpose or the intention that they're responding to. The words might make it easier or more difficult for them to do so, but that's what drives the response.

How Do Readers Identify The Purpose?

Readers recognise signals in the way the question is put. Here are 10 different sorts of 'purpose' and some notes on the way they change the corresponding question.

The purpose is to:

Get some help question is specific, direct, practical

Learn from feedback question expresses interest in learning, indicating an intention to share findings

Make connections question phrased in human, conversational style; refers to previous conversations

Get comments question is tacked on at the end, with little connection to the content

Encourage conversation question is deliberately open, leaving as much room as possible for readers

Stretch our minds question has hallmarks of great brain teasers or puzzles, requiring our brains to go chasing after the answer

Stimulate thought question suggests reflection over period of time, not immediate response

Think deeply question might be rhetorical, leading to reflection for the reader

Wake us up question is personal & direct with powerful simple language

Inspire change question is aimed at changing mindset or emotional state: a call to action, not asking for a written response

The last four examples aren't looking for a conversational response, or expecting a comment to be written. They're written with the intention of creating a different kind of reaction – a changed state.

3/ Asking Questions For A Change

“A person needs new experiences. They jar something deep inside, allowing him to grow. Without change something sleeps inside us and seldom awakens. The sleeper must awaken.” (Dune)

There are times when we write or ask questions without any expectation of getting an answer. These questions are asked with a different intention in mind: to expose the reader to a new idea, to create an emotional shift, or to jar something deep inside.

Powerful Coaching Questions

These are the type of questions that coaches tend to use: questions that might help someone

- reframe a problem, so they see it in a different way
- access positive states or
- tap into their inner resources

These powerful questions have certain recognizable characteristics. You'd expect to find:

- open questions, starting with a 'what' or a 'how' (and avoiding a 'why')
- questions that only the client / reader can answer: the person asking genuinely doesn't know the answer
- questions that are based on positive presuppositions

A presupposition is something you hold to be true. Something that underpins the question. The question doesn't make sense without the presupposition. For example, if I ask: *What inner resources will you draw upon to achieve your writing goals?*

I'm presupposing that:

- You have the inner resources that will help you
- You know what they are
- You know how to access them
- I don't know what they are, but I believe / know that you do
- My question might help you to tap into them

Some Questions To Get You Thinking About Questions

Have a look at these questions... ask yourself the questions and notice the different reaction you get inside.

1. What can you learn from this e-book?
2. Why have you learned from this e-book?
3. What have you learned from this e-book?
4. What 5 things have you learned from this e-book?
5. What was the most surprising thing you learnt from this e-book?

You'll have your own reactions and responses. Some things to flag up:

They all presuppose that you can learn something from this experience. The first presupposes that you haven't learned your lesson yet... (maybe implying a negative). Q2 uses 'why' which tends to throw us backwards to justify or defend our position. Best used with care.

Qs 3-5 open things up for a conversation by leading with an open 'what', presupposing you've already learned interesting things (and that you might want share them).

Q3 is very open but a little vague; there's no hook to hang it on. Qs 4 & 5 get our mind racing to find the answer: to construct a list of five, or to filter the learning for the most surprising thing.

What kind of reaction do you notice when you run the questions? Where do you notice the reaction: in your mind, in your stomach, in the back of your head?

We often ask questions to prompt or stimulate positive change in another person. Here are some things to think about if your purpose is to ask a question that will lead to a (positive) change.

First: think about your reader (just one). Think about where they're at. What kind of state they're in.

That might be: bored, Monday morning-ish, worried about how to do sales and marketing, bogged down in the minutiae of running their own business, lacking in confidence in the power of their own words, disbelieving that they're creative, convinced they can't take photographs.

Now: think about the state they'd like to be in.

That might be: energized, Friday morning-ish, confident in writing sales copy, relishing their creativity... and so on.

So now you've created a story. A journey. A distance your hero needs to travel from one point to another. To get from A to B.

The purpose of your question is to help your reader do just that. To get from A to B.

Hold on to the belief that they already have all the resources they need.

Focus on asking the question that will help your reader to tap into, to access, to make use of those resources.

Trust your instinct that you'll find the right answer.

Then: ask yourself this.

What's the most useful question you can ask that will help you reader get from where they are to where they want to be?

4/ Get The Words To Match The Intention

How do you get the words to match the intention? Well, the simple answer is that you focus on the intention and trust that the words will follow.

But there are other things you can do too.

You can learn more about the principles of effective communication and how we use language. If you're interested in language patterns and their effect I'd encourage you to find out more about NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming). Joseph O'Connor's *NLP Workbook* is a great place to start.

You can keep reflecting on questions that you read: how they're phrased, how you respond, what kind of words act as triggers for you.

You can watch your own reactions and think about why you respond to some questions (even if you're busy and don't want to) when others leave you cold (even if you like the person you're reading and want to try and respond).

Focus On The Positive Intention

But the simplest and most positive thing you can do is focus on your own positive intention. Get clear on the positive purpose behind your question. Try expanding the purpose till it becomes more compelling. Not just to 'get comments' or 'be conversational' but to have a conversation in order to... make human connections, change hearts and minds, teach someone about what you do.

Then focus on that. Focus on that intention. Narrow it down to thinking about one person you'd like to... connect with, learn from, inspire, teach, encourage.

And last but not least: trust. Trust your writing mind to find the words that will match the intention.

You've already got all the words you'll ever need. You're a human: you've been listening to, reading, absorbing, asking questions all your life.

You know what works. You've already got all the resources you'll ever need.

Focus on the positive intention. Then allow the words to flow.

5/ A Checklist for Questions

Questions don't work in isolation: they work in context.

You need to pay as much (if not more) attention to the framework for your question as you do the question itself.

Here are 7 things to think about before you add your questions to the bottom of the page

1 Have you left room for your readers to add value?

People like to be helpful, to feel as though they're adding something. If an article is beautifully polished and constructed it doesn't leave much room for your reader to add anything in, even if they want to.

Thinking about the space you're leaving for your readers can make a big difference to the way you write, and the way you ask questions.

2 How much work do people need to do in order to answer?

Take a quick flick through your article. Are you hoping your readers will invest time reading a long piece of writing, or some links you're pointing them to elsewhere?

If your readers feel they need to 'work' in order to answer your question you're less likely to get a response. (Of course you might want to get them to do the work anyway for a particular teaching reason... but that would be linked to a different purpose.)

3 Who will be able to answer your question?

Again: take a look at your piece. Are you assuming that people will have specialized knowledge or use a particular trade jargon? Do they need to have read a particular book or watched a particular film?

Perhaps you're talking about quite a specific incident or experience: this might make it hard for them to answer. Could you make it more general in order to include a wider number of people in the response?

4 How can you make it easier for people to answer your question?

Unless you're an exceptionally gifted teacher, writer or coach people will prefer the easy way round.

If you're looking for more conversation, if you're looking for people to be able to answer your question (and if not, why ask?), look for ways to make it as *easy* as possible.

Try making the question less specific and more universal. Reduce the amount of extra reading or link clicking your reader needs to do. Remove technical barriers to leaving a comment. Use plain English, as plain as you can, and the plainer the better!

5 What will you do with the responses you get?

Think about what you're going to do with the responses. Will you respond to each and everyone with care and attention? Will you listen closely to what your readers are replying?

How will you thank or reward people who take the time to answer your questions?

There are other less visible things you can do with the responses: you might learn from them, frame new articles from them, thicken and develop your blog or book as a consequence.

How you answer this question will relate to your intention, and that intention will change the way you ask the question. It will also change the kind of answers you get.

6 What's the positive intention behind your question?

Don't stick with the answer "to get more comments".

What will "getting more comments" allow you to do?

How will it help you to learn, to write, to teach, to inspire, to connect, to help others with marketing, to provide career advice, to show people how beautiful your country is, to make the world a little more human...?

Find the positive.

Find the purpose that goes beyond you and your writing. It'll help the words to flow.

7 What will your readers get from answering your question?

This is probably my killer question for you. Switch your focus from your need to ask a question and “get” comments.

Think about your reader. Focus on them.

What difference will your question make to them?

How can you phrase the question to help them tap into positive resources, see things in a new light, awaken happy memories, share their expertise, enjoy talking story with you?

Get clear on your own answer to that question.

Focus on that positive intention.

And start to ask questions for a change.