I. Before you ask a question

Preparation really is the most important step for asking good questions, so we've included some tips on preparing for meetings where you expect to be asking questions.

II. Strategies for asking effective questions

This section could also be called “5 tips for highly effective question-askers.”

III. Basic question theory

For those of you in disciplines who learn the theory before the practice, we have included some general background theory on question development at the end of this resource guide. Feel free to start in this section.

We hope you find this guide helpful. If you have any feedback at all, feel free to contact sga@su.ualberta.ca to share it.

If this resource guide proves useful for you, you might also want to check out these other great resources offered by Discovering Governance:

- The Answers Seminar
- Reading University Outlines of Issue
- Further reading on asking questions and getting answers

Good luck!
II. Strategies for asking effective questions

In our experience here at the Discovering Governance program, there is no universal, perfect question, nor is there such a thing as the most powerful question. “Why are we here?” might be a profoundly powerful question in a philosophy class… not so much in a meeting.

There are, however, such things as strategies for asking good questions as well as some basic theory behind good question asking. Hopefully these will help you.

1) Come prepared.
Read the materials in advance so you’re prepared to discuss the items on the agenda. Understand your role as a student representative so that you’re prepared to fulfill your role and responsibilities. Not sure what your role is? Ask us! We can help.

2) Ask questions respectfully.
The act of asking questions is not disrespectful, but the tone you use may be. Your experience on University committees will be more successful if you treat other members with the respect you wish to be treated with yourself.

3) Draw from your own expertise.
As a university student, you are learning discipline-specific methods of inquiry in your classes. Draw upon the skills you’re learning in your studies to structure coherent, meaningful questions. Consciously drawing on your own expertise will also help you develop awareness of the assumptions that your questions are premised on.

4) Listen carefully.
In governance, you need to know what you want to say and also how to say it. The University’s collegial governance structure has its own language.

Listen carefully to what’s being said so that you don’t cause repetition. Learn about how to say what you want to say to get the best possible reaction. Listening will also help you understand the business under discussion, and will also help you get a better sense of your audience (the people in the room who will hear the question you ask).

5) Above all, Practice.
Student representatives aren’t expected to know everything – in fact, very few members of University committees know exactly what they’re doing.¹ Feel free to ask lots of questions.

Learn by trial and error.

¹ There are a couple of exceptions to this – if you’re reading this and you sit on GFC ASC, GFC CLRC, or an appeals committee, you should make an appointment to speak with the Student Governance Advisor (sga@sualberta.ca).

III. Basic Question Theory

Here are some basic theoretical fundamentals that you can apply to making your questions more effective.

1) Open vs. Closed
Questions can be open or closed. Open questions, commonly referred to as open-ended questions, do not place very many constraints around the range of answers that might be deemed acceptable. Closed questions place specific parameters around acceptable answers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Words</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open</td>
<td>Why</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who, When, Where</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>Which, Yes/No (e.g. Do, Is)</td>
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Open questions tend to allow for deeper, more complex answers, but are also very likely to stray off-topic. Open questions are very powerful tools during a dialogue, but can be challenging to use effectively during more debate-style discussion as the person answering has a lot of space to deflect the question.

Closed questions illicit specific, on-topic answers, but may only yield basic information. They are difficult to structure effectively because they must be founded on either assumptions or expertise around the subject under discussion.

2) Factual, Evaluative, Interpretive

Factual questions are asking for data or clarification on the hard data.

Evaluative questions are asking the respondent to provide an assessment of strengths, weaknesses, or progress to date.

Interpretive questions are asking the respondent to provide their opinion or to speculate on future outcomes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpretive</td>
<td>Opinion, what happens if</td>
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</table>
Evaluative
Strengths/weakness, anticipated challenges

Factual
Data-oriented, yes/no

What are the pros and cons of hiring graduate students as principal instructors?

What is the projected increase in enrolment for the next 3 years?

Some questions can be answered as any or all of the above kinds of questions.

Example: “What does Quaecumque Vera mean?”

3) Hypothesis Testing & Leading Questions
It is sometimes useful to ask questions that you suspect you already know the answer to, much like testing a hypothesis. You may do this in order to give the presenter an opportunity to share additional information or to focus on a particular aspect of the discussion, or to subtly highlight some aspect of the proposal that is important to you.

It is also sometimes useful to ask a question in a way that leads the respondent towards a particular answer. This is quite often done in formal debate to try and leverage support towards your particular point of view.

Questions of this nature should be posed with care. They can be very useful, but they can also backfire very badly. As the hypothesis or ‘lead’ becomes more powerful, you build more assumptions into your question, making the question higher risk to pose. This is particularly true if you are not as knowledgeable as the person you are asking – which is almost always the case in University settings.

4) Convergent vs. Divergent
Convergent questions have one answer. Convergent questions are often thought of as “simple” questions (like the example below), but a well-crafted convergent question can also be used to yield one answer relating to a complex problem.

Divergent questions have multiple answers. Questions about opinions are always divergent. Divergent questions are integral to thorough discussions about complex or controversial issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Convergent A question that has one answer</td>
<td>What is the name of the current University President?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divergent A question that may have many answers</td>
<td>How do we best support teaching faculty in their work?</td>
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