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Leading Questions

A *leading question* is a question which subtly prompts the respondent to answer in a particular way. Leading questions are generally undesirable as they result in false or slanted information. For example:

<i>Do you get on well with your boss?</i>	This question prompts the person to question their employment relationship. In a very subtle way it raises the prospect that maybe they don't get on with their boss.
<i>Tell me about your relationship with your boss.</i>	This question does not seek any judgment and there is less implication that there might be something wrong with the relationship.

The difference in the above example is minor but in some situations it can be more important. For example, in a court case:

<i>How fast was the red car going when it smashed into the blue car?</i>	This question implies that the red car was at fault, and the word "smashed" implies a high speed.
<i>How fast was each car going when the accident happened?</i>	This question does not assign any blame or pre-judgment.

Obtaining Responses to Suit the Edit

In journalism, leading questions can be used in various ways. For example, a journalist might want a particular type of answer to edit alongside some other content. This can be good or bad, as illustrated by the following example.

A hypothetical journalist is doing a story on the moon hoax theory¹. First of all the journalist gets the following statement from an advocate of the theory:

"Photographs of the moon landing show converging shadows were they should be parallel. This could only happen in a studio so the photos must be fake."

The journalist then interviews a NASA engineer. This response will be edited to appear immediately after the accusation. There are several ways to ask the question, each with very different results:

<i>How do you explain the missing stars from the Apollo photographs?</i>	This question leads the engineer enough to answer the specific question, while being open-ended enough to get a complete answer. This is good.
<i>How do you respond to people who say the Apollo photographs were fake?</i>	This question elicits a tenuously-relevant reply without actually answering the accusation. The engineer will give a broad answer such as "I think these people have got it wrong". This gives the impression that the engineer is being evasive and can't answer the question.
<i>How do you respond to conspiracy theorists who accuse you of faking the landing and lying to America?</i>	This question adds some spice with provocative phrases designed to encourage a stronger response.

Of course the ethical journalist will avoid using leading questions to mislead.

Children

Children are particularly susceptible to leading questions. Studies have shown that children are very attuned to taking cues from adults and tailoring their answers based on the way questions are worded².

Next page: [More interview tips](#)

(1) The theory that NASA never really landed on the moon. For information see www.dave.co.nz/space/moon-hoax.

(2) Ceci, 1994; Ceci & Bruck, 1993a, 1993b; Ceci, Loftus, Leichtman, & Bruck, 1994; Leichtman & Ceci, in press; Clarke-Stewart, Thompson, & Lepore, 1989; Haugaard & Alhusen, 1992; Thompson, Clarke-Stewart, Meyer, Pathak, & Lepore, 1991

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