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Open-Ended Questions

The ability to ask *open-ended questions* is very important in many vocations, including education, counselling, mediation, sales, investigative work and journalism.

An open-ended question is designed to encourage a full, meaningful answer using the subject's own knowledge and/or feelings. It is the opposite of a *closed-ended question*, which encourages a short or single-word answer. Open-ended questions also tend to be more objective and less leading than closed-ended questions (see next page).

Open-ended questions typically begin with words such as "Why" and "How", or phrases such as "Tell me about...". Often they are not technically a question, but a statement which implicitly asks for a response.

Examples

Closed-Ended Question

Do you get on well with your boss?

Who will you vote for this election?

What colour shirt are you wearing?

Open-Ended Question

Tell me about your relationship with your boss.

What do you think about the two candidates in this election?

That's an interesting coloured shirt you're wearing.

How do you feel?

Perhaps the most famous (or infamous) open-ended question is "How does this make you feel?" or some variation thereof. This has become a cliché in both journalism and therapy. The reason it is so widely used is that it's so effective.

In journalism, stories are all about people and how they are affected by events. Audiences want to experience the emotion. Even though modern audiences tend to cringe at this question, it's so useful that it continues to be a standard tool.

In psychology, feelings and emotions are central to human behaviour. Therapists are naturally keen to ask questions about feelings.

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