

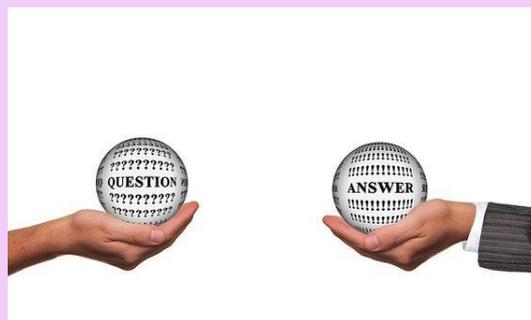
BOOK BONUS 5

Tips for Navigating an Academic Q&A Session



For many students the most dreaded aspect of an academic presentation is not the presentation itself, but the Q&A session that follows it. Q&As are not only unpredictable, they also appear impossible to prepare for. We can never be sure what we are going to be asked and by whom. It is no wonder that the prospect of a Q&A session is unsettling for many. Here are a few tips for navigating academic Q&As:

1. Question the Question



My first tip is based on the fact that not all questions in a Q&A session are created equal and, indeed, some may be downright unfair. If, for example, an audience member goes on a rant for a considerable period of time – as almost always happens at some point during an academic Q&A – it is worth asking if there is a question in what they have asked or if it was more of a comment. In other words, it's perfectly reasonable to question the question. So, if you happen to get thrown an incomprehensible monologue, by all means, throw it back to the questioner. By doing so you are inviting them to either reframe their question or retract it.

2. Ask for Clarity



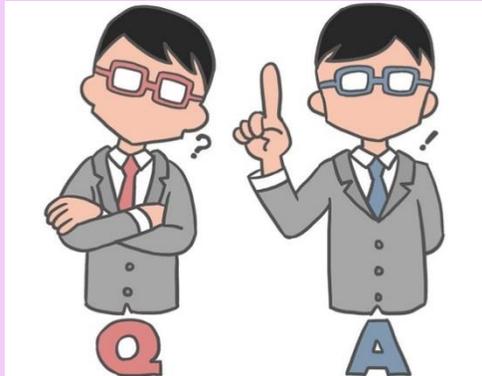
Remember that it's not your job to interpret a poorly phrased question, so before you attempt to offer a response ensure that you have understood the question clearly. If anything is unclear, don't hesitate to ask the questioner for some clarification. One way to do this would be to restate the question as you have heard it and then ask the questioner to confirm if you have understood correctly. Or you could simply ask the questioner to be clearer in how they've formulated their question. It may be, as with the case above, that there isn't actually a question within their 'question', in which case, you need not spend time answering it.

3. Take Notes



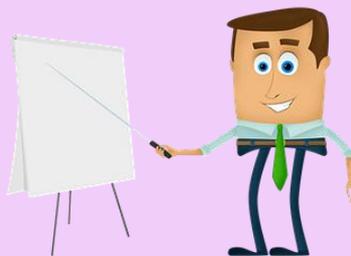
A lot of the anxiety surrounding the Q&A comes from the rapid-fire nature of these sessions. There is rarely time to think and gather our thoughts before we are expected to answer. Like many people, I don't do particularly well when I feel on the spot, and I usually think of my best responses hours after an event has passed rather than on my feet! In order to offset some of this pressure, and buy yourself enough time to think, consider writing down the questions as you are being asked them. This tool can be particularly useful if you want to recall key words or phrases as you respond.

4. Experiment with Another Format



If you'd like to be more selective in your responses, feel free to alter the format of the Q&A to one that would better suit you. This might involve taking multiple questions from the audience and then being more discerning about which ones you'd like to engage with. This will give you the freedom to focus in on the most relevant questions and consider each one at your own discretion.

5. Repeat Yourself



Although it may seem redundant to you, it may be worth repeating material from your presentation during the Q&A. The audience will not be as familiar with the material in your presentation. What may seem obvious to you or even repetitive will not be for them. An additional benefit of referring back to your presentation script is that it equips you with a ready-made response. This can only help in building your confidence throughout the Q&A session. As I've often found, one confident response leads to another and another, and so on.

8. Not Every Q Requires an A



Perhaps our greatest fear during a Q&A is that we will be asked something that we don't know. The most common approach to this type of scenario is to either pretend we do know or to provide an answer to the question we wish we had been asked. Neither of these approaches feels particularly authentic. What if, however, not every Q required an A? If we assume that were true, we could instead say something along the lines of: 'I don't know the answer to that, but it's a really interesting question. I'll have to give it some more thought.' While some may be reluctant to admit that they don't have all the answers out of fear they will appear stupid, in my view it signifies the exact opposite – a person who is confident enough in themselves, and in their work, to admit that they don't know everything.