Version 2 · Revised 11 November 2026 · 2/12

How to Ask Clear, Useful Questions

By the end of this guide, you can

Design a short sequence of neutral, answerable questions for a defined purpose.

Bring to the task

A real conversation or investigation, its purpose and any facts already established.

“Why are you always late with proposals?” looks like a request for an explanation. It also assumes repeated lateness and places responsibility on the person being questioned. A more useful opening might be, “Can we trace what happened on the last proposal?” The second question gives the colleague something specific to describe and leaves the explanation open.

Question design begins with purpose. You might need to confirm a fact, understand a sequence, explore an experience, test a belief, create possibilities or make a choice. A question that works well for one purpose can be cumbersome for another. “Was the proposal approved?” is a sensible closed question when approval status is the missing fact.

EXPLAIN · APPLY

Seven purposes for useful questions

Purpose	A working question
Clarify	What do you mean by ready?
Describe	What happened in the last case?
Diagnose	What might explain the difference?
Challenge	Which evidence could contradict this view?
Generate	What other approaches could work?
Evaluate	Which trade-off changes the choice?
Reflect	What would we do differently next time?

Original Tibyan teaching aid. Illustrative example; not observed field results.

Choose the purpose that addresses the current gap. Then adapt the example to the people, task and facts already established.

Text explanation of the graphic
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Case, demonstration and correction

Five repairs with reasons, not a list of preferred phrases

Original fictional practice set, revised 11 November 2026. Use Namaa's proposal handoff as context. For this exercise, assume P3 underwent an approval review and that a dispatch log confirms one request was sent on 10 November; its routing and outcome are not established. The questioner wants to understand the process before choosing a change. Each repair below has an acceptable alternative; wording is judged by purpose, evidence and the response it permits.

Problem and original question	A usable repair and acceptable alternative	Answer-dependent follow-up and reason
Leading premise: “How much time did our new form save?”	“What changed in preparation and checking time after the form?” Alternative: “What took more or less time in the latest case?”	If the speaker reports no saving: “Which step stayed the same?” The repair permits benefit, no change or additional work.
Vague: “Why is the quality bad?”	“What happened during P3’s approval review?” Alternative: “Which requirement, if any, was unmet?”	If the information was complete: “What step followed the review?” It makes the criterion discussable without assuming the missing-information explanation is true.
Compound: “Why was P3 late, who failed, and how will you fix it?”	“What happened between receipt of the estimate and submission of P3?” Alternative: “Talk me through those steps.”	If an internal review held the draft: “What did that review require?” It starts with one event sequence before responsibility or remedies.
Loaded attribution: “Why do you keep ignoring requests?”	“What happened to the request sent on 10 November?” Alternative: “When did you first see that request?”	If it reached the wrong person: “How was responsibility assigned?” It tests the event without treating intention or repetition as established.
False choice: “Should we train everyone or accept missed deadlines?”	“Which responses could address the observed gap?” Alternative: “What could change besides training?”	If an ownership repair is proposed: “What evidence would show that it addresses this case?” It keeps process, practice, support and other feasible options open.

“Who was responsible for that request?” followed by “How was that responsibility agreed?” is more neutral than asking someone to confirm that nobody owned it. A later summary can still invite correction: “I understand that the request went to Omar but no response owner was recorded. What have I

misunderstood?”

Try this sequence: identify the case; reconstruct its events; probe one consequential detail; check your interpretation; ask what evidence would change the next action. If the answer corrects your premise, change the next question. A closed question can efficiently confirm a bounded record; its answer still needs appropriate checking before it is treated as fact.

COMPARE · NOTICE

Repair the question before using it

Loaded

Why do staff resist the new form?	What happens when staff try to complete the form?

Double task

What failed and how should we fix it?	What happened? Then: which next step does that suggest?

False choice

Train everyone or miss the target?	Which barriers need a change, and which options address them?

Original Tibyan teaching aid. Illustrative example; not observed field results.

Notice what is removed: an unsupported premise, a preferred solution or several tasks in one question. Explain the repair instead of memorizing its wording.

Text explanation of the graphic
Repair the question before using it
Loaded
Why do staff resist the new form?
What happens when staff try to complete the form?
Double task
What failed and how should we fix it?
What happened? Then: which next step does that suggest?
False choice
Train everyone or miss the target?
Which barriers need a change, and which options address them?
Original Tibyan teaching aid. Illustrative example; not observed field results.

Your reusable working record

1. Repair row 1

Record original, purpose, problem, repair, acceptable alternative and conditional follow-up.

2. Repair row 2

Repeat the full row structure, including an acceptable alternative.

3. Repair row 3

Repeat the full row and split extra tasks into later probes.

4. Repair row 4

Repeat the full row and remove unverified attribution or repetition.

5. Repair row 5

Repeat the full row and replace a false choice with feasible alternatives.

6. Selected conversation sequence

Choose three repairs and record how one answer changes your next question.

7. Partner correction and revision

Record the correction and what you changed.

Annotated completed record

Repair row 1

Original: How much time did the form save? Purpose: compare preparation effort. Problem: assumes a saving. Repair: What changed in preparation and checking time? Alternative: What took more or less time in the latest case? If no change: Which step stayed the same?

The repair admits an unfavorable answer; it does not replace one preferred answer with another.

Repair row 2

Original: Why is quality bad? Purpose: understand the approval sequence. Problem: quality is undefined. Repair: What happened during P3’s approval review? Alternative: Which requirement, if any, was unmet? If information was complete: What step followed the review?

The alternative does not assume missing information when the event may have another explanation.

Repair row 3

Original: Why was P3 late, who failed, and how will you fix it? Purpose: reconstruct the sequence. Problem: multiple tasks and assumed blame. Repair: What happened after the estimate arrived? Alternative: Talk me through those steps. If review paused work: What did the review require?

Only the first needed task is asked; responsibility and remedies can follow checked information.

Repair row 4

Original: Why do you keep ignoring requests? Purpose: trace one request. Problem: assumes intention and repeated neglect. Repair: When did you first see the 10 November request? Alternative: What happened to that request? If it arrived late: How was it routed?

The record investigates delivery and responsibility without asserting motive.

Repair row 5

Original: Train everyone or accept missed deadlines? Purpose: choose a response. Problem: excludes other feasible responses. Repair: Which responses could address the observed gap? Alternative: What could change besides training? If an ownership repair is proposed: Which case would let us examine it?

A process repair remains an option to investigate, not a proven solution.

Selected conversation sequence

Which case are we discussing? → What happened after the estimate arrived? Speaker: internal review paused it. → What did that review require?

The third question follows the actual answer rather than the next item on a fixed list.

> ### Partner correction and revision
>
> My partner noted that “Which information was missing?” assumed a deficit. I changed it to “What happened during the approval review?” and kept the information question only if the answer supports it.
>
> The revision explains why a more neutral opening was needed.

Practice and retry

Repair the five original questions before reading the table. For each, justify the change and provide a different acceptable wording. In a five-minute conversation, use three questions and document one answer-dependent follow-up.

Common error and corrective feedback

A question is not neutral merely because it begins with “what.” “What made you ignore the request?” still assumes ignoring. Investigate receipt and action first. Closed questions are acceptable when the missing fact is bounded; an unverified answer is not automatically established evidence.

Independent-study alternative

Write a repair for every original, then compare with the key. Imagine an answer that contradicts your premise and write the next question you would actually ask. Explain one difference between your wording and the model.

Check your work

- Purpose and wording fit.
- Unsupported premises are removed.
- Each question asks one main thing.
- At least one follow-up depends on the answer.

Apply and review

Bring one repaired question to your next meeting and note whether it produced usable information.

Sources and further reading

- Right Question Institute. What is the Question Formulation Technique?
- Stanford d.school. How Might We Questions

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Original evidence-informed teaching aid. Cases and example records are hypothetical; the assessment is not a validated certification.