

How to handle difficult Q&A moments with confidence and professionalism



During Q&A after a presentation, do you worry about being able to answer all of the audience's questions about your research with confidence and professionalism? If so, you're definitely not alone. Even experienced presenters can feel nervous about handling the Q&A portion well—it's not always possible to anticipate the questions that will be asked or the direction that Q&A will take.

We've given some practical tips before on how best to [prepare for conference presentations](#) and [deliver them effectively](#). In this article, we'll focus on how you can use some simple standard phrases to handle unexpected questions or difficult moments smoothly and with authority.

For the following 6 potentially tricky scenarios during Q&A, you can choose which phrase or phrases best match your level of language proficiency and your style of speaking.

1. When you don't hear the question well
2. When you don't understand the question fully (or you aren't asked a clear question)
3. When you need a little time for thinking before you start your answer
4. When you want to emphasize that you are giving a tentative answer only
5. When you don't know the answer and don't want to give a tentative one
6. When you disagree with the asker

Experienced speakers may recognize that there is some overlap between the phrases used in certain scenarios above (such as 1 and 2). However, we've seen many instances when not using phrases specific enough to each scenario causes confusion and misunderstandings between presenters and audience members, so we suggest using more specific, non-overlapping phrases to keep communication clear and simple.

**Download common phrases
to handle difficult Q&A moments**

1) When you don't hear the question well

Sometimes a question is just not loud enough for you to hear clearly—maybe the audience member doesn't have a microphone or doesn't speak loudly enough at all times even with a microphone.

It's important to say when you don't **hear** all of the question asked (see scenario 2 if you heard the question but don't **understand** what is being asked).

At international conferences and in research meetings, we have often seen this miscommunication happen: the presenter doesn't **hear** the question well enough, so they respond with "Pardon?" or "Sorry, could you say that again?" and the asker wrongly assumes the presenter didn't **understand** the original question and then spends unnecessary time recasting the (sometimes lengthy) question.

A quick way to ensure the audience knows that you couldn't **hear** a question (rather than didn't understand it) is to say so explicitly.

When you didn't hear all or most of the question and need to hear it all again:

- Sorry, I couldn't **hear** that. Could you say it louder please?
- Sorry, I couldn't **hear** that very well. Could you repeat it a bit louder?

When you didn't hear part of the question well and want only that part to be repeated:

- Sorry, I didn't **hear** the last part of your question. Could you repeat that part again please?
- Sorry, I couldn't **hear** all of your question. Did you say/ask "xxxxx"?
- Pardon? I couldn't quite **hear** the last part of the sentence. Are you asking whether/if...?

As you say this, you can also signal non-verbally that you didn't hear, by tilting your head and shoulder forward slightly toward the asker.

Also, note that the common phrase "I didn't **catch** that" can be used to mean both "I didn't **hear** that" and "I didn't **understand** that." So, it's best to use the verb "hear" to make the problem immediately clear to the asker.

2) When you don't understand the question fully (or you aren't asked a clear question)

You've probably seen people not understand questions during Q&A at conferences or research meetings and may well have experienced this yourself as either a presenter or the person asking the question.

Maybe the question is too difficult to understand linguistically (it exceeds your current level of English proficiency) or because the asker's question itself is not clear (this is especially common when it is in the form of a comment or an opinion, with the question implied or indirectly asked).

When you don't understand, the best way to handle this is simply to state that you don't understand, so that the asker can recast, or reframe, the question.

- Sorry, I didn't understand the question. Could you repeat it please?
- Sorry, I didn't quite catch your question/meaning there.
- Sorry, I couldn't understand the last part (of your question).
- Sorry, I'm not sure (that) I understand. Did you say/ask/mean "xxxxx"?
- Sorry, I'm not quite sure of your question. Are you asking if/whether...?

3) When you need a little time for thinking before giving your answer

When you are asked a question that you haven't prepared an answer for, you might need a little time to think through the idea and construct your response. It's important to use a "thinking phrase" to signal to the audience that you understood the question and are actively constructing an answer, so they will wait a short time patiently before you respond to the idea. This will also stop the asker from repeating or restating the question unnecessarily, which can be distracting.

Try using one of the following common phrases (or a combination of them) to signal that you are preparing to answer—to buy a few more seconds of thinking time—before starting your answer.

- Good question... Well... (Start your answer)
- Good point... Well...
- That's a good/interesting question... OK...
- Ah, yes... OK... that's a good point...
- Ah, that's interesting... Let me think (a second)...
- Let me consider the best way to answer that.
- That point deserves some thought. Let's see...

4) When you want to emphasize that you are giving a tentative answer only

When you don't know the exact answer to a question, or when the answer has too many parts to answer in the time you have, you might still want to give a tentative or incomplete answer.

It's important to signal that you are "thinking on your feet" and that your answer will represent your initial thoughts on the matter and may not be what you would answer given more thinking time (and maybe more experimental or theoretical work).

You can signal this clearly by using these standard phrases in English.

- My first thoughts are that...
- Off the top of my head (maybe)...
- I'm not sure what the research says on this, but maybe...
- Don't quote me on this, because I might change my mind, but I think...
- That's a bit beyond the scope of this talk, but my understanding is that basically...
- Let me sketch some thoughts (and maybe we can follow up after)...
- I'm summarizing here, so some details may differ, but...

These common phrases often follow a thinking phrase from point 3 above.

- That's interesting... Well... (Start your answer) My first thoughts are that maybe...
- Ah, good question... I haven't (really) thought about that before/in detail before... (Start your answer) Off the top of my head, it's possible that...

5) When you don't know the answer and don't want to give a tentative one

Sometimes when you don't know the answer, you'll also not want to venture a tentative answer, perhaps because the question is beyond your expertise or because you know of recent research on the topic but not what the results are.

Here are some phrases to indicate that although you are not going to answer the question, you are not disagreeing with the asker.

- I don't have the data here/at hand (right now), and I need to check it before answering.
- I'm not sure what the answer to that is, and I don't want to mislead anyone, so I don't think I can answer that right now.
- I know that AA and BB are researching that, but I don't know what they've found.
- That's beyond the scope of this research, and I'm not sure how to give a reasonable answer. But that's an interesting point.
- That would be interesting to find out, but I don't know the answer. Thank you for raising the question.
- That might be more in the field of X, and I'm not that familiar with it enough to answer.

6) When you disagree with the asker

Because your audience will likely include people with similar research interests, sometimes audience members will be experts in your topic but have a different perspective or follow a different line of research. They may disagree with your work or a part of it. Some questions may actually be intended more as comments to tell you that your perspective or research is wrong than to elicit useful knowledge from you.

If you find yourself in this situation, tactfully responding to these questions can prevent Q&A from devolving into an argument over technical issues that most audience members will neither understand nor care about.

Here are a few phrases you can use to disagree with the asker and defuse any tension.

- It seems we think differently. Maybe we can talk more later.
- Yes, I'm aware of that research direction, but I'm interested in achieving different aims, which is why I've taken the approach I talked about here.
- I understand your point, but I believe my approach offers a new way forward as I explained...
- I think this comes down to a difference in theoretical basis, which we're not going to be able to resolve during this Q&A. Maybe we can talk more later about this.
- I'm not sure that's correct, but I'll look it up and we can discuss it later.
- I'd love to debate that in the literature with you.
- Thanks for the comment/question. It's something for me to think about.

Summary/Conclusion

One of the main benefits of attending a presentation in person is being able to ask the presenters questions, rather than just watching a video of the presentation or reading the proceedings, so the Q&A session can give you a chance to demonstrate the depth of your research as well as find out areas in your research that might benefit from more emphasis, clarity, or depth.

Being able to respond effectively to questions that are not perfectly audible, comprehensible, clear, or simple to answer is likely to improve your confidence in speaking and to make your presentations more memorable.

Colleagues and mentors are often the best resource for improving your own speaking, but our team of expert presenters is happy help you or your whole group be better prepared and more confident in giving conference presentations or research meeting updates. We can help through our [one-on-one presentation coaching sessions](#) or [group presentation workshops and courses](#), and of course by [editing](#) or [translating](#) your prepared Q&A session answers for you.

Happy presenting! Any questions? Just send us an [email](#) to ask.