

OFFICE OF RESEARCH, SCHOLARSHIP, AND INNOVATION

LIFE HACK: ASKING (AND ANSWERING) GOOD QUESTIONS AT A CONFERENCE

Just like presenting one's research or performing can sometimes be nerve-wrecking at first, so can asking someone, particularly someone you don't know, about their work. If that's you, we've got you covered! Below are some handy tips for asking (and answering on pg. 2!) great questions. We hope you all enjoy yourselves and learn a lot from the accomplished students presenting and performing today!



1. BE CURIOUS

Maybe a presenter's topic is one you are familiar with, maybe it is new to you, or maybe it sounds uninteresting to you at first. Try not to worry about what you know or don't know about the topic and just be curious. If you are genuinely curious about the work that person has spent so much time on, you might learn something you never knew that excites you. Who knows, you may even find a new interest!

2. ASK QUESTIONS

This tip may sound obvious, but often people's first instinct at conferences is to comment on someone's work, saying, "This is interesting," or "Nice work," or "I don't think I agree with this." While this type of feedback can be helpful, it doesn't leave a lot of room for interaction or discovery. Ask questions that require an answer from the presenter and both of you will gain so much more from the conversation.

3. ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Keep questions simple, to the point, and open-ended. Try to ask succinct questions that require thoughtful answers. Rhetorical questions and yes-or-no questions don't leave the presenter any room to elaborate. Instead, ask open-ended question, such as:

- How did you become interested in this topic?
- What did your research/creative process look like?
- What was one aspect of your project you feel was very successful?
- What was one of the biggest challenges you faced in doing this kind of work?
- What advice do you have for other students who want to do similar work?

4. ASK ABOUT THE DETAILS

Take some time to read through some of the poster and/or listen carefully during the presenter's talk, and ask them an open-ended question about a specific piece of their project, particularly if it's something you don't understand. It is a valuable experience for all presenters to gain practice discussing the details of their work with outside audiences.

5. ASK FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

Listen carefully and ask for more information about something the speaker said. Examples of follow-up questions might be: What do you mean by that? Why do you think that is important? Can you tell me more about _____? What implication might that have for other areas of your field?

6. BE OPEN-MINDED

Try to set aside any opinions you might already have about a topic and listen carefully to the presenter's perspective, even if it feels uncomfortable. True discovery often takes place in respectful discourse between people with different points of view. As you ask curious and open-minded questions, you might find you have more in common than you thought! At the very least, you will find it is possible to disagree with someone's results or methods but still respect them professionally and as a person.

7. DISAGREE POLITELY

Remember, at the end of the day all research is a work in progress, and someone has spent a great deal of time on the project they are presenting. You may disagree with their findings or methodology, but be respectful of their expertise as well. Be clear about how you disagree and ask them to elaborate on specific points.

**MOST IMPORTANTLY,
HAVE FUN!**

Q & A TIPS FOR PRESENTERS AND PERFORMERS

BE INTERESTED

Curiosity goes both ways in academic conversations. Sometimes people will ask you questions about your work you haven't thought of yet! It's okay to do some thinking on the spot. Remain interested in your project and curious about your own work, and sometimes even your own answers might surprise you.

BE CLEAR

Try to discuss your project in general terms. This becomes especially important for work that uses technical or scientific language, or vocabulary that is mostly used in your field and not outside of it. Avoid the use of technical language in your answers and practice explaining your work in the simplest and clearest terms possible.

BE HONEST

Even if you feel like someone is misunderstanding you or disagreeing with you, be honest about your work, your findings, and your conclusions. Also, if someone asks you a question you are not sure how to answer, it is okay to say, "I don't know." An even better answer is, "I don't know YET, but I'll find out!"

BE OPEN

Be open to any question, no matter how simple or how complex. Be open to feedback, to disagreements and different opinions. Be open to different ways of looking at things. As researchers ourselves, we can't tell you how many times our own work has grown from conversations that arose with people who saw things from a different perspective than us. It's invigorating to learn more about your topic even as you present on it. Be open to further discovery and the possibilities may excite you!

**MOST IMPORTANTLY,
HAVE FUN!**