

# How to Use Questions to Supercharge Your Critical Thinking

*"Successful people ask better questions, and as a result, they get better answers." —Tony Robbins*

Critical thinking is the methodical practice of collecting and analyzing information to solve problems and arrive at sound, informed decisions.

Critical thinking is arguably the most important skill needed for success in the 21st century.

Unfortunately, most people have poorly developed critical thinking skills.

But that doesn't have to be you.

Want to know the fastest, most effective way to improve your critical thinking? To solve problems? To get the answers you crave?

Ask questions.

But not just any questions. Ask deep, probing, penetrating questions.

Questions are powerful. They are thought provoking. They are revealing. They clarify your thinking, give you perspective, and prevent you from being misled by fuzzy logic.

The right questions quickly take you directly to the heart of any matter. They get you to the root cause of a problem.

Questions are how doctors come up with a diagnosis and how scientists invent new theories and products. Questions are at the heart of critical thinking.

Questions are also good for identifying and overcoming roadblocks that are holding you back. And they help you learn from your mistakes. This is so important if you are to continue growing and moving forward.

Thinking is hard work and, unfortunately, our minds are inherently lazy. Deep thinking is absolute drudgery for most people. George Bernard Shaw put it well when he said:

*"Two percent of the people think; three percent of the people think they think; and ninety-five of the people would rather die than think"*

But there is an easy way to snap your mind into instant focus and to switch from shallow, superficial thinking to deep, effective, problem solving thinking... ask a good question.

Asking good questions is so important in all aspects of our lives if we are going to get the answers we need. From mundane everyday choices, to handling crisis situations, to making life decisions, we need to be asking good questions.

But what constitutes a good question?

Let's take a look.

### **The Characteristics of Good Questions:**

*"If you do not know how to ask the right question, you discover nothing." W. Edwards Deming*

To understand what makes a good question, we must first understand what we are looking for when we ask a question.

When we ask questions, we are seeking to identify the best solution to a problem or the best choice when making a decision.

But what do we mean by the "best?"

The "best" solution or choice has certain characteristics, which include:

- It is based on sound fundamentals and information
- It is a solution that solves the root cause of a problem rather than just suppressing symptoms or a being temporary quick fix
- It is a decision aligned with our core values and which provides the best outcome for all parties involved
- It leads you in a positive direction and keeps you moving forward

Therefore, a good question always seeks to reveal the truth, to find an objective answer, to bring clarity. A good question keeps you moving in an upward and forward direction.

Good questions are also very specific and focused. They define exactly what you are looking for in an answer. And they lead you to take very specific action.

Finally, good questions will often reveal gaps in your knowledge or information that you will need to fill before you can get the answer you seek.

### **The Characteristics of Bad Questions:**

Bad questions, on the other hand, are vague and unfocused with no clear direction or purpose.

They often promote negative feelings and make you or others defensive.

Bad questions don't solve problems or provide good answers. Bad questions don't move you forward.

Here is a comparison that illustrates the difference between good and bad questions.

<b>Bad Question</b>	<b>Good Question</b>
Why am I so far behind schedule?	How can I work more effectively and more efficiently to get back on schedule?
Why did this have to happen to me?	How can I use this event to become a stronger and better person?
Why does everyone else in the department make more money than me?	What additional skills can I learn to earn a promotion?
Why don't more people like me?	How can I improve my social skills so that I can become a more interesting and likeable person?

See how the bad questions promote negative responses and excuses. They make you defensive. They are disempowering.

The good questions, on the other hand, promote positive responses and a forward-looking mindset. They prompt you to action to solve a problem and to become better. They are empowering.

Good questions lead to clarity and solutions; bad questions lead to confusion and excuses.

### **Ask the Right Questions for the Right Situations:**

*“If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask... for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.”* **\_Albert Einstein**

In addition to asking good questions, we must ask the right questions for the situation at hand. If you ask the wrong question, you'll get the wrong answer, even if the question was a good one.

Therefore, before we begin asking questions, we must first precisely define our objective, stating exactly what it is that we are trying to accomplish. Be very specific. The more specific you are, the better your answer will be.

Your objective will then determine the type of questions to ask.

And always ask multiple questions in any given situation. As you answer each question, your understanding will deepen, and lead to other questions. Continue until you have a full understanding of the situation and a clear answer as to how to proceed.

Following are lists of good questions broken down by the type of situations they are best used for. This list is obviously not exhaustive but is designed to give you a sampling of good questions and how to tailor questions to the situation at hand.

### **Questions to Solve Problems and Overcome Roadblocks:**

Here is a list of great questions to use whenever you experience a roadblock or need to solve a problem.

How is that working for you? This is Dr. Phil's classic question. And it is a great one that cuts right to the chase. Usually, when something isn't going that well, we'll try to rationalize the results: "I just need more time to make it work." "I haven't given it my best effort yet." "I've just had a run of bad luck." Well, this question cuts right through those rationalizations. If your answer is "not very well," then you need to make a change. Period.

How can I make this work better? This is a follow-up to Dr. Phil's question. If something isn't working, you need to find out why and do it fast. Then you need to identify a corrective action, a new plan, a new path forward. Change and course corrections are all part of growth. The key is to identify issues early, before they become problems. Accept change, anticipate it, and learn to use it to your advantage.

What could have caused that to happen? / Why did that happen? This is part of the "five whys" process that is used in root cause analysis. Develop a list of answers to that question and then ask the same question for each of those. Continue until you can't generate any more answers, at which point, you should be at or near to the root cause of the problem. Typically, five iterations should be sufficient.

What lesson should I learn from this? / What is this telling me? Problems are great teachers, if you allow them to be. Always seek to learn a lesson from each problem you encounter. Problems are inevitable. They are part of life. Use them to build wisdom and character. Learn from them, solve them, and then move on. If you don't learn from your problems and mistakes, you'll be forced to repeat them over and over again. Never allow this to happen to you.

Have I seen this problem before? If so, what did I learn from it then? Problems are often cyclic, disappearing and then reappearing at a later date if you didn't solve the root cause the first time around. Therefore, it is always important to learn something from each problem. When a problem arises, first make sure it isn't something you have already dealt with in the past. If it is, then use what you learned before as a starting point this time. However, since the problem came back, you obviously didn't solve its root cause the first time. Make sure you solve it this time.

Who can help me solve this problem? An important lesson to learn is that you can't expect to solve all your problems by yourself. It's important to develop a circle of people you can count on for wise council and that you can go to for help. When you get stumped, seek out one or more of these people and ask for help.

How should I respond to this? How you respond to events, both good and bad, is crucial. You can't always control the events in your life but you can control your response to them. You always want to be perceived as a wise leader. Someone who is calm in the face of crisis. And you always want to build other people up and help them advance in their lives and towards their dreams. Always seek a win-win response. Always offer a helping hand to those who are down. And always give others credit for what they have done. Look for the good in everyone and help them to be their best. And, no matter what happens, stay focused and marching forward to your goal.

How can I help? Always seek to be part of the solution. Always be willing to offer a helping hand. Always be a friend that can be trusted and counted on, no matter what. Be gracious and generous in all you do.

How can I best recover from this? / What is the quickest way to get back on my feet?

Sometimes, life is going to trip us up. To give us a body-slam to the ground. It's inevitable. When that happens, it's crucial to maintain your focus and to get moving forward again as quickly as possible. There can be no time for self pity, for "poor me" thinking. Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get right back into the game. What is done is done. Your focus must always be on recovery, on the future, and on your goal.

Am I part of the problem? You always want to be part of the solution, never part of the problem. However, sometimes, you may find that you are indeed part of the problem, generally because of some wrong thinking. In such cases, it is critical to discover this early on and immediately change your thinking for the better. Change your attitude, your perspective, your mindset. Stop blocking progress and start promoting it. Become a cheerleader.

How would I be doing this differently if I were willing to let it be easy? This is a question used by Rebecca Fine, a self-help guru. She likes this question because it changes her perspective of a problem or difficult task from a struggle to something that can be easily accomplished if she allows it to be. This shifts her focus from fighting the situation to finding the path of least resistance to accomplishing her goal.

How can I do this and have fun doing it? Many necessary tasks are dull and boring. We don't enjoy doing them, so we procrastinate and put them off as long as possible. And when we finally get around to them, our heart isn't in it, so we don't do them well. The trick is to make these tasks fun and enjoyable. Integrate something that you really enjoy doing in with the task, so that it actually becomes fun. Make the joy significantly outweigh the pain. Be creative. Reward yourself when you are done. It will be well worth it.

### **Questions for Self Development and Personal Growth:**

*"Who questions much, shall learn much, and retain much." \_Francis Bacon*

How can I improve? / How can I get better at this? To continue to grow, we must continue to improve. To continue to get better as a person and at what we do. We must approach learning as

a life-long process. We must constantly seek out opportunities to learn and teachers who can help us. Identify people you respect and admire and experts in your field and learn from them. Emulate their positive characteristics and the traits and mindsets that have made them successful.

Who can help me get better at this? / Who can take me to the next level? Having a mentor or coach is so important to your success. Someone who has already done what you want to do. Someone who has solved all the problems and has navigated all of the pitfalls. Their guidance will be priceless and they can greatly accelerate your progress. Seek out and find a mentor early on and continually solicit their advice at every stage of your development.

Who are the experts in this field? Identify people who have already done what you want to do and who are the recognized leaders in the field. Then, study everything you can about them. Make them your virtual coaches. Read their books and biographies. Imitate the things that have made them successful. Always have three or four virtual coaches leading your personal development efforts.

Where can I get additional information on this subject? There is an old adage that "information is power." However, "actionable information is power" is more correct since, without action, information is powerless. With the advent of the Internet, there is no longer an excuse for not having all the information you need. Learn how to effectively search the Internet to collect information. Next, distill the information down to its essential nuggets of wisdom and then take action. In addition to general Internet searches, libraries remain good sources of information. Also, tap into the wisdom of your virtual coaches by reading their books and watching their videos.

What thoughts, ideas, or assumptions are holding me back? Often, we go into a situation with preconceived notions or misguided assumptions. There is an old saying that says, "Assumptions are the mother of all screwups!" Be careful of your assumptions. Often, we don't even realize what our assumptions are. Take time to identify what assumptions you are making and what preconceived notions and ideas you have. Then challenge each one to make sure it is valid. Abandon any that don't hold up to scrutiny.

Do I have limiting beliefs that are holding me back? Limiting beliefs are beliefs that we hold in our self-consciousness mind that prevent us from achieving certain goals in life. For example, many people subconsciously believe that they don't deserve to be wealthy or that it's immoral to be wealthy. Such thoughts often prevent them from achieving wealth, no matter how hard they try. And, often, they don't even know they have such beliefs. Thus, it's important to identify any limiting beliefs up front and eradicate them early on. Limiting beliefs can be identified by looking for negative emotions associated with keywords and concepts related to what you want to accomplish. For example, negative emotions associated with the words "wealth," "affluence," "luxury," etc. When limiting beliefs are detected, they can be eradicated by replacing them with empowering beliefs through affirmations and visualization around the same keywords, done with positive emotions. Limiting beliefs can be difficult to eliminate but it absolutely essential to do so. Otherwise, you will never reach your goal.

Why not me? Why not now? These are powerful questions for motivation. James Allen also considered them important to success:

*"For true success, ask yourself these four questions: Why, Why not? Why not me? Why not now?" \_James Allen*

Russell Wilson, the quarterback of the Seattle Seahawks, says that whenever he came up against a challenge in his development as a football player, his father would say to him, "Russell, why not you?" This greatly motivated him and changed his perspective from fear of failure to expectation of success. Now whenever he comes up against a challenge, he uses this same question to motivate himself. "Why not now?" can have the same motivating effect. Conditions will never be perfect. We will never be fully prepared. When an opportunity presents itself, we must take immediate action and act with confidence. Asking the questions "Why not me?" and "Why not now" can give us the confidence to take decisive action.

### **Questions for Making Decisions:**

*"The One who asks questions doesn't lose his way." \_African proverb*

What are my options? Knowing your options is crucial when making decisions. Often we limit ourselves to only one or two options in a given situation, especially when our emotions are running high. Whenever a critical decision needs to be made, it's important to slow down, step back, and search for other options. This is best done by asking additional questions. Only when you are sure all of the options have been identified should a decision be made.

What am I trying to accomplish? / What do I want to get out of this? Whenever an important decision needs to be made or a problem needs to be solved, it is crucial that we know exactly what it is that we are trying to accomplish. What our exact objective is. This narrows our focus and greatly increases the probability of arriving at the best answer or the best solution. If we don't know what we want, then we're probably going to get an answer or solution that we don't want in the long run either.

What are my priorities? / What is most important to me? Often, when we make a decision, we will be presented with several viable options. In this case, we need to prioritize the answers in some way, typically based on what is most important to us at the time. For example, prioritization could be done based on our core values, our short-term or long-term goals, risk, or other such criteria. In such cases, it is important to thoroughly think through the decision to make sure you get the best possible answer.

Why am I doing this? We must always understand our motives for making a decision or taking a specific action. Our motives must always be aligned with our core values and the virtues we hold dear. If instead, we find that our motives are greed, revenge, spitefulness, or the like, then

we must not proceed. If we seek joy, fulfillment, and happiness in our lives, then everything we do must be aligned with our core values. Period!

What can go wrong and what are the consequences if I am wrong? Whenever we need to make a decision, in addition to clearly understanding our objective, we must also understand the consequences if we make the wrong decision. This is essentially a risk / reward analysis. Some answers will offer a huge reward if we are right but also a massive loss if we are wrong. We must assess whether or not that is the right decision to make. There are often more moderate answers that might be better. If we are to make a decision that puts us at risk, then we must know this going in and make an objective decision based on facts and sound information. A massive loss must never be a surprise.

What is the worst thing that can happen? Often, we are hesitant to take action because we are afraid that something will go wrong or something bad will happen. Many times, these fears are totally unfounded. Thus, it is always important to think through the situation and clearly define the worst-case scenario. Only then can we make an informed decision.

### **Socratic Questions to Increase Knowledge and Understanding of a Subject:**

Another great source of questions was given to us by Socrates. He was one of the greatest educators of all time and he taught by asking questions. Through his questioning, he helped his students solve their own problems and to deepen their understanding about a given topic.

His six types of questions are given below. Use them to probe your thinking, to deepen your knowledge, and to increase your understanding. Find out what you know and what you don't know and then fill in the gaps. Your position must be able to stand up to the scrutiny of these questions.

#### **Questions to Clarify Concepts:**

- Why are you saying that?
- Could you explain that further?
- What exactly does this mean?
- What is the fundamental nature of this?
- What do we already know about this?
- Can you give an example?
- What is the counter argument for this?
- What might be another explanation of this situation?
- What would this be analogous to?
- What would be an alternative?
- What is another way to look at this?
- Why is this the best approach?

#### **Questions to Probe Assumptions:**

- What are your assumptions?
- How did you choose those assumptions?
- What else could we assume?



- What could we assume instead?
- Please explain why/how this works.
- How can you verify or disprove that assumption?
- What would happen if that assumption were not true?
- Do you agree or disagree with that assumption?
- Is this always the case?
- Why do you think that this assumption holds here?

### **Questions to Probe Rationale, Reasons, and Evidence:**

- What evidence supports this idea?
- How else could this happen?
- What evidence is against this being true?
- Is there reason to doubt this evidence?
- How do you know this?
- Show me the evidence for this?
- Can you give an example of that?
- What do you think causes this to happen?
- Are these reasons good enough?
- Would it stand up in court?
- How might it be refuted?
- How can I be sure of what you are saying?
- Why? (keep asking until you get to the final answer)
- What evidence is there to support what you are saying?
- On what authority are you basing your argument?
- How does this fit with our prior knowledge of this subject?
- What generalizations can you make?

### **Questions to Probe Viewpoints and Perspectives:**

- Are there alternative ways of looking at this?
- Who benefits from this?
- Why is this better than something else?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of this?
- How could you interpret this in another way?
- Why is this important?

### **Questions to Probe Implications and Consequences:**

- What are the consequences of this?
- What are the implications of this?
- What would happen next?
- How could this be used?
- What are the best, worst, and most realistic outcomes?

### **Questions About the Question Itself:**

- What was the point of asking that question?

- Why do you think I asked this question?
- Am I making Sense? Why Not?
- What else might I ask?
- What does that mean?

### **Your Action Plan For Harnessing the Power of Questions In Your Life:**

Here are your *Cerebral Advantage* action steps to use questions to supercharge your critical thinking.

**Step 1:** Print out the above questions and keep them handy. Better yet, memorize them so that you can think on your feet and respond quickly whenever a problem arises in your life.

**Step 2:** Keep an eye out for additional questions that are probing and thought provoking. Add them to your list and memorize them.

**Step 3:** Whenever you encounter a problem in your life, begin asking questions until you have identified the root cause of the problem. And then use questions to find the best possible solution.

**Step 4:** Whenever you have to make a decision in your life, ask questions until you identify the best possible choice. The choices we make determine, to a large degree, where we go in our lives. Learn to use questions to make great decisions.

**Step 5:** Practice constantly. Asking good questions is a skill that takes practice to master. All day long, practice using questions every time you have to make a decision or solve a problem, no matter how small or trivial. Practice until asking good questions becomes part of your DNA.

### **Summing Up:**

Critical thinking is crucial to our lives. It's essential for making wise decisions and solving problems. The better our critical thinking, the better our decisions will be and the more problems we will solve. And the better our life will be.

And asking good questions is a great way to supercharge our critical thinking.

Being able to formulate good questions and the right questions at the right time is a skill that you must develop. Like any other skill, it takes lots of practiced to achieve mastery.

Begin practicing on minor situations that occur throughout the day. What cereal to buy, where to go for lunch, how to fix the leaky faucet in the kitchen, etc. There are many mundane problems to solve and decisions to make every day. Use every one of them as an opportunity to hone your question asking skills. That way, you will be prepared and ready when a major decision needs to be made or a serious problem needs to be solved.

Questions are powerful. They won't raise your IQ, but you'll be amazed at how much smarter you think and how much more effectively and efficiently your mind works once you start asking good questions.

Become a master at asking good questions. This is a life skill that will pay enormous dividends in every area of your life.

Remember, if you want better answers in life, you must first learn to ask better questions.

**...Think right, live well.**