



British International School Riyadh

The art of asking questions

Why do many [students](#) assume that university is about finding answers when really it's about learning to ask questions? And if it's about asking questions, what's the best way to learn how to do it?

The answer is practice. Take up every opportunity to interrogate what you are learning, how you are learning it and what you hope to gain from the knowledge. If you can't identify these opportunities, ask yourself, and your teachers, why not and what you can do about it.

Start broad - why am I here? What do I want to achieve? What is life about? And then get more detailed - why is this book on the booklist? What point is this author trying to make? Do I agree with him/her? Does that tutor know what he is talking about?

Try to get beyond the kind of mundane questions students usually ask: will this count towards my final degree? Is there a handout for this? Can I leave early to get the train home for the weekend?

It is worth bearing in mind that some moments are better for asking questions than others. The best time is at that point in a lecture when the lecturer asks: "Are there any questions?", and everyone coughs and sneaks a look to see if they've got a text message. This is a good time because the lecturer is usually dropping a massive hint that the lecture has just covered something complicated or controversial that should spark questions from anyone who's remotely paying attention.

If you haven't been, or if you find addressing a whole lecture theatre intimidating, it is OK to approach the lecturer at the end, so long as you're clear about exactly what you want answered.

Asking questions can help you to hone and clarify your ideas, but it's a good idea to understand the difference between asking a question and randomly thinking aloud.

Emailed questions can also be useful, although beware of forgetting what you wanted to know - or dismissing it as unimportant - before you get around to composing the message. And don't persuade yourself that you can skip asking questions because you can look up whatever you need to know on Google. It may not be there, it may be wrong, or your lecturer may have just written a paper disagreeing with it.

The worst time to ask a question is just after it has been answered. This can sometimes happen if you've been so busy thinking about an intelligent question to ask that you've lost concentration.

Never worry that asking a question will make you sound stupid. Just because nobody else is asking it doesn't mean that everybody else understands, and you're not supposed to know everything yet anyway. What are you paying fees for?

Talking of which, if lecturers constantly reply to your queries with their own questions, it is always worth asking yourself: are they believers in dialectic methods of teaching, as practised by Socrates in ancient Greece, or do they simply not know the answer?