

# The Power of Questions

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EMS Providers and instructors use questions as a regular part of their job. Given that communication is a key part of EMS, mastery of asking questions in an effort to obtain information is an essential ability to have. Different types of questions provide answers in ways that supports the information being sought. Knowing the type of question to use and how to ask it in effort to obtain information is a learned skill and practiced art.

The dictionary defines a “question” as an “interrogative statement” that seeks information from a reply, discussion, or is a matter of uncertainty. EMS educators use questions to determine the knowledge of the student, their competence to make critical decisions and confidence to perform in an EMS call. In an emergency, the quality of the questions asked improves patient care.

Each question asked by a 9-1-1 telecommunicator has been researched to extract the most important information in the least number of questions. The first question asked by 9-1-1 is the most important: *“what is the location of the emergency?”* This is an essential piece of information needed: where to dispatch responders. The second question, as related to an EMS patient: *“is the patient conscious and breathing normally?”* An adult who is unconscious and not breathing normally is and CPR instructions are quickly offered by the Emergency Medical Dispatcher. Research shows a telecommunicator giving CPR steps to an untrained person saves lives.

Prehospital providers follow a similar process as dispatchers. When assessing a patient, I construct my questioning to what I want to know, how much I want to know and when I want to know it. I ask questions differently depending on the age of the patient, seriousness of the emergency, in the order I require to determine a field or differential diagnosis. I also use questions to evaluate whether the person is telling the truth.

Asking good questions is a practiced skill. Regardless whether you are an EMS educator or prehospital provider understanding the different types of questions will improve your abilities.

An **Essential question** is not answerable with finality or a direct answer or brief sentence. They provoke inquiry or a spark for more questions. These are open ended questions: *“Can you tell me your medical history? What is going on that caused you to call 9-1-1?”*

A **Divergent question** is an open-ended question allowing the receiver of the asked questions the freedom to answer in a way the person wishes. This type of essential question sparks conversation. Clinically, this supports exploration into a differential diagnosis. *“Tell me about how you are feeling, or where you hurt?”* An educator might ask, *“Explain the how you determine causes of dyspnea.”*

A **Convergent question** has one correct answer. Convergent or factual questions seeks straight forward, inarguable details or obvious facts. These require the lowest level cognitive (thinking)

type of 'knowledge' question found in Bloom's taxonomy.<sup>i</sup> *"Who is the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States?" "How many fingers are on my left hand?"*

**Dichotomous questions** are best known as Yes/No questions. Use of dichotomous questions can provide single answers, **even non-verbal**, in formation of informational pieces. *"Do you have chest pain?" "Are you having difficulty breathing?" "Does ventricular fibrillation cause cardiac arrest?"*

**Supporting questions** focus on descriptions, definitions, constructed explanations which requires an understanding when making the response. *"Describe the difference between cardiac and muscular chest pain?" "What is coupe contrecoup?"*

**Semantic questions** refer to answers that provide rating or a scale of feedback in the answer. Often semantic questions are used in research as in a scale form. *"Can you rate your pain from one to ten?"* Or, *"How would you rate this pain in comparison to the pain you have had in the past? Is it the same or different, worse or better than in the past?"*

A **Follow-up question** is an exploratory question based upon the previous answer. The questioner determines the need for additional information and constructs more questions to obtain information to a satisfactory conclusion: *"From what you said, what happened next?" "Let me ask you another question to help me understand..."*

**Repeat questions** asks the source for the same information obtained previously. It is usually the question asked in a different way. It can help the person understand the question being asked. It is also used to determine deception. I have used it to determine retrograde amnesia (memory before injury) and anterograde amnesia (memory after injury), such as *"What did you eat for breakfast?" "I told you my favorite color, what color was it?"* Educators use repeat question to determine a student's context of memory: *"Last week we discussed the functions of human cells, what is a stem cell?"*

**Gotcha questions**, also known as **pre-suppositional or loaded questions** are accusatory or those that places the person into a near impossible situation to answer: *"When did you stop beating your wife?"*

An **Intonation question** is stated with intent of being a question because the spoken pitch goes up such as, "You going." rather than, "You're going?" Or, "Are you going?" This type of question is colloquial or 'everyday vernacular or jargon language'. These questions can risk confusion and misinterpretation of what is being asked.

A **conversational question** is not a specific type of question but a helpful method when communicating with another person, like a spouse. The value of such a question provides the other person an opinion as part of the inquiry of the answer. An example is: "What do you think about going to a movie?" verses "Let's go to a movie."

In conclusion, mastery of asking questions comes from knowing **what** you want to ask and **how** and **why** you want to ask it. Emergency responders know the important questions must be asked first. The use of the information provided in an answer provides feedback from which decisions can be made. Questions can be detailed or cursory. Answers to questions can give rise to more questions. How a question is answered can cause emotion which may provide more information than what an answer imparts.

In my earlier career, Dr. Richard O. Cummins, American Heart Association, lead science editor, taught me that that knowing the right answer to a question was least important than knowing why the wrong answer was wrong. Because you can guess at an answer and get it right and learn nothing.

EMS providers and instructors have the opportunity to establish their own method of asking questions to improve the quality of what they do.

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<sup>i</sup> **Blooms Taxonomy Questions** (original, circa 1956)

EMS educators understand the value of critical thinking using the Blooms taxonomy in educating a student.

The six levels of Bloom:

1. **Knowledge**: recall of information - who, what, where, when, how, or requires the student to describe what they were taught (what they remember)?
2. **Comprehension**: organization and selection of fact - re-telling – define the difference between to pieces of information?
3. **Application**: using facts, rules or principles – why is it significant?
4. **Analysis**: separating a whole into component parts or categorize – how does it compare?
5. **Synthesis**: taking ideas to form a new whole – what solution is suggested?
6. **Evaluation**: development of opinion, judgment or decision – do you agree? Explain why.

Touchstone, Mike. "Applications of the Taxonomies of Learning Objectives (Part 1)." *EMS1*, 4 Jan. 2008, [www.ems1.com/ems-products/education/articles/331934-Applications-of-the-Taxonomies-of-Learning-Objectives-Part-1/](http://www.ems1.com/ems-products/education/articles/331934-Applications-of-the-Taxonomies-of-Learning-Objectives-Part-1/).