

Coming up with questions for papers

Knowing which questions to ask and how to pose them is a **key skill** in philosophy and in life in general!

“Some years ago the head of the Industrial Engineering Department of Yale University said, 'If I had only one hour to solve a problem, I would spend up to two-thirds of that hour in attempting to define what the problem is.'” (cited by Markle, William H. 1966. “The Manufacturing Manager’s Skills.”)

Questions **come with assumptions, orient our attention, and specify a particular set of relevant options**. That’s why they matter! (Even trivial questions; “Who ate the last cookie?”).

General points on how to ask questions

- When picking the **general topic**: Be guided by **what interests you** and seems important to you.
- Do not worry too much about “Is this question philosophical?”. If you've been engaging deeply with philosophy and with the course material in particular, the philosophy will come out.
 - Feel free to start by really thinking of a concrete situation you have encountered!
- To select a question, one good guide is **puzzlement**.
 - What can seem like clarificatory questions are often genuine questions!
 - A good guide: the feeling of “I really don’t get what this means/how this could be true/what the author could say in response to this point I’m thinking about.”
- Another way to approach this is by **engaging with other papers**:
 - Try to solve the author’s problem on your own.
 - When reading, ask yourself ‘Is this the only way of doing it?’
 - When reading, ask yourself ‘**Really?**’ very often, especially with every ‘therefore’, ‘because’ etc. and every ‘clearly’, ‘obviously’, etc.
- For a seminar paper in particular, good questions are often highly **directed at a reading**:
 - Identifying an **assumption** you see made in one or more papers and arguing against it.
 - Arguing **against an author's view** - perhaps by developing an objection you had earlier in the term.
 - Developing an **alternative view** to one that we have seen in class, or an alternative analysis of a range of cases.
 - A great **place to start** is your **annotations** or **questions** that came up for you in earlier classes that you feel we didn’t get to the bottom of.
- You might also want to focus on picking a question that connects to your main interests, the topics you think you will write a dissertation about: e.g. ADHD, the ethics of education...

Refining questions

- Once you have a general question, it will need to be refined.
- Questions need to be **the right size**: for students, the worry is usually that questions are too big!
 - Examples of questions that are way too big: What is freedom? How are free will and determinism compatible? How should I revise my beliefs?

- To avoid this: tether your paper to a more concrete situation (How should I revise my beliefs in light of peer disagreement?) or using some established literature (What is the best objection to compatibilism about free will?)
- As with everything in philosophy, you should be **talking with other people!** Try asking the question to others, explaining it to them, getting them to phrase it back to you.
- Sometimes, you will arrive at a question that is much more specific than your initial interest. It is important to make sure that you don't miss the forest from the trees: **keep zooming out** to how the answer to your narrower question matters to the larger puzzle.

A taxonomy of philosophical questions

Note: Typically, you will be asking a narrow version of one of these questions, or addressing it via responding to or engaging with what other people have said. This could look like responding to what someone else said attention is, objecting to what an author claims to be different kinds of attention, etc.

- **Metaphysical:** On the nature of things and what various terms pick out.
 - What is attention? What are necessary and sufficient conditions for attending?
- **Taxonomic:** distinguishing different kinds and categories. (+ why those distinctions matter)
 - What different sorts of attention are there?
- **Concept mapping:** considering the relationship between different concepts.
 - How do attention and self-control relate to each other?
- **Conceptual critique:** arguing against the usefulness of certain concepts.
 - Should we get rid of the notion of attention in scientific contexts?
- **Epistemological:** On how we can know things.
 - How can you know that someone is attending? What experiments can we design to study this?
- **Evaluative:** On importance, good and bad.
 - What is the importance of attention to the good life? Is X way of attending valuable in a democracy? Does the commodification of attention undermine democracy? What virtues do we need to attend well?
- **Counterintuitive:** Looking for good in the bad or vice versa. (Note: also a good question to ask when addressing evaluative questions)
 - When is distraction a good thing?
- **Quantificational:** all, some, most, none. Determining the scope of various principles.
 - Is the commodification of attention always bad for democracy? If not, in what conditions?
- **Implications/consequences:** investigating what a theory implies and assessing those implications.
 - If attention is a resource, what does this imply about norms on attention?
- **Teleological:** about purposes or goals.
 - What is attention for?
- **Aspect-teasing:** how can different features that seem contradictory be present?
- **Applications:** what a theory says about real-life cases (and ideally using these cases to refine the theory)
 - What does Wu's account of attention tell us about X cases? How does it (or doesn't) help us explain aspects of attention disorders?