# Clarification & Probing Questions

Asking questions serves a few important purposes. First, asking a question allows you an opportunity to check your understanding. Second, a question can show the speaker that you have been respectfully listening and focused. And finally, questions help to facilitate the movement of the conversation.

### Objectives

1. Ask clarifying questions to confirm or fill in gaps in comprehension
2. Use probing questions to demonstrate engagement in the conversation

## Clarifying Questions

As the name suggests, a clarifying question serves the purpose of checking that what you understood was the intended meaning. You have likely been using casual conversational forms of clarifying questions as you have learned English, but we will focus on more formal forms of these questions in this lesson.

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| How much are you clarifying? | Informal Question | Formal Question |
| I didn't hear what was said OR  What I heard didn't make any sense to me | What did you say?  Can you repeat that? | Excuse me, I don't think I understood. Can you repeat that? (The question itself is the same, but there is a more formal introduction to the question) |
| I understood most of what was said, but I feel like I'm missing a key point of understanding | What does \_\_\_\_ mean?  Direct wh- question such as "Where were you?" or "Why did you do that?" | Did I hear you say \_\_\_?  Did I understand correctly when you said \_\_?  Can you explain \_\_\_ in another way? |
| I believe I understood, but I want to double check before continuing | Ok, so \_\_\_\_\_. (Uses yes/no question intonation to indicate checking) | If I understood correctly, you said \_\_\_, right?  In other words, \_\_\_\_.  Do you mean \_\_\_? |

You may notice a similarity in the differences between informal and formal clarifying questions. The main difference is directness. In informal situations, it is not uncommon to "cut to the chase" and ask the question directly. However, formality increases the amount of hedging, or polite indirectness, that a speaker will use. Not only does this show your understanding of cultural expectations of politeness, but you must use more complex sentences to achieve the same goal.

## Probing Questions

While clarifying questions serve the role of checking understanding, probing questions have the purpose of uncovering additional information. These questions go beyond what was already said to encourage the speaker to share more. As stated in the introduction, a probing question could fill a variety of purposes:

* Encourage the conversation to continue
* Show interest and focus on the speaker
* Demonstrate that basic comprehension is established and more information can be given
* Point out an under-supported point

These questions will begin with a wh- question word and a verb of varying directness. Here are some examples:

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| Example Questions |
| Why do you think...?/What do you think would happen if...? |
| How did you decide/determine/conclude....? |
| What about \_\_\_? |
| When did this begin? |

You want to avoid yes/no questions when probing because it does not lead the speaker to provide more than a short response. In some cases, a yes/no question could be used to encourage the speaker to provide additional information, but those questions are far more common as clarifiers. However, a clarifying question can lead to probing for more information. For example:

* You said that \_\_\_ was the most important factor, right? (clarifying question, with a yes/no answer)
* What about \_\_\_? (probing question to point out an under-supported point or contradicting information the speaker did not address.

Building off of a clarifying question is an excellent practice in a debate. It allows you to confirm the other speaker's position on a topic before pointing out a weakness in the argument. Because this is a technique often used in debate, it could come off as too direct/aggressive in some speaking contexts. Always remember to keep your audience and purpose in mind when you ask follow up questions in order to avoid giving offense.

### Exercise 1: Listen

Watch this video. Listen to the clarifying and probing questions Oprah uses to continue the conversation with this young painter.

Make a list of additional clarifying and probing questions you would ask the artist if you were asked to continue this interview.

### Exercise 2: Partner Activity - Mini Debate

* Your teacher will assign a topic and one partner will choose a positive position on the topic, while the other will choose an opposite opinion.
* The positive position will begin speaking.
* After 1 minute, the opposite position will have an opportunity to ask a clarifying question followed by a probing question.
* Next, the opposing partner will share his or her opinion for one minute.
* Then he positive position speaker will ask a clarifying question followed by a probing question.

### Exercise 3: Ready, Set, Ask!

* The teacher will play a section of a video and then pause.
* When the teacher pauses, students will be asked to create either a clarifying question or a probing question they could ask at this point in the conversation.
* The teacher will call on a random student to ask the question.
* The teacher will continue the video and repeat the activity until all students have had the opportunity to practice.

Read this online at <https://edtechbooks.org/advanced_mid_listening__speaking/clarification__probing_questions>