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ADVICE

# The Professor Is In: How to Ask 'Smart' Questions



By Karen Kelsky | SEPTEMBER 18, 2017

**Do you have any tips on how to ask great questions in a departmental seminar? I'm a new hire in a prestigious department, and this is the first way my colleagues size me up. The thing is: I'm not great at formulating articulate, pointed comments.**

**Even with a precirculated paper, my comments often end up being ... circuitous. I am trying to work on this skill and have always admired those who — in a few words — manage to distill a paper to its essence.**

This is a great question, on an issue that doesn't get much attention. Of course, your performance in the audience during a departmental lecture series or a brown-bag seminar is not the main thing on which you will be judged as a new faculty member. But you are right that — especially in large departments — what you say and how you say it in those settings ends up being how you make your first impression, especially on colleagues who are too senior and too busy to have come to your job talk last year, but who will show up for departmental colloquia.

You are also right that asking incisive and clear questions during colloquia is a skill, and one that is appreciated by your colleagues. No one likes a rambling, circuitous question, at least not when someone else is asking it. Some professors — even established "star" academics — can have a real blind spot when it comes to their own self-referential and self-indulgent queries. Don't be like those people!

First of all, not every good question needs to "distill a paper to its essence." Big-picture,

"global" questions about a paper may require such a distillation, but detail-oriented questions about nuances of the research generally do not.

One trick to asking substantive, incisive questions actually mirrors a strategy I tell job-hunting clients to use in their cover letters when talking about their research. It involves understanding clearly the difference between substance and contribution. Substance is about the argument you are making as a scholar, and it comes out of your data and analysis. Contribution is about how the work in question is situated more broadly within discipline and subdiscipline, whether it adds a new dimension to a familiar direction in research, invents a new methodology, or intervenes in the latest theoretical debate from an unexpected angle.

In listening to a talk, or reading a precirculated draft of the talk, try to identify to yourself which aspect of the work you have a question about. Is it about what the scholar is saying about his or her own research, or is it about how the research fits into disciplinary trends and conversations? In my experience at lecture series and at conferences, the incoherent questions often stem from people's not being able to differentiate between those two things, and jumbling them together in a question that makes the person giving the talk assume a deer-in-the-headlights look and go, "I am sorry, I am not sure what you are asking."

Beyond that, engaging questions can fit into the following genres. Think of them as



## The Professor Is In

Karen Kelsky, through her business, The Professor Is In, has advised countless graduate students and junior faculty members on how to navigate the perilous waters of the job search. Twice a month she answers questions from readers on all aspects of the hiring process. Here is a sampling of her recent columns.

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templates of sorts and teach yourself to look for places in a talk or a paper where one of these will organically make sense.

- **Clarifying questions:** "On page 13, you say X implies Y. Can you say more about how one follows the other?"
- **Challenging questions (but be nice about how you ask):** "Isn't it possible that that passage/quote/dataset can be also interpreted in ABC way, which would imply XYZ about the larger argument?"
- **Suggestions disguised as questions:** "Do you happen to know the work of this obscure and/or brand-new scholar? They look at XYZ in a way that resonates with your approach. You may find it of interest."
- **Process questions (which people like because they like talking about their research):** "Can you say a little bit about how you chose this particular example/case study/methodology?" (This is really a reliable fallback.)
- **Intellectual-team questions:** As long as you are clear on the contribution of the work to a body of theory, you can ask something like, "So, obviously your work speaks to issues in the Big Polarizing Theory Debate. How do you see your research situated in relation to XYZ aspect of this scholarly conversation?"

Now for the simple logistics of asking seminar questions. I struggled with summoning the courage to do that during my early years as a graduate school and later as an assistant professor — even when I knew my question was an excellent one. I developed a variety of techniques to overcome my shyness.

First, I wrote down my questions completely, so that I could read them if necessary. Reading a question is not odd in a scholarly context. I also learned that I could not wait for a pause in the conversation, because such pauses rarely occur among academics. So I learned that I had to really insert myself with a loud and assertive (but still collegial) tone, no matter how awkward that felt.

Finally, I observed the gendered norm that women tend to raise their hands and wait to be called on, while men tend to just shout out questions or comments.

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Eventually I learned that if I didn't want to be continually ignored or talked over, I had to stop waiting around with hand meekly raised, and just start talking. If that feels uncomfortable to you, master such conversational gambits as, "Oh, and expanding from what David just said ...," or "Right! I had that thought as well, but also would argue that ...," or "That is such a terrific point. The way I saw that manifesting is ...." Go ahead and practice such interjections with friends or in front of a mirror, or in a role-play exercise, or in low-stakes environments like your own classroom. The idea is to have them down for the higher-stakes context of a departmental seminar.

Being a good asker of questions is a skill, like any other academic skill — being a good teacher, a good peer-reviewer, or a good grant writer. The more you practice, the easier it will be to come up with a "smart" question on the spot in the kind of situation you are describing. Good luck.

*Karen Kelsky is founder and president of The Professor Is In , which offers advice and consulting services on the academic job search and on all aspects of the academic and postacademic career. She is a former tenured professor at two universities . Browse an archive of Kelsky's previous advice columns here .*

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