How to Ask Questions
Jan. 23, 2017

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Synchronization

Wait list
- 410 wait list is done
- 605 wait list
  - Being done today seems very plausible
  - Probably not 100% of students will be registered this time

Office hours
- Today I expect to be available at 13:00
Motivation

You're here to learn
You ask us questions
Some questions result in better learning than others
  • We have a pedagogical theory
    • We would like to train you to be self-oracular

Topic: how to ask the faster-learning questions
Outline

I don't get _____.
Can I assume ________?
Is this the right way to ________?
I can't decide between _______ and ________.
Q1: “I don't get _____”

What you ask us
- I don't get _____

The problem we fear
- Insufficient synthesis
Q1: “I don't get _____”

What you ask us
- I don't get _____

The problem we fear
- Insufficient synthesis
  - Textbook
  - “Regular” (inter-project) lectures
  - Project-specific lecture
  - Project specification, project handout
  - Test code (reading during design can be good)
  - Material on “projects” web page of course web site
Q1: “I don't get ______”

What you ask us
- I don't get ______

The problem we fear
- Insufficient synthesis
  - Textbook
  - “Regular” (inter-project) lectures
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How to help us with our fears
- “I read X and Y. I think I understand Z, but I don't see how to apply W.”
- “When the spec says ____, I can't tell whether that means ____ or ____ because ____.”
Q2: Can I assume __________?

What you ask us
  • Can I assume _____?

The problem we fear
  • Missed opportunity for design
Q2: Can I assume __________?

What you ask us
- Can I assume _____?

The problem we fear
- Missed opportunity for design

How to help us with our fears
- Ask *yourself* these two questions instead
  - Q2': If I assume _____ *and I'm wrong*, what will happen?
  - Q2'": If I *don't* assume _____, what is the penalty?
Q2: Can I assume __________? 

What you ask us
- Can I assume _____?

The problem we fear
- Missed opportunity for design

How to help us with our fears
- Ask yourself these two questions instead
  - Q2': If I assume _____ and I'm wrong, what will happen?
    » A1: “The world will end” ⇒ ...?
    » A2: “Maybe I must complain to user” ⇒ ...?
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What you ask us
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The problem we fear
- Missed opportunity for design

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    - A2: “Maybe I must complain to user” ⇒ ok?
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    - A1: “Must do 1 more XOR” ⇒ ...
    - A2: “Must do O(N^{12}) graph scan” ⇒ ...?
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    » A2: “Must do $O(N^{12})$ graph scan” ⇒ ok?
- Avoid: “World will end” + “save 1 XOR”
Q3: Is this the right way to ______? 

What you ask us
- Is this the right way to _____?

The problem we fear
- You believe there is *one* right way to _____.
Q3: Is this the right way to _____?

What you ask us
- Is this the right way to _____?

The problem we fear
- You believe there is one right way to _____.
  - Usually, there are several
  - Generally our assignments are designed to have multiple good solutions
Q3: Is this the right way to _____?

What you ask us

- Is this the right way to _____?

The problem we fear

- You believe there is one right way to _____.
  - Usually, there are several
  - Generally our assignments are designed to have multiple good solutions

How to help us with our fears

- Figure out two or three ways to _____
  - Often one will seem clearly better than the other(s)
  - Regardless, you will almost certainly understand the problem better
  - But sometimes you may end up having to make a tough decision...
Q4: I can't decide between X & Y

What you ask us
- I can't decide between X and Y

The problem we fear
- You believe that we believe X (or Y) is “the right answer”
  - Again, we try *not* to do this
- Missed opportunity for design
Q4: I can't decide between X & Y

What you ask us
- I can't decide between X and Y

The problem we fear
- You believe that we believe X (or Y) is “the right answer”
  - Again, we try *not* to do this
  - Missed opportunity for design

How to help us with our fears
- Show us a table!
Q4: I can't decide between X & Y

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Proposal X</th>
<th>Proposal Y</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metric 1</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metric 2</td>
<td>Bad</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>This one, because...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<td>Good</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metric 2</th>
<th>Proposal X</th>
<th>Proposal Y</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion**

This one, because...

**Note!**

- This table is strictly better than “a list of pros and cons”
Conclusion

Suggestions

- Make sure you read everything
- Ask detailed questions that refer to handout, spec, etc.
- Ask multi-dimensional questions about assumptions
- Try to find multiple solutions to a tough problem
  - When choosing, try to have a rationale
  - If you write down a summary each time, you have a “design document”!