15-410

How to Ask Questions
Aug. 30, 2019

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Synchronization

Wait list
- 410 wait list is essentially done
- 605 wait list is essentially done
- If you want to take the class this semester and are not on a wait list, you must see me today.
- If you have received “see me” mail, you must see me today.

Office hours
- The staff web page has a pretty good estimate
“How to Ask Questions” - 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 _____

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- Insufficient synthesis
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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” ⇒ ...?
Q2: Can I assume __________?

What you ask us
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    » A2: “Must do O(N^{12}) graph scan” ⇒ ...
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What you ask us
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- 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>Metric 1</th>
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<th>Proposal Y</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metric 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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**Note!**
- This table is strictly better than “a list of pros and cons”
- Rationale generally involves prioritizing (metric, value)
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”!
Conclusion

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Note!

- We expect you (personally) to carry out these procedures!
  - Not “Is it ok to assume ____?”
  - Not “pros and cons”
Conclusion

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Note!

- We expect you (personally) to carry out these procedures!
  - Not “Is it ok to assume ____?”
  - Not “pros and cons”
- These procedures may appear on an exam question
  - “Is it ok to assume ____?” will not get full credit
  - “Pros and cons” will not get full credit