How to Ask Questions
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Synchronization

Wait list

- 410 wait list is essentially done
  - I expect to take roughly one more student (probably not everybody)
- 605 wait list is close to done
  - I expect to take 2-5 (almost certainly not everybody)
- We are not in “1:1” mode
  - If 1 student drops, it may not be possible to add 1 student
  - Staffing is already borderline – a small number of drops won't really help
  - If you are registered but planning to drop, please drop very soon, or else you will keep some hopeful student out permanently.

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 _____
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
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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 _____?
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

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  - Ask *yourself* these two questions instead
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      » A1: “The world will end” ⇒ ...
      » A2: “Maybe I must complain to user” ⇒ ...

⇒ ...?
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What you ask us
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    » A1: “Must do 1 more XOR” ⇒ ...?
    » A2: “Must do O(N^{12}) graph scan” ⇒ ...?
Q2: Can I assume __________?

What you ask us
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    - A1: “Must do 1 more XOR” ⇒ maybe not assume
    - A2: “Must do $O(N^{12})$ graph scan” ⇒ ok to assume?
- Avoid: “World will end” + “save 1 XOR”
Q3: Is this the right way to ______?

What you ask us

- Is this the 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 ______.
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
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
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The problem we fear
- You believe that we believe X (or Y) is "the right answer"
  - Again, we try \textit{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>
<th>Proposal X</th>
<th>Proposal Y</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Bad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Metric 2</th>
<th>Proposal X</th>
<th>Proposal Y</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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**Conclusion**

This one, because...
Q4: I can't decide between X & Y

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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