Description

The question and answer part of a lecture is a short but crucial part of a research presentation. Listeners get a chance to clarify parts of the presentation and ask the speaker to expand on interesting topics. The answers may be the most memorable parts of the presentation. On the other hand a badly handled Q&A will be disappointing to the listeners or even embarrassing to the speaker. Here are some tips to make the most of the opportunity.

Repeat

The acoustics of a large lecture hall may be poor. A question from the front row will be easy for the speaker to hear but listeners a few rows behind may hear nothing but a mumble (audience members—please stand when asking a question!) In this case, the speaker should repeat the question before answering it.

Clarify

Question may be clumsily expressed. If so, don't try to answer until you are sure what's being asked. Politely ask for clarification: "If I understand the question, you are asking . . .?"

Think

Take a second or two to compose your thoughts for a response. Perhaps there are several points that should be discussed in a certain order. A brief pause will help you organize an answer. A thoughtful pause is much more effective than casting about for something to say. The audience will be impressed: they appreciate that you value them enough to take their questions seriously.

Stick to the Topic

Researchers love talking about their work and a question may be a starting point for a rambling digression. Resist the urge. Many other audience members may be waiting to ask questions.

Plain Language

During the Q&A you might not be able to refer back to a visual to illustrate a response. This makes it all the more important that responses be delivered in plain, easy to understand language, with a minimum of jargon.

Don’t Know? Say So

No matter how well prepared a speaker is, there will be times when he cannot answer a question. In this case, it’s best to admit it rather than trying to fake an answer. Perhaps no one can answer the question—the data is not there. In this case you might speculate on possibilities, or better, suggest experiments that could be done to find the answer. If you don’t know the answer to a question because it’s not your area of expertise or you haven’t read a certain paper, don’t be afraid to say so. I’ve heard distinguished professors jovially decline to answer a question because, “That’s in an area I know nothing about.” Audiences admire a speaker who will give it to them straight.

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Date Created
2016/06/27
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