

# GUIDE TO CRAFTING GREAT QUESTIONS



At the heart of any effective media engagement project are thoughtful questions. Here are some tips on how to get a news conversation started with a community.

## LOOK FOR EXPERIENCES OVER OPINIONS OPINIONS

Your goal is to give space for people to share their experiences. In general you want people to respond with longer, personal responses. Avoid questions that begin with, “What do you think...” or “What’s your opinion on...?” go with questions like, “What happened to you when...?” “How were you impacted...?”

- *Don’t ask:* What do you think about gun laws?
- *Do ask:* How are guns a part of your life?  
What negative or positive impact have guns had on your life?

## MAKE ABSTRACT ISSUES TANGIBLE

Ask questions that people can readily answer based on their experiences. Not everyone in your community will be an expert on the latest policy decision, but they are experts on their daily lives. Your job is to find a way to turn complex topics into accessible questions that speak to real and tangible issues people are dealing with.

- *Don’t ask:* How are you impacted by gentrification?
- *Do ask:* What percentage of your income goes to rent or mortgage?  
(federal indicator for affordable housing)
- *Do ask:* What long-term businesses in your community have closed in the past few years? What new ones have popped up? How do you feel about these changes?

## ASK PEOPLE TO TELL THEIR STORY, NOT FILL OUT A SURVEY

Everyone’s a storyteller. Asking people yes or no questions, or questions that elicit one word answers, does little to compel people to continue participating in the project. Those survey style questions also tend to feel extractive rather than collaborative. Ask questions that the community has been begging to answer and then give them space to really tell their story.

- *Don't ask:* Are you satisfied with the public school system?
- *Do ask:* Tell us about the last time you were proud of our public schools.

### STICK TO THE 5WS AND H

Start your questions with *Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How* as often as you can. Sticking to the 5Ws and H helps you avoid short answers.

- *Don't ask:* Are you in favor of new federal immigration policies?
- *Do ask:* How are you impacted by new federal immigration policies?
- *Do ask:* What's the impact of new federal immigration policies on your community?

If you must ask a Yes/No questions, follow it up. Sometimes it's important to get a yes or no answer. If you do that, follow up with an open-ended question that gets more information.

- *Examples:* Did you vote in the election? Y/N, What motivated you in that decision?  
How do you feel about the outcome?

Do some research on the topic you're interested in, it will make your questions more effective. But also remember, all of your research doesn't have to be reflected in your question. You want to hear what your community knows. A question is an exercise in gathering information, it's not about you sounding smart.

- *Don't Ask:* I heard that the police have been more active in this neighborhood in the past few weeks, rounding up accused gang members. Is that true?
- *Do ask:* How safe does your community feel these days?
- *Do ask:* What kind of police presence have you seen in your community?  
How is that impacting the neighborhood?

### HAVE SOME FUN

Sustained and long term engagement gives you time and space to ask all sorts of questions. They don't have to (and shouldn't) always be based around hard hitting news. Have fun every now and again. You want your project to feel like an extension of the community—vibrant and engaged. The Listening Post project in New Orleans sent out a question about the city budget and received this message: "The first time I sent a text to this, I saw a sign that asked, "who do you love." I was newly in love so I said, Mary. This was about 2 years ago. She dumped me last night. And now I'm falling apart." There was something bigger going on in this person's life than the city budget, and they felt connected enough to the Listening Post to share it. This person had joined in the discussion because they saw a sign with a question—"Who do you love?"—that then led them to 2 years of engagement with local news and information.