

The ABCs of Answering Difficult Questions in Academic Presentations

No matter what your experience level might be, the three principles below can provide a helpful guide for answering questions from your audience.

A

Acknowledge the question

Paraphrase the question.

Say something like “that’s a great question!” or “...interesting question”.

Ask the audience member to clarify their question if needed.

B

Be honest

If you don’t know, that’s ok, don’t pretend you do.

C

Contribute something based on your knowledge

Provide an answer that acknowledges what you do know and make an educated guess if needed.

Offer to look up the answer or explore areas for further research with the audience member afterwards.

If appropriate (e.g., if you are facilitating an activity or in a TA role), ask the audience what they think.

Some Example Prompts

“That’s a great question! I’m not sure about the answer because it was beyond the scope of our project but if I had to speculate based on our research, I’d say ...”

“Are you asking about ...? That’s a really interesting point! Can we chat after the presentation, as I think this could be something interesting to explore?”

“Great question! Before I answer, what do people in the audience think (then provide a summary with your opinion added)?”

It can be helpful to think of potential questions you might receive ahead of time. Write down some questions you think your audience might ask you below. Then, practice delivering your responses. You can even create additional slides in your slide deck with the answers!