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# BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

## 6 Minute English

### Asking the right questions



*NB: This is not a word-for-word transcript*

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**Neil**

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English. I'm Neil...

**Alice**

... and I'm Alice. Now Neil, I'm a big fan of chat shows, as you know. But what do you think makes a good interview?

**Neil**

I like it when the interviewer asks a question that **catches** the guest **off guard**. You know – to surprise them so they're embarrassed and don't know what to say.

**Alice**

That's not very nice!

**Neil**

I know. But it's great TV. That's what chat shows are all about, isn't it?

**Alice**

Well, I don't agree, Neil! A **chat show**, by the way, is a TV or radio programme where a **host** – the person who presents the show – talks to guest celebrities about various topics. And what makes a good interview is the subject of today's show.

**Neil**

So what's a good interview technique, Alice?

**Alice**

Well, asking **open questions** – questions the celebrities can't easily respond to with a short answer. Open questions give them the chance to talk and possibly reveal some juicy details about themselves!

**Neil**

**Juicy details** means information you find interesting because it's exciting or shocking.

**Alice**

Yes. So let's test your interviewing skills, Neil. Ask me something – see if you can get some juicy details.

**Neil**

OK... Hmm... How much do you weigh?

**Alice**

How much do I weigh?

**Neil**

Yeah.

**Alice**

How much do *you* weigh? Look, that's a **closed question** – you're going to get a short answer and no juicy details! And more importantly, Neil, it's a rude question!

**Neil**

OK – bad choice. Sorry. But your reaction was juicy – you got pretty **hot under the collar** – and that means embarrassed or angry! I'll try to think of a better question to ask you before the end of the show.

**Alice**

Alright then. Now, since you aren't good at *asking* questions, perhaps you can *answer* one instead. Who developed a method of questioning around two and a half thousand years ago that aims to discover hidden truths? Was it...

- a) Hippocrates?
- b) Socrates?
- Or c) Aristotle?

**Neil**

Well, I don't know much about ancient history so I'm going to guess c) Aristotle.

**Alice**

Well, we'll find out if you picked the right answer later on – but now let's listen to Larry King talking about the secret of his successful career as a TV chat show host. Can you spot a word that means to get or produce?

**INSERT**

**Larry King, TV chat show host, US**

If you ask good questions and you elicit thoughtful answers then you learn more about the person. If the interview's hard – if I begin by saying, 'Why did you do that?' I'd make you defensive. That may be thrilling television, but you don't learn a lot. I learned that the more I drew back, asked good questions, listened to the answers, cared about the guest ... you make the camera disappear.

**Neil**

The word Larry King used is... **elicit**.

**Alice**

Right. And *you* elicited a defensive reaction from me when you asked a not very thoughtful question about my weight. **Defensive** means protecting yourself from criticism or attack.

**Neil**

OK, I wouldn't make a good chat show host then.

**Alice**

You're right there. So good interviewers **draw back** – or move away – from being the centre of attention. They're good listeners and care about their guests. Sound familiar?

**Neil**

Are you suggesting that you're a good interviewer?

**Alice**

Yup.

**Neil**

OK, well, so why aren't you a top chat show host, hmm? What does Larry mean when he says you have to **make the camera disappear**?

**Alice**

It means to make the conversation real – as if you were chatting with a friend – rather than performing to a TV audience. But let's hear more from Larry King on the secret of his success.

**INSERT**

**Larry King, TV chat show host, US**

I don't want a 'no'. I don't want a 'yes'. I want a 'why'. So in other words, I want to be a little kind of dumb. My friend Herbie said the secret of my success is being dumb. 'What do you mean by that?'

**Neil**

So you have to ask **dumb** – or stupid – questions to make a great chat show host! I knew it!

**Alice**

Maybe there's hope for you yet, Neil.

**Neil**

Charming.

**Alice**

Lovely. OK, here's the answer to today's quiz question. I asked: Who developed a method of questioning around two and a half thousand years ago that aims to discover hidden truths? Was it... a) Hippocrates? b) Socrates? Or c) Aristotle?

**Neil**

And I said c) Aristotle.

**Alice**

No, it was b) Socrates. All three were famous Greek philosophers but Socrates was the one who angered lots of important people by his **probing** – or investigative – questions – and this technique is called Socratic Dialogue. Socrates lived from **469 to 399 BC** and he influenced philosophy so much that all previous thinkers have come to be known as Pre-Socratic. Despite this he declared "All I know is that I know nothing".

**Neil**

Very noble. OK, a final question for you, Alice. What makes you happy?

**Alice**

Working with such a fantastic co-presenter, Neil.

**Neil**

That's nice! I'm embarrassed now.

**Alice**

Can you tell us the words we heard today?

**Neil**

Of course!

catch somebody off guard

chat show

host

open questions

juicy details

closed question

hot under the collar

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defensive

draw back

make the camera disappear

dumb

probing

**Alice**

Well, that's the end of today's 6 Minute English. Please join us again soon.

**Neil**

Yes, do indeed!

## **Both**

Bye.

## **Vocabulary**

### **catch somebody off guard**

to surprise someone in a way that often makes them confused or embarrassed

### **chat show**

a TV or radio programme where celebrities talk to their host about various topics

### **host**

a person who presents a TV or radio show and talks to guest celebrities

### **open questions**

questions that can't be answered with a short answer for example a couple of words or yes or no; they often begin with 'wh' (why, what, who etc)

### **juicy details**

information you find interesting because it's exciting or shocking

### **closed question**

a question where the choice of answers is limited for example to yes or no, or a specific piece of information

### **hot under the collar**

angry or embarrassed

### **elicit**

get or produce something, for example, a reaction

### **defensive**

protecting yourself from criticism or attack

### **draw back**

move away

### **make the camera disappear**

make something real or authentic

### **dumb**

stupid

### **probing**

investigative