It's How You Ask It
Sydney Harris

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What a lot of people fail to learn, even as they grow older, is that the way you ask a question can determine the kind of answer you get. The professional pollsters are keenly aware of this and can elicit seemingly contradictory answers by asking the same question in somewhat different ways.

As an example, I recall the story of the two priests arguing about whether it was proper to smoke and pray at the same time. One said it was, and the other said it wasn’t. To settle the matter, they agreed that both should write to the Pope for his opinion.

A few weeks later they met and compared notes. Each claimed that the Pope had supported his view and suspected the other of falsifying the reply he got from the Holy Office.

Finally, one asked, “How did you phrase your question?” The other replied, “I asked whether it was proper to smoke while one is praying, and the Pope answered, ‘Certainly not, praying is a serious business and permits of no distractions.’ And how did you phrase your question?”

“Well,” said the other, “I asked if it was proper to pray while smoking, and the Pope said, ‘Certainly, prayer is always in order.’”

Some years ago, two large auto companies made expensive public surveys at much the same time to try to find out what kind of car the American motorist might buy in the future.

One company’s pollster asked the direct question, “What kind of car would you like to have?” The majority of auto owners replied that they wanted a car that was compact, economical, functional, and subdued in looks.

The other company’s pollster was far shrewder and more sensitive to the self-deception most of us unconsciously practice. He asked: “What kind of car do you think your neighbor would like to have?” And there the majority replied that their neighbors coveted large, ostentatious, gimmicky models that looked more like boats or airplanes.

The first auto maker nearly went broke putting out sedate little cars long before the public was ready for them, while the second enjoyed a banner year with its rakish, gaudy, rear-finned models. In fact, the first company was forced to retool to meet the competition.

It is far harder to devise fair and “unweighted” questions than it is to find the answers. Indeed, the most significant advances in
science have come not from finding answers, but from beginning to ask the right questions in the right way. Like that simplest one of all, which no one asked until Newton, "Why do apples fall down instead of up?"

Questions About "Illustration"

1. What is the main idea of this essay?

2. Does Harris succeed in making that idea clear to you? Explain.

Questions on Diction and Writing Techniques

1. How does your dictionary define "elicit" (par. 1); "ostentatious" (par. 8); "sedate," "rakish," and "gaudy" (par. 9)? Use each of these words in a sentence.

2. Evaluate paragraph 1 as an opening paragraph and paragraph 10 as a closing paragraph.


For Discussion, Reading, and Writing

1. Write a short essay on any subject, using one or two anecdotes to illustrate your main idea.

2. Find in your personal experience simple material that can be used to illustrate a meaningful generalization. Embody this information in a short essay.

3. How have your views about college changed since you first arrived on campus? Write about them in a short essay based on specific experiences.