

## Answering Questions at Conferences

Consider the following examples of typical questions posed during a conference paper Q&A. Of the provided responses, which is the most appropriate? Why? Are there other types of questions you aren't sure how you should go about answering? Our answers and commentary are provided on page 3 of this handout.<sup>1</sup>

### Example 1:

"You presented an interesting argument for the requirement of Protein X in the transcriptional regulation of gene Y, but research publications from Better Lab suggests that this is not true. Did you read these papers and how do you explain these discrepancies in your data?" –Dr. Better, University of Awesome Research

*Response A:* Thank you for your question. Our experiments on protein X and gene Y were done using a different cell type that is more physiologically relevant than previous reports, which could explain the differences. Also, everyone in the field knows that no one can reproduce the scientific results that My Lab publishes.

*Response B:* Thank you for your question. Our experiments on protein X and gene Y were done using a different cell type than previous reports, which could explain any discrepancies. We were interested in using other cell type because recent reports show that transcriptional research in other cell type is often more reproducible in human studies, which could make these data applicable to translational research in collaborating labs.

### Example 2:

"Can you explain how your model of economic response to the housing recession fits in with the existing framework by Dr. Jonathan Wits?"

*Response A:* Thank you for your question. While I'm not well versed on this particular framework, I will be sure to look into it as a potential point of interest for my model.

*Response B:* I'm not sure, since I haven't read any publications by Dr. Wits.

### Example 3:

"You argue in your paper that Quaker women subverted the ideology of gender that is represented in the imagery and language of men and women writers of the early Quaker movement that was built upon the early modern English hierarchy of male over female through the acts of writing and speaking. I think this is interesting in the context of one specific conflict within the Quaker movement—that of the existence and duties of the Women's Meeting in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Developed by Jennifer Heller for the Graduate Writing Workshop: Developing and Delivering Conference Papers, Panels, and Presentations. Adapted from <http://www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/working-in-higher-education/1823/the-question-and-answer-session-at-an-academic-conference>

1660s, '70s, and '80s. During these decades, the jurisdiction over marriage applications was debated, as was the existence of the separate Women's Meeting, which had been established only a decade or so earlier. Women claimed their continued jurisdiction over these applications by providing essentialist arguments for their participation: as women, they spent more time with young people and therefore knew better who should marry. This argument reasserted women's gender roles as mothers and caregivers, but it also gave them an authority over marriage which can be seen in Quaker writings of this period."

*Response A:* Thank you for your comment. That is a very interesting point, which further evidences a situation where Quaker women subverted the traditional ideology of gender.

*Response B:* I'm sorry, but did you have an actual question?

**Example 4:**

"Thank you for the great talk. One detail I wanted to inquire about: I couldn't help but notice that throughout your fascinating paper on German poets of the nineteenth century, you continually referenced a particular Novalis. However, since this was the pseudonym of Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg, I think it might be more accurate to utilize his proper name, since your paper was more historical in nature. Did you realize this?"

*Response A:* Thank you for your comment. Since this is a minor detail and both names are considered accurate in the disciplines of history and poetry, I don't think this is a particularly important area of contention.

*Response B:* Thank you for your comment. I appreciate getting feedback from different disciplinary points of view, and I will be sure to keep this in mind for future papers of this genre.



## Answers & Commentary

**Example 1:** Response B is more appropriate. This questioner falls into the disagreeable category, but can be handled effectively by sidestepping the direct challenge to directly address the potential reasons behind the different data results.

**Example 2:** Response A is more appropriate. This question falls into the expert/curveball category, and it is completely fine to admit you do not know everything. The best way to address these kinds of questions is to admit your ignorance and thank them for their input.

**Example 3:** Response A is more appropriate. This questioner is also an expert/curveballer, which is indicated by the long, verbose commentary that lacks a real question. Again, navigate these kinds of questions by thanking him/her for his/her comment and try to redirect back to your own research.

**Example 4:** Response B is more appropriate. This is a nitpicker question/comment that can be addressed by acknowledging the questioners' feedback and moving on quickly thereafter.

