

Chapter 1

What do you really want?

How to make sure you really understand the question

In this chapter you'll find out how to:

- **avoid misunderstandings**
- **ask the right questions**
- **agree the task**
- **find out how long you've got to do it.**

There's a story told of a London taxi driver some years ago who picked up an American fare outside Victoria Station. There was a big Egyptology exhibition on at the British Museum at the time. 'Take me to Tutankhamun,' the lady drawled. So the cabbie did. Thirty minutes later he dropped her at a rather down-at-heel patch of open space in the south-west London suburbs, called 'Tooting Common'.

It's an apocryphal tale, no doubt. But it does show the problems you can hit when dealing with what seems like the simplest of enquiries. Some of your queries will come orally, face-to-face. The possibilities for misunderstandings are endless – accent, articulation, assumptions, all can send you scurrying off in totally the wrong direction, wasting both your time and the enquirer's. But with face-to-face enquiries, you are at least offered lots of clues; most of what we communicate is non-verbal, so you can glean what you can from facial expression, eye contact, body language. You are deprived of these clues when your queries come in by phone, and you have even less to go on when they arrive in written form – by e-mail, fax or post. So the first task has to be: no matter how your enquiry comes in, always make sure you understand the question.

Avoiding misunderstandings

Remember when you were doing your exams, and teachers and lecturers dinned into you the lesson ‘read the whole paper first’? Well, it matters just as much here. Because, if you get it wrong, it’ll be your fault no matter how unhelpful the enquirer has been. You are the professional, remember, and the enquirer is the amateur.

Just think of all the different types of enquirer you might meet, and the things that could go wrong as a result . . .

Type 1: The homophone victim

I’m looking for information on migration patterns in whales

means:

I’m looking for information on migration patterns in Wales

Type 2: The Chinese whisperer

I’m trying to find a song called ‘When I would sing under the ocean’

means:

I’m trying to find a song called ‘When I was king of the Beotians’

Type 3: The malapropist

Do you have the Electrical Register?

means:

Do you have the electoral register?

Type 4: The generalist

Do you have any books on retailing?

means:

What is Marks & Spencer’s current pretax profit?

Type 5: The know-all

I need some statistics from Employment gazette.

means:

*I need earnings data for female employees in Croydon; I'm guessing that they're in Employment gazette because I don't want to seem ignorant. [Actually, they aren't. And it hasn't been called *Employment gazette* for years, but *Labour market trends*.]*

Type 6: The muddler

Have you got any books on Kew Gardens? That's to say, something on the Crystal Palace, if you can manage it. What would be really helpful, actually, would be the index to the Illustrated London news. Or, better still, a book on tropical fish.

means:

I'm doing a project on the Westminster Aquarium.

Type 7: The obsessively secretive

Where's the catalogue?

means (after a lot of tactful questioning):

I know there have been reports in the papers that MPs have been accepting cash in return for asking Parliamentary questions, and that one paper has actually named names; I'm very concerned about this because my brother is an MP and he may be involved because he's been asking questions about immigration quotas and he's sponsored by the Strong & Moral Britain Association, which I think is associated with neo-fascist organizations; can you confirm this, or let me know where its funding comes from? I really need to know because I'm about to become a governor of a school with a large number of Asian children – so I'd also like to find out what obligation there is on school governors to declare other interests, but I don't want to approach the school directly about this in case they start asking awkward questions.

Most of these are real examples, some exaggerations. (The last one is almost a total fiction.) But they all pose real dangers. Rule number one of enquiry answering is that people almost never ask the question they really want to know the answer to.

Disgruntled and unconvinced enquirers

There are all sorts of reasons for this. They may not want to bother the busy staff. It's true, a big public or educational library can be a busy place. You can have people queuing up at the enquiry desk just when Maisie decides to go off for coffee. When you're under pressure, it's always a temptation to take an enquiry at face value and answer the question actually put to you. Resist it! You're almost certain to have a disgruntled customer returning to the enquiry desk before too long, and that's a waste of everybody's time, and really bad customer relations.

Equally alarming is the kind of enquirer who lacks confidence in your ability to answer the question. They'd sooner browse themselves, perhaps inefficiently, than risk having their time wasted by you. This kind should be sending alarm signals both to you and to your boss. It probably means that the enquirer has had bad experiences before – either with your service or somewhere else. Either way, it's up to you to convince them, quickly, that you can help, even if you don't know anything about the subject they are interested in. This doesn't mean trying to pull the wool over their eyes – that's the worst possible tactic. You're bound to get found out, and you'll just reinforce the enquirer's scepticism. There are ways of being helpful, even if you haven't a clue what the enquirer is talking about.

Secretive enquirers and time-wasters

Then there are enquirers who just don't want anyone to know what they're doing. These can be the most infuriating kind. Despite your gentle persuasion, they resolutely refuse to disclose any information that might help you to help them. But you must suppress your urge to get annoyed. That will only make matters worse. They may have excellent reasons for not wanting to give anything away. It might be someone applying for a job with a big local firm who doesn't want their current

employer to get wind of it. It might be an academic who doesn't want to be beaten to publication by a rival. Or would *you* want everyone to know that you were looking for addresses of HIV clinics?

Finally, there are time wasters – people who want to burden you with every tiny detail of their investigation, together with the complete life stories of all their sisters, cousins and aunts. Genealogical enquirers frequently fall into this category. You owe it to your other enquirers to steer this type to the point as quickly as possible. They'll try to persuade you that you can't possibly help them without a full understanding of their needs. They may genuinely believe this, or they may simply have time on their hands, and be looking for someone to talk to. Either way, you have to focus them, tactfully.

There are ways of dealing with all these types. You'll need to be approachable, reassuring, discreet and tactful. This is relatively easy to do face-to-face, more difficult on the phone, because you're not giving the enquirer any visual clues. One thing that does work is to smile when you're on the phone; it can work wonders with a suspicious or hostile enquirer! What you really do need to do, though, is to maintain what the police used to call an attitude of 'suspicious alertness'. You have to find out what you need to know by asking questions, and there are several different questioning techniques that you can employ. This is sometimes rather pretentiously referred to as 'the reference interview', but that implies a formality about the process that can be off-putting for the enquirer. It's really just a structured conversation, directed by you.

Asking the right questions

One of the most useful things you can learn to do in enquiry work is to get into the habit of always asking a supplementary question. Practise it in conversation until it becomes second nature. It can provide an enormous number of clues as to what your enquirer really wants – and can sometimes reveal something completely unexpected that can prevent you from darting off in the wrong direction. Here's a silly example – you're in the kitchen and you think your partner said, 'Have you got the time?' So you reply, 'Do you mean what time is it now or how long does it take to cook?' 'No, no,' your partner answers, 'Did you remember to buy the thyme?'

It's probably second nature to ask a supplementary question in conversation – face-to-face or on the phone – but you should also do it if at all possible with written enquiries as well. This can admittedly be awkward and time-consuming if you are responding to a fax or letter. But with the increasing proportion of enquiries that come in by e-mail, it's easy; you should look carefully at the wording and respond immediately, asking questions that will help you to help your enquirer better.

You need different kinds of questions for different situations, different techniques for dealing with each of the types of enquirer listed above. Let's run through them, and the situations in which you might use them.

Open questions

These invite the enquirer to supply further details without your specifying what additional information would be helpful. You might need to use an open question to deal with a type 4 enquirer (the generalist). Perhaps something like 'Are you interested in any particular aspect of retailing?' And it may be your only way forward with type 7 (the obsessively secretive) with a response like 'I could give you a hand if you can give me an idea of what subject you're interested in.' However, open questions do have the disadvantage of leaving far too many options open.

Closed questions

These force the enquirer to give you a yes/no answer. With type 5 (the know-all) you might be tempted to ask, 'Are you sure that the statistics you want are published there?' But, if the know-all runs true to type, the answer will undoubtedly be 'Yes,' and you will have learned nothing. So you should use closed questions only when you are certain what the options are. For example, you could ask type 3 (the malapropist) 'Do you want the current register for this area?' (see below – 'Who, What, When, Where, Why, How?').

Forced choice questions

These force the enquirer to choose between alternatives. The little

kitchen sink drama above uses a forced choice question. Or you might ask a type 1 enquirer (the homophone victim), ‘Do you mean the sea creatures or the country?’ Forced choice questions can be very helpful – they immediately narrow the field in a way that is being firmly directed by you. But you have to learn to think quickly to come up with two really useful options. You sometimes have to be tactful with forced choice questions too. After all, it’s perfectly clear to the enquirer what they want!

Multiple questions

These offer the enquirer a range of options to choose from. You’d use a multiple question when you’re really not sure at all what the enquirer wants and you need to fish for ideas. An alternative might be to use an open question, but multiple-choice questions are likely to be much more useful, provided you can think quickly enough to come up with some sensible options. Instead of using an open question for type 4 (the generalist), you could try, ‘Are you looking for information on retail management, shop design or location, market research, special types of retailer such as food or electrical goods shops – or even one particular retailer?’ The only real problem with multiple questions is that you might confuse the enquirer by offering too many options. So it’s worth considering asking a succession of forced-choice questions instead, moving from the general to the particular.

Leading questions

These lead the enquirer in the direction of the answer you want. You should only use them when you’re 99% certain you do know what the enquirer wants. They can be dangerous, because they impose your assumptions on the enquirer’s request, when what you really need to be sure of is that you haven’t made any false assumptions. With type 1 (the homophone victim), you might ask, ‘So it’s *statistics* on their movements that you’re looking for then?’ Your enquirer might answer ‘Yes’, and be quite right. But you still don’t know whether it’s ‘whales’ or ‘Wales’.

Hypothetical questions

These attempt to glean further information by putting a hypothetical situation to the enquirer. As with the multiple questions, you have to be able to think on your feet to come up quickly with a sensible hypothetical question. But they might be your only hope with type 6 (the muddler), because there is one hypothetical technique that allows you to ask *the* forbidden question. You're never allowed to ask 'What do you *really* want?' That sounds aggressive and suspicious and sends out the wrong signals to the enquirer. But you can put the same question in a hypothetical form by asking 'What would your ideal answer look like?' (Whether or not you ask a hypothetical question of your enquirer, this is one absolutely vital hypothetical question that you must ask yourself. We'll come back to it in Chapter 3.)

Agreeing the task

Whichever questioning technique you employ, the aim is the same. It's to find out, beyond any doubt, exactly what your enquirer wants you to do for them. For this you must be in full possession of the facts. Your chosen questioning strategy should allow you to do one or both of two things – funnelling and probing.

Funnelling focuses the enquirer in from the general to the particular. It would probably help with types 4 (the generalist) and 6 (the muddler). However it can also be an efficient way of dealing with the ambiguities offered by types 1 (the homophone victim), and 5 (the know-all). It's usually the easier of the two techniques to apply because it needn't sound over inquisitive or threatening. Closed, forced choice and leading questions are all suitable for funnelling operations – although you should bear in mind that each of these techniques carries its own hazards. Forced choice is almost always the most efficient one.

Probing seeks further details from the enquirer when you're not at all clear what they want; you would use the technique to try to find out the context in which the enquirer was thinking. It might help you with types 2 (the Chinese whisperer) or 4 (the generalist), and you'll certainly need to deploy this technique with type 7 (the obsessively secretive). But you have to exercise caution and tact when using it, because it can sound

inquisitorial. Open, multiple and hypothetical questions might all help you to probe. On the whole, multiple questions are probably best here – they don't sound so inquisitorial, they show that you're trying to help and taking the enquiry seriously, and they're more likely to put the enquirer at their ease than on their guard.

Who, what, when, where, why, how?

'I keep six honest serving men – they taught me all I knew,' said Rudyard Kipling in the *Just so* stories. To answer any enquiry effectively, you need them too; they are the six questions – Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? Your enquirer will fill in some of the blanks relatively unprompted – once you've discovered what they really want, of course, as opposed to what they began by asking. Your supplementary questioning should either fill in or eliminate the others. The first four – Who? What? When? Where? – should provide essential information to enable you to answer the enquiry. The last two – Why? How? – could provide supplementary details that enable you to understand the subject of the enquiry better. You should try to get answers to all six.

- *Who? means* Who are you interested in? (This could be a person, an animal, an organization, a civilization, a society, a movement.)
- *What? means* What are they doing that interests you?
- *When? means* Are we dealing with current, recent or historical information?
- *Where? means* Which localities, regions or countries do we have to consider?
- *Why? might mean* Why are they doing the thing you're interested in? *or could mean* Why are you, the enquirer, interested in this subject?
- *How? might mean* What methods are they using to do it? *or could mean* How do you, the enquirer, want the subject handled?

You wouldn't necessarily always take the questions in this order. (Kipling didn't.) Your enquirer's answers would fill in the blanks for some of them as you went along. Sometimes your questions will seek to elicit more information about the subject that the enquirer is interested

in, and at other times you will be looking for information on why the enquirer is interested and how they want the subject handled.

Let's see how it might work for the questions to which our enquirers really wanted answers.

Type 1: The homophone victim

I'm looking for information on migration patterns in whales

So we need something like a big animal encyclopaedia then? (**Who** are we looking for?)

Oh, sorry – you mean people in Wales moving around? (**What** are they doing?)

Do you mean things like how they travel to work, or what they do when they move house? (**How** are they doing it?)

Is it just movements within the country, or from outside as well? (**Where** do we have to consider?)

Are you looking just for movements now – or back over a period? (**When** do we have to consider?)

Are you looking for information on why people move – or just the figures? (**Why** do you need the information?)

I'm looking for information on migration patterns in Wales

Verdict: Once you've got over the initial misunderstanding, you should be able to get all the way with this enquiry – it's precise and specific.

Type 2: The Chinese whisperer

I'm trying to find a song called 'When I would sing under the ocean'

Right; have you any idea who sings it, or who it's written by? (**Who** are we looking for?)

I'm afraid I can't find a song of that title. How did you come to hear of it? (**How** can we take this enquiry forward?)

Oh, you heard it on the radio. Can you remember which station or programme? (**Where** did you hear it?)

Was it a pop song or something more traditional? (**When** might it have been written?)

Oh, so it was a baritone solo and you think it might have come from an opera or musical. (**What** kind of song was it?)

Since it's not showing up in any of our musical sources, perhaps the title's slightly different. Let's think of some other way of identifying it. (**Why** aren't we finding it, when the enquiry seems so straightforward?)

I'm trying to find a song called 'When I was king of the Beotians'

Verdict: OK – so you're not going to get all the way to the right answer by this stage. But several things that emerged during your questioning should help you to understand the challenges you face – particularly the fact that the enquirer discovered the title aurally. This should arouse your 'Chinese whisper' suspicions. Meanwhile you now have lots of ideas for places to try: the radio station that played the song, guides to opera and musicals, even asking the enquirer to hum the tune so you can look it up in a dictionary of musical themes.

Type 3: The malapropist

Do you have the Electrical Register?

I'm sorry, I can't find a directory of that title. Is it electricians you're looking for? (**Who** are you looking for?)

Oh, I beg your pardon, I must have misheard – it's the voters' list you need. The local one? (**Where** are you interested in?)

And I presume you want the current one? (**When** do you want to cover?)

Are you just looking up a specific address, or do you need to browse through? (**What** kind of information do you need to find?)

So you're looking for people with particular surnames. Is this because you're trying to trace someone? (**Why** do you need the information?)

There might be other kinds of source we could use as well – online directories, for instance. What form would you like the information in? (**How** do you want the enquiry handled?)

Do you have the electoral register?

Verdict: In this instance, we've probably taken the line of questioning much further than is necessary to answer the enquiry – but it does go to show just how much may lie behind even the most apparently simple request. At the very least you will need to confirm that it is the current register for your local area that the enquirer wants; you shouldn't just assume that it is. And, of course, once you've realized the enquirer's initial mistake, you will need to respond tactfully so as to spare them any embarrassment.

Type 4: The generalist

Do you have any books on retailing?

Yes, plenty – and other kinds of information source as well. Are you interested in retail management, shop design or location, market research, special types of retailer such as food or electrical goods shops – or even one particular retailer? (**Who** are you interested in?)

Ah, so it's Marks & Spencer; are you looking for financial information or news on the company's activities? (**What** do you need to know about them?)

So you need the latest accounts? (**When** are you interested in?)

Just its UK operation, or worldwide? (**Where** do we need to consider?)

Is it detailed information for investment purposes, or just a brief financial profile for information? (**Why** do you need the information?)

Do you need the figures in manipulable form? On a CD-ROM? (**How** do you want the information presented?)

What is Marks & Spencer's current pretax profit?

Verdict: This may be an over optimistic scenario. Enquirers can be extraordinarily secretive about money matters, and here we reached the crucial company name remarkably fast. After that, however, the thing to bear in mind is that there is an enormous amount of business information available and it's easy to bury an enquirer under a deluge of semi-relevant information. So it's worth probing to find out precisely what they want.

Type 5: The know-all

I need some statistics from Employment Gazette.

I'm afraid I can't find a journal of that title. Can you tell me what specific figures you're looking for and I'll see if I can help you find them somewhere else? (**What** are you looking for?)

I see, so it's statistics on pay. Is it current figures you're after, or something that shows trends over a period? (**When** do you need them for?)

Would that be across all sectors or for a specific group? (**Who** are you looking for?)

So it's female pay. Are you looking for comparisons with male workers as well? (**Why** do you need the information?)

And is it worldwide data, UK, or even a UK region you need? (**Where** do you need the information for?)

Probably the most efficient way to find the figures you need would be online. May I show you a website that would help? (**How** do you want the subject handled?)

*I need earnings data for female employees in Croydon; I'm guessing that they're in Employment Gazette because I don't want to seem ignorant. [Actually, they aren't. And it hasn't been called *Employment Gazette* for years, but *Labour Market Trends*.]*

Verdict: A pretty good funnelling strategy has gone on here. Your immediate offer to help without appearing too inquisitorial starts to elicit the

specific information you need to answer the enquiry. Thereafter, you can pin the enquirer down ever more precisely through a succession of questions that demonstrate you're taking the enquiry seriously.

Type 6: The muddler

Have you got any books on Kew Gardens? That's to say, something on the Crystal Palace, if you can manage it. What would be really helpful, actually, would be the index to the Illustrated London News. Or, better still, a book on tropical fish.

That's a wide range of topics; is there a common factor? (**Who** (or what subject) are you interested in?)

So it's information on zoos; would it actually be aquariums? (**What** kind of zoos?)

Victorian ones? (**When** would this be?)

And is it particularly London you're interested in? (**Where** are these aquariums?)

Are you trying to do a general history of aquariums? (**Why** do you want the information?)

So you want to concentrate on one aquarium; which one would that be? (**How** do you want the enquiry to proceed?)

I'm doing a project on the Westminster Aquarium.

Verdict: Like type 4, this is probably an over-optimistic scenario. The true muddler would probably go on muddling for some time before giving you the opportunity to start funnelling. But one advantage that muddlers offer over generalists or the obsessively secretive is that they do at least give you plenty of clues.

Type 7: The obsessively secretive

Where's the catalogue?

We have an online catalogue but it only covers the books; can I help further? (**How** can I help you?)

So it's something in the newspapers? (**What** sort of information do you need?)

Do you know roughly when? (**When** should we start looking?)

Can I help you with the website/CD-ROM? What subject are you interested in? (**What** kind of information do you need?)

So it's the cash for questions affair – how would you like me to narrow the search down after that? (**How** would you like the enquiry to proceed?)

Ah, if it's a particular organization you want, a directory might actually help you better, or it might even have a website. (**Who** are you looking for?)

So you actually want something on how it's funded? Well, if it doesn't seem to have a website, let's see if we can find an article on it. (**What** is being done to this organization?)

Is it the race relations aspect you're interested in? For any particular purpose? (**Why** do you need the information?)

So it's school governorships? Sorry, I don't understand the connection with the cash for questions issue. (**Why** do you need to know this?)

It's a family connection? So it's a question of possible conflict of interest? (**How** are the two issues linked?)

So we're looking for something like the rules for school governors? (**How** do you want the subject handled?)

Cash for Parliamentary questions... Strong & Moral Britain Association... neo-fascist organizations... funding... school governors... declarations of interest.

Verdict: Like type 6, this is a somewhat compressed scenario. It would probably take a lot of very tactful questioning to elicit all the aspects of this complex and sensitive affair. Restricting your questioning to sources and techniques, as opposed to the specific information required, will probably reassure your enquirer. Then you can use your demonstration of how the source works to find out more about what your enquirer actually wants.

Keeping good records

As you can see from these examples, some of your questions come out as requests for further information, others as reactions to information received. That's how it usually happens in real life; the responses to either type will help you to fill in more of the blanks. If it's an oral enquiry, or you can respond quickly by e-mail, now is the time to repeat back to your enquirer what you think they want you to do. Which brings us to the question of record-keeping.

Many libraries and information services use enquiry forms; these can be laid out in innumerable different ways and can be printed or electronic. (There's an example on page xii designed especially for the techniques suggested in this book.) They can allow you not only to record the enquiry, but also to list the sources checked and the time taken, collect valuable performance data on the degree of success achieved, and alert your organization to any new information or sources that might be useful to your colleagues in the future. (We'll take a detailed look at this aspect of record keeping in Chapter 9.) For the moment, though, you'll be using the form to ensure that you really do understand what your enquirer wants. Something like . . .

- *So we're looking for figures on how people have moved into, out of and within Wales between the 1991 and 2001 Censuses?*
- *So we're looking for a song that's a baritone solo that you probably heard on BBC Radio 2 last Sunday, with a title something like 'When I would sing under the ocean?'*
- *So we need to browse through the current electoral register for this area?*
- *So we just need a single figure – Marks & Spencer's latest pretax profit?*
- *So we're trying to find out how earnings for women in Croydon compare with those of men, and whether their situation has improved over the last few years?*
- *So we're looking for anything we can find on the Westminster Aquarium, which was demolished some time in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century?*
- *So we need: something on the funding of the Strong & Moral Britain Association; information on whatever rules affect school governors; and it*

would help to have something from the papers on the cash-for-questions affair?

Note the use of the word ‘we’. This is your problem now, as well as your enquirer’s, and it is only good customer relations to make that clear by involving yourself in it.

Finding out how long you’ve got

Finally, you have to agree a deadline. Often, this will be ‘now’. The enquirer will be standing there, and they’ll want you to point them in the right direction straight away. (We’ll deal with techniques for thinking on your feet in Chapter 3.) But, if the enquiry has come in by phone, email, fax or letter, you need to be quite clear when the answer is required by. So don’t take ‘As soon as possible’ or ‘It’s urgent’ for an answer. ‘As soon as possible’ could mean next year, from your point of view, and urgency can be measured in minutes or days. So politely pin your enquirer down to a date and/or time. And if you think the timescale is unrealistically short, don’t say ‘Can’t be done’ – keep it positive. Explain that you will only be able to provide a limited answer in that time, and invite your enquirer to extend the deadline. More often than not, you’ll find that they’re able to give you more time. (We’ll deal with meeting deadlines in Chapter 6.)

Coming next – not too little, not too much...

You now have nearly all the information you need to tackle the enquiry. But you still have to find out just one more thing – how much information your enquirer wants, and in what detail. Until comparatively recently, information on many topics was a scarce commodity. But increasingly now we’re facing information overload, so whereas in the past it may simply have been a question of giving your enquirer whatever you could find, now you must have the courage to select and reject.

Information overload is such an important topic that we’re going to devote an entire chapter to it. So in Chapter 2, we’ll look at how to provide the right amount of information – not too little, not too much.

To recap . . .

- **Beware of the pitfalls presented by homophone victims, Chinese whisperers, malapropists, generalists, know-alls, muddlers and the obsessively secretive.**
- **Employ open, closed, forced choice, multiple, leading or hypothetical questions, as appropriate.**
- **Look for answers to the questions Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?**
- **Don't accept a vague deadline.**