Picture the scene. You’re in the kitchen getting ready for a dinner party and you think your partner has just said: ‘Have you got the time?’ So you could reply: ‘It’s ten to eight and the guests are going to be here any moment so let’s get on with it.’ Or you could say: ‘Do you mean what time is it now or how long does it take to cook?’ To which your partner replies patiently: ‘No, darling – did you remember to buy the thyme?’

By simply telling your partner the time you’ll have taken the question at face value. But by answering the question with a question you’ll have dealt with any potential misunderstanding from the outset – and in this case, misunderstanding there certainly was. The question used in this little drama was a forced choice question – one of several specific question types, each of which can be deployed for a particular purpose. In this instance, it helped to defuse a little bit of potential domestic strife. When you use this and other questioning techniques at work, it can save you a deal of trouble from the outset.

Many of the enquiries you deal with 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 are able to glean what you can from facial expression, eye contact, body language. But 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 or text for instance. We’ll look at remote enquiry handling in Chapter 2, but right now, let’s assume that the enquirer is standing in front of you.

Avoiding misunderstandings

So the first task has to be: always make sure you understand the question. And in almost all cases this means answering a question with a question – a supplementary. There’ll be plenty of times when you think the meaning behind the question is obvious. Beware! This happens far less often than you imagine. It has to be as simple a question as ‘Where’s the toilet?’ for you to forgo a supplementary safely. In most other instances, you have to assume that there’s more you can learn about the enquirer’s needs by questioning a bit further. 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 pre-tax profit?

Type 5: The know-all
Where do you keep the New Scientist?
means:
I think I saw an article recently about the research that’s been done into the health effects of radiation, both from artificial and natural sources, and who’s doing it. I don’t want to appear ignorant so I’m just going to ask for the latest New Scientist, which is where I think I saw it. [In fact, the article appeared in Nature, and was published months ago.]

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 media 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 has connections 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 based on real enquiries, some are exaggerations. (The last one is almost – but not quite – fictional.) But they all pose real dangers. Rule number one of enquiry answering is that people almost never ask the question to which they really want to know the answer, and there are all sorts of reasons for this.

**Disgruntled and unconvinced enquirers**

They may not want to bother the staff. It's true, a big public or college library can be a busy place. You can have a queue building up 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 when they realize that you've sent them somewhere that doesn't actually meet their needs.

They may return to the enquiry desk before too long, complaining that you haven't really helped them. They may try to ask someone else instead – for instance, a passing member of library staff or a fellow student or colleague who happens to be in there. Or they may simply walk out. Whatever happens as a result, it's a waste of everybody's time, and really bad customer relations.

At the very least, you want them to come back and see you if they're not satisfied, so you can do something to limit the damage. But this isn't necessarily all that easy. You may well be busy with another enquirer when they return, so not only will they be growing more and more impatient, but
Sceptical enquirers

Equally alarming is the kind of enquirer who lacks confidence in your ability to answer the question. They’d sooner browse themselves, perhaps ineficiently, than risk having their time wasted by you. This kind of enquirer should be sending alarm signals both to you and to your boss. It probably means that they’ve 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

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 a colleague applying for a job who doesn’t want your 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 information on sexually transmitted infections?
Time wasters
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.

Equally pernicious are students who try to get you to do their assignments for them. They may come back time and time again trying to get you to look up things that they should really be researching for themselves. This is actually a type of potentially time-wasting activity that you can turn into a benefit. You can seize such opportunities to show them how they can search more efficiently and evaluate the sources they find. (We’ll look at smarter searching in Chapter 4.) Sure, coaching them in efficient searching techniques takes time – but at least it’s time invested, not time wasted.

Asking the right questions
There are ways of dealing with all these types. You’ll need to be approachable, reassuring, discreet, tactful, and frequently, firm as well. Above all, you need a game plan. 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 an inquisitorial formality about the process that can be off-putting for the enquirer. Much better if it comes out as a structured conversation but – here’s the crucial bit – with you in charge.

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? It’s an excellent formula for kicking off your questioning process. This doesn’t mean that you necessarily have to ask them all; your enquirer will fill in some of the blanks relatively unprompted and all you have to do is note that information down. But you should certainly address them all, and try to fill in
any gaps with your own questioning. The first four – Who? What? When? Where? – are pretty obvious and should provide essential information to enable you to answer the enquiry. The last two – Why? How? – are a bit more subtle.

Firstly, you can use Why? and How? to seek further details that will help you to understand the subject of the enquiry. Remember – there’s nothing wrong with not knowing anything about the enquirer’s subject. Why should you? That’s not your job. But it is your job to help them with sources and search strategies, and for that you do need to understand at least a little about the enquirer’s subject. It means that when you begin searching, or helping the enquirer to search, you’ll know when you’re on the right lines. But you can also use the Why? and How? questions to try to understand the enquirer’s reasons for asking. This should enable you to ensure that you provide just the right amount of information, fit for purpose, in the most appropriate form. (We’ll come back to this towards the end of the chapter.)

So what do you use these six (or more accurately eight) questions for?

- **Who?** _means_ Who are you interested in? (This could be a person, an animal, an organization, a civilization, a society, a movement, a concept.)
- **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?** _firstly means_ Why are they doing the thing you’re interested in? (This can enable you to start understanding a little of the enquirer’s subject.)
- **How?** _firstly means_ What methods are they using to do it? (Again, to help you understand more about the subject.)

But in addition:

- **Why?** _can also mean_ Why are you, the enquirer, interested in this subject?
- **How?** _can also mean_ How do you, the enquirer, want the enquiry handled or the answer delivered?

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 the enquirer is interested in, and at other times you will be looking for information on the enquirer’s motives and aspirations. But you certainly shouldn’t ask them in direct, unvarnished form. A straight ‘What do you want?’ or – worse – ‘Why do you need to know?’ sounds combative and inquisitorial and will almost certainly spoil the temporary but intense relationship that you and the enquirer need to have. What you have to do instead is to weave your questions into the structured conversation that is your goal.

**Your interrogation strategy**

The first thing to say is that it shouldn’t come across as an interrogation – nice cop, nasty cop. Nevertheless an interrogation strategy is what you need and it should allow you to do one or other of two things – funnelling or probing. As we’ll see in a moment, it will probably be pretty obvious from the enquirer’s first question which strategy you need to start with – although you may need to change your strategy as the conversation develops.

**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 and we’ll come onto the specific questioning techniques in a moment.

**Probing** seeks further details from the enquirer when you’re not at all clear what they want; you might use this strategy 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.
Six questioning techniques

We've just mentioned some questioning techniques that might help you achieve your strategy, so let's run through all of them now, and the situations in which you might use them.

**Open questions** invite the enquirer to supply further details without you 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** force the enquirer to give you a yes/no answer. With type 5 (the know-all) you might be tempted to ask, 'Is it the current issue you’re looking for?' 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 pretty certain what the options are. A good time to use a closed question is when you do finally understand what the enquirer really wants and you are literally ‘closing the deal.’ (We’ll come back to agreeing the task to be undertaken a bit later.)

**Forced choice questions** force the enquirer to choose between alternatives – just two of them. You might ask a type 1 enquirer (the homophone victim), 'Do you mean the sea creatures or the country?' Forced choice is an immensely powerful questioning technique. Firstly, there are only four possible answers: option 1, option 2, both options, or neither. So immediately you are directing the enquiry in ways that are useful to you. Secondly, if you ask someone a forced choice question, they’re very likely to leap one way or the other – so it can be a great way of unblocking a secretive enquiry. True, you have to learn to think quickly to come up with two really useful options – but if you can, they’ll probably pay dividends both in terms of what you learn and in demonstrating to the enquirer that you’re taking a real interest in their needs.

**Multiple questions** offer the enquirer a range of options (more than two) to choose from when you’re really not sure what they want and you need to fish for ideas. 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?’ Of course it’s not always easy to think quickly enough to come up with some sensible options
– and you might confuse the enquirer by offering too many. So it’s worth considering asking a succession of forced choice questions instead, moving from the general to the particular.

**Leading questions** lead the enquirer in the direction of the answer you expect. 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 you really need to be certain that you haven’t made any false assumptions. With type 1, 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** attempt to glean further information by putting a hypothetical situation to the enquirer. As with multiple questions, you have to be able to think on your feet to come up quickly with a sensible hypothetical scenario. But it might be your only hope with type 6 (the muddler). You’re not allowed to ask the forbidden question: ‘What do you really want?’ Put this way, it 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?’

Is there a questioning ‘magic bullet’? Probably not. But perhaps forced choice questioning comes close because of its diagnostic capabilities. When your optician puts two lenses in front of you in succession and asks: ‘Better 1 or 2?’ that’s a classic forced choice question, enabling the specialist to narrow down the options based on responses from the layperson. But all these questioning techniques have their value at different times. And when you’re finally deciding how to set about answering the enquiry or helping the enquirer to answer it – and keep down your panic at the same time – then the magic bullet is undoubtedly the hypothetical question that you ask yourself. (We’ll come back to that in Chapter 3.)

**Does all this really work?**

That’s enough of the theory. Let’s see how all this might work for the questions to which our enquirers really wanted answers.
Type 1: The homophone victim

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ah, so we need to be looking in the zoology section?</td>
<td>Who are we looking for?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh, sorry – you mean people moving around Wales?</td>
<td>What are they doing?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you mean things like how they travel to work, or what they do when they move house or where they come from?</td>
<td>How are they doing it?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it just movements within the country, or from outside as well?</td>
<td>Where do we have to consider?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Forced choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you looking just for movements now – or back over a period?</td>
<td>When do we have to consider?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Forced choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you looking for information on why people move, or do you just need the figures?</td>
<td>Why do you need the information?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Forced choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m looking for information on migration patterns in Wales.</td>
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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

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<tr>
<td>Right; have you any idea who sings it, or who it’s written by?</td>
<td>Who are we looking for?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Forced choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m afraid I can’t find a song of that title. How did you come to hear of it?</td>
<td>How can we take this enquiry forward?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh, you heard it on the radio. Can you remember which station or programme?</td>
<td>Where did you hear it?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was it a pop song or something more traditional?</td>
<td>When might it have been written?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Forced choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh, so it was a baritone solo and you think it might have come from an opera or musical?</td>
<td>What kind of song was it?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Leading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since it’s not showing up in any of our musical sources, perhaps the title’s slightly different – so shall we try to think of some other way of identifying it?</td>
<td>Why aren’t we finding it, when the enquiry seems so straightforward?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Leading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m trying to find a song called ‘When I Would Sing Under the Ocean’. But the title is probably wrong.</td>
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</table>
Verdict: At this stage in your questioning, you’re not going to find out what you’re really supposed to be looking for because the enquirer has got the question wrong. As far as you’re concerned, you’re still looking for a song called ‘When I Would Sing Under the Ocean’ but just not finding it anywhere. However, 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 or on a music finder website or app.

Type 3: The malapropist

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<tr>
<td>I’m sorry, I can’t find a directory or website with that name. Is it electricians you’re looking for?</td>
<td>Who are you looking for?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh, I beg your pardon, I must have misheard – it’s the voters’ list you need. The local one or for some other area?</td>
<td>Where are you interested in?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Forced choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And I presume you want the current one?</td>
<td>When do you want to cover?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Leading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you just looking up a specific address, or do you need to browse through?</td>
<td>What kind of information do you need to find?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Forced choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So you’re looking for people with particular surnames. Is this because you’re trying to trace someone?</td>
<td>Why do you need the information?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There might be other kinds of source that could do the job better – websites that can help you trace people, genealogical sites – even social networking sites. What form would you like the information in?</td>
<td>How do you want the enquiry handled?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have the electoral register? [But is that really the best source to use for the purpose?]</td>
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Verdict: In this instance, we’ve taken the line of questioning much further than was necessary to answer the enquiry initially posed – even without the misunderstanding. But it does go to show just how much may lie behind even the most apparently simple request. Once you’ve realized the enquirer’s initial
mistake, you will need to respond tactfully so as to spare them any embarrassment – and at the very least you will need to confirm that it is the current register for your local area that they want; you shouldn’t just assume that it is. But in any case, it’s beginning to sound as if the Electoral Register may not be the most efficient way of meeting the enquirer’s needs – so it might be worth taking the questioning even further, while starting to suggest possible solutions at the same time.

Type 4: The generalist

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<td>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?</td>
<td>What aspect of retailing are you interested in?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah, so it is one retailer. Are you looking for financial information or news on the company’s activities?</td>
<td>What particular activity are you interested in?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Forced choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So you just need the latest accounts?</td>
<td>When are you interested in?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just the company’s UK business, or does it have worldwide operations as well?</td>
<td>Where do we need to consider?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Forced choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it detailed data for investment purposes, or just a brief financial profile for information?</td>
<td>Why do you need this information?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Forced choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you need to be able to download the figures into a spreadsheet so you can manipulate them?</td>
<td>How do you want the information presented?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Verdict: Enquirers can be extraordinarily secretive about money matters, so it’s probably wise to have delayed the crucial question: ‘Which retailer is it?’ Even so, you haven’t wasted your time. 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 funnelling to find out precisely what they want without being too specific. By this time, maybe
they’ll have gained sufficient confidence in you to divulge the name. Or perhaps that’s an over-optimistic scenario!

Type 5: The know-all

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<tr>
<td>The current issue is on the display racks, but we have back issues as well if you’re looking for something specific?</td>
<td>What are you looking for?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Open (by implication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So you’d like to check some back issues as well. How far back would you like to go?</td>
<td>When do you think the article appeared?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you looking for a particular article that you know appeared in the New Scientist or are you just looking for information on a particular topic?</td>
<td>Why do you need the New Scientist specifically?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Forced choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So it’s information on radiation risks. If you can’t spot the article you remembered from the New Scientist, would you like to check elsewhere as well?</td>
<td>How do you want to progress your enquiry?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probably the most efficient way to find further information on this topic would be to use our discovery platform for articles that might have appeared in other scientific titles that we have access to. For example, Nature covers the same sort of subjects as New Scientist.</td>
<td>Where else would you like to search?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Leading (by implication)</td>
</tr>
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*Verdict:* This may seem like going to enormous lengths to deal with what appears initially to be a very straightforward query. But it turned out not to be straightforward, and your tactful probing may have prevented the enquirer from leaving in a disgruntled mood after failing to find the article in the current New Scientist.
Type 6: The muddler

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<tr>
<td>That’s a wide range of topics; is there a common factor?</td>
<td>Who (or what subject) are you interested in?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where do the tropical fish come into it?</td>
<td>Why did you mention them?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So it’s aquariums. Victorian ones?</td>
<td>When would this be?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And is it particularly London you’re interested in?</td>
<td>Where are these aquariums?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So you want to concentrate on one aquarium; which one would that be?</td>
<td>How do you want the enquiry to proceed?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I’m doing a project on the Westminster Aquarium.</em></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Verdict:** Like type 4, this is probably an over-optimistic scenario. The true muddler would likely 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 to work on – and in this instance one huge anomaly which it’s really worth focusing on: the fish.

Type 7: The obsessively secretive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We have a public catalogue which you can use here or access online, but it only covers the books and we have plenty of other resources as well – journals, news media, directories, guides to websites.</td>
<td>How can I help you?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Multiple (by implication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So it’s something in the newspapers?</td>
<td>What sort of information do you need?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you know roughly when?</td>
<td>When should we start looking?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can show you one or two news sites that might help. What’s the subject you’re interested in?</td>
<td>What kind of information do you need?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued on the next page
Type 7: The obsessively secretive (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So it’s the cash-for-questions affair – how would you like to narrow the search down after that?</td>
<td>How would you like the enquiry to proceed?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah, if it’s a particular organization you want, its website is more likely to help you.</td>
<td>Who are you looking for?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Closed (by implication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So its website doesn’t tell you how it’s funded. We could see if we could try to find some articles or blog postings on it.</td>
<td>What is this organization doing for funds?</td>
<td>Funnelling</td>
<td>Closed (by implication again)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So it’s the race relations aspect you’re interested in? For any particular purpose?</td>
<td>Why do you need this information?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So it’s school governorships? Sorry, I don’t understand the connection with the cash-for-questions issue.</td>
<td>Why do you need to know this?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Open (by implication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s a family connection? So it’s a question of possible conflict of interest?</td>
<td>How are the two issues linked?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So we’re looking for something like the rules for school governors?</td>
<td>How do you want the subject handled?</td>
<td>Probing</td>
<td>Closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash for Parliamentary questions … Strong &amp; Moral Britain Association … neo-fascist organizations … funding … school governors … declarations of interest.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 initially to sources, delivery media and searching techniques, as opposed to the specific information required, will probably reassure your enquirer. Then you can use your demonstration of how the source or delivery medium works to find out more about what your enquirer actually wants – perhaps by means of a succession of step-by-step closed questions, a technique resorted to frequently in this scenario.

If you look back, you’ll see that a few of the ‘questions’ in these little scenarios aren’t actually questions at all. But they still invite an answer nevertheless, and sometimes posing a question as a statement can keep the encounter reassuringly non-inquisitorial. And you may also have spotted that there are
no hypothetical questions here at all. To be frank, you need to be pretty desperate to ask a hypothetical question – maybe something along the lines of: ‘If we found you information on so-and-so, would that be helpful?’ But to ask a hypothetical you have to make something up, thereby moving the whole process away from the realm of fact and towards fiction, so it’s to be avoided if possible. You may have no choice if you can get nowhere with the muddler or the obsessively secretive enquirer – but avoid making hypothetical questions part of your regular interrogation strategy if you possibly can.

(Remember, though, you are going to need the hypothetical questioning technique for the next stage of the process – covered in Chapter 3.)

**Agreeing the task**

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. You’ll have been taking notes during your structured conversation with the enquirer – won’t you? (We’ll deal with record keeping in detail in Chapter 2.) So now is the time to repeat back to them what you think they want you to do – something like:

- So we’re looking for figures on how people have moved into, out of and within Wales between the 2001 and 2011 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 browsing through the current electoral register for this area might be a useful starting point, but we’re also going to locate other sources that may help you to trace the names you’re looking for more efficiently?
- So we just need a single figure – Marks & Spencer’s latest pre-tax profit?
- So we’re looking for information on who’s doing research into the health risks of artificial and natural radiation, and it’s worth searching elsewhere if we don’t find the article you remember from *New Scientist*?
- So we’re looking for anything we can find on the Westminster Aquarium, which was demolished some time in the late 19th or early 20th 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 news media on the cash-for-questions affair?

What you have by this stage is an implied contract with your enquirer. It may not be legally enforceable, but that’s its function nevertheless. If you deviate from it without consulting your enquirer again, then you can no longer guarantee that you’re meeting their needs, and you’re almost certainly not making the most efficient use of your time either. (We’ll come back to occasions when you may need to deviate from the original request in Chapter 5.) And note the use of the word ‘we’. It doesn’t matter whether you’re simply helping your enquirer to locate sources, advising them on using those sources efficiently, or undertaking the complete research project yourself – 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. And that includes not simply helping them find the answer, but helping them find it in a form that’s useful to them.

Not too little, not too much

Pretty much right up to the end of the 20th century, if you wanted to find something out you usually had to be content with whatever you could glean from a large but strictly limited number of proprietary (and usually charged-for) sources – whether printed, online or published in a portable digital medium such as a CD-ROM. If these didn’t yield what you wanted, there wasn’t a lot more you could do with documentary sources. You had to start casting round looking for experts in the field or else give up and be content with at best a second-rate answer.

How things have changed! Almost all those proprietary sources are still there – and usually available in the form of a much wider range of products – plus a great many more charged-for services besides. And to all those you have to add information from hundreds of thousands of potentially relevant websites – many of them free – as well as possibly millions of blog posts and billions of comments on social media. When an enquirer asks you ‘Get me everything you’ve got on…’ the time is not far off when you’re going to be able to do just that. And that’s almost certainly too much.

So the last stage in your questioning is to find out more or less how much information your enquirer needs, and of what kind – and this is where your secondary Why? and How? questions come in: ‘Why do you need to know
this?’ and ‘How do you want the enquiry handled or the answer delivered?’ If
you’re actually doing the work on the enquirer’s behalf, you have the tools to
bombard them with information, but you’re not helping them if you do that,
because they’re looking to you not only to find the information they need but
also to help them filter it, so that they end up with just enough to do whatever
they want to do – no more, no less. The same applies if you’re simply advising
– getting a student started on a research project for example. They may be
doing the work, but they still expect you to guide them to the most
appropriate sources for their purpose.

So you could simply ask an open question: ‘How much information do you
need?’ But you might not get a very precise answer; ‘Whatever you can find’
doesn’t really help you very much. Also some enquirers might feel daunted by
the task of trying to imagine for themselves what the final answer might look
like. That’s your job – and we’re going to return to it in some detail in Chapter
3. So a multiple question might be better – something like: ‘Do you just want
a few main points in note form, or a page or so of information, or something
like an article, or a complete book?’

This of course assumes that you have a fair idea of the form in which the
information is likely to appear. But if it’s a highly technical subject, or the
enquirer has used terminology that is unfamiliar to you, you might not know
what to expect. So a third possibility might be to put the hypothetical
question: ‘What would your ideal answer look like?’ This again puts the onus
back on the enquirer, so it’s to be avoided if at all possible. But it may be your
only hope if your enquirer has really taken you into totally unfamiliar
territory. (Whether or not you ask the enquirer this question, it’s an absolutely
crucial one that you need to ask yourself – as we shall see in Chapter 3.)

Information for a purpose

People rarely want information merely to satisfy their curiosity – they almost
always need it for a purpose. An academic about to embark on a piece of
ground-breaking new research may indeed need to know everything that’s
been discovered on a particular topic – but that almost certainly still only
means everything in the academic and professional literature, and blog posts or
tweets only from acknowledged specialists in the field. A practitioner, with a
specific problem to solve, may also want to draw on the same body of specialist
literature and seek out comment from the same experts – but may be happy
with a good selection of practical solutions to that problem, irrespective of
how much more might have been written about it in theory. And yet they may both have started by saying: ‘Get me everything you’ve got on . . .’

Then there are student assignments. However much you may privately regret a student’s lack of curiosity, or deplore the narrow focus of a curriculum that forces this attitude upon them, you have to be realistic about it. You’re not helping the hapless student or school child at all if you don’t take a pragmatic approach. The fact is that they need enough information to allow them to get a good mark, and once they’ve got that, they can’t afford the time to go browsing for more information because they’ve probably got more assignments or homework projects coming up to deadline too. So help them find what they want, and then when they’ve got enough – stop.

And of course, you have to know just how much help to give. Teachers and lecturers are notorious at handing out projects with no thought whatsoever for the ease or difficulty of the research involved. You can easily be faced by two children from the same school class, one of whom wants to do a project on dinosaurs and the other on 14th-century Byzantine art, where the teacher appears to have given no thought whatever to the possibility that these might not represent tasks of equal difficulty. In these circumstances, you clearly need to get the dinosaur child started quickly, and devote the bulk of your attention to the Byzantine one.

Retirement hobbyists, on the other hand, may be operating at the opposite extreme. They’re delighted with every additional snippet of detail you can provide – even if they’ve read it in a dozen other places already. The danger here, of course, is that – in the nicest possible way – they can be terrible time-wasters. Whether you actually get carried along by their enthusiasm, or simply can’t shake them off, you have to be systematic about your choice of sources to help them too – and the order of priority in which you suggest them. In both these cases – the student and the hobbyist – the aim is to help your enquirer become self-sufficient as rapidly as possible: to give them something to read, and get them settled down reading it.

Getting answers to these Why? and How? questions may require quite a lot of care on your part. You may need both to probe and funnel to find out whether your enquirer is operating at postgraduate level or starting from a position of total ignorance. No one wants to be thought ignorant, and it’s only human nature for people to pretend to greater knowledge than they actually have. So you must use the answers to your Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? questions to judge how much your enquirer knows already. Again, this determines the types of source you use or recommend. A
layperson asking about varicose veins may just want a medical dictionary, a home health guide or a health advice web page, but a student doctor probably wants articles from the clinical press. An enquirer who asks you for textbooks about anatomy may be a paramedic studying fractures, but may equally be an art student studying life drawing.

**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. But if the enquiry has come in by phone, e-mail or text, or if the enquirer is going to leave now and let you get on with it, you need to be quite clear when they need the answer. 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 a time too if the deadline is tight.

Admittedly this isn’t always easy when you’re dealing with a senior colleague in your organization or a peppery academic in your college, or even sometimes an impatient and intimidating member of the public. So be prepared to explain why you need to agree a firm deadline: so that you can provide as full a response as is feasible within the timescale. And if you think that timescale is unrealistically short, try not to 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 are able to give you more time. (We’ll deal with meeting deadlines in Chapter 5.)

**Coming next – when the enquirer’s not there . . .**

We’ve discovered that plenty can go wrong with even the apparently simplest of enquiries, we’ve found out a bit about how to avoid some of these pitfalls and learned that good customer care is an essential part of the process. But that’s when you actually have the enquirer standing in front of you. When the enquirer’s at the other end of the phone, or e-mailing or texting in, even more things can go wrong and maintaining good customer relations becomes even more vital. So in Chapter 2, we’ll look at some of the things you need to think about when dealing with enquirers remotely.
To recap . . .

■ Beware of the pitfalls presented by homophone victims, Chinese whisperers, malapropists, generalists, know-alls, muddlers and the obsessively secretive.
■ Be ready to funnel or probe as appropriate, and employ open, closed, forced choice, multiple, leading or hypothetical questions.
■ Reach firm agreement about what you will do for the enquirer, and in how much detail.
■ Make sure you agree a clear deadline for the work.