

Sharon teaches the art of asking questions without any assumptions or expectations. Miraculously, what we hear is rarely what we anticipated. And here is where the learning and the real communication begins.  
—Janine Sternlieb, A Novel Idea, KRCB Radio.

## **Interview Coaching: Question Asking**

The following example demonstrates how Sharon Ellison can analyze the text of an interview in order to strengthening the interviewer's question-asking skills.

### Excerpt from the Bush-Gore Presidential Debate

#### Analysis of Bush's Responses

#### Analysis of the Interviewers Questions

#### Recommendations for Alternative Questions

While the identity of the interviewer is known to many, the interviewer will remain anonymous for the purposes of this exercise. My objective is not to single out one person's techniques, or one candidate's responses, but to show common interviewing patterns and present more effective alternatives.

### **Excerpts:**

**Interviewer:** If elected president, would you try to overturn the use of the abortion pill RU-486?

**Bush:** I don't think a president can do that.

**Interviewer:** If you're elected president, will you not throw appointments to the F.D.A., you won't support legislation to overturn this?

**Bush:** I don't think a president can unilaterally overturn it. I think the F.D.A.'s made its decision.

**Interviewer:** You wouldn't throw appointments to the F.D.A. and ask them to reappraise this?

**Bush:** No, unless it's proven to be unsafe to women.

## **Analysis of Bush's Responses:**

I'd like to examine Bush's responses to the three times he was asked the question about whether he would try to overturn use of the abortion pill. Let's review Bush's three answers in sequence.

I don't think a president can do that.

I don't think a president can unilaterally overturn it.

No, unless it's proven to be unsafe to women.

### **First Answer:**

- Bush switches from first person to third person, so what he said references what "a president" can or can't do instead of saying what he will do
- He also says what he "thinks" a president can do, leaving room for uncertainty without having to acknowledge that he might try to overturn it

### **Second Answer:**

- Bush continues using third person, thus avoiding making a commitment about what *he* will or won't do
- This time he adds one word, "unilaterally," thus suggesting he couldn't do it alone, but leaving room for the possibility that with some joint action the ruling could be overturned—but still without having to commit himself because he is just speaking *hypothetically*.

### **Third Answer:**

- Bush switches to first person and starts his sentence by saying a clear "No" suggesting he won't try to overturn the ruling
- This time he follows his commitment not to overturn the ruling by naming an exception—which provides the *rationale* (protecting women's health) he might use if he tries to overturn the ruling.

**Conclusions:** In each of the three answers, Bush conveys the impression that he has accepted the finality of the ruling and avoids saying directly that he will try to overturn it. Yet, his choice to speak in third person and his phrasing create a double message. This allows Bush to send a message that will be heard differently by different people. It also allows

him to try to overturn the abortion pill ruling later without being accused of being untruthful.

**Bi-partisan comment:** While I have chosen to work with an example from what Mr. Bush said as a candidate, Gore also avoided responding to certain questions or allegations. For example Bush raised the following issue: If Gore was so concerned about getting low-cost prescriptions for seniors, why didn't he do something about it while he was in office for eight years? The likely implication is that either it wasn't a priority or he was ineffective in accomplishing the task. Gore avoided responding to that issue, just as Bush avoided responding to the issue under analysis here.

### **Analysis of the Interviewer's Questions:**

Next, let's look at the interviewer's sequence of three questions.

If elected president, would you try to overturn the use of the abortion pill RU-486?

If you're elected president, will you not throw appointments to the F.D.A., you won't support legislation to overturn this?

You wouldn't throw appointments to the F.D.A. and ask them to reappraise this?

Here, the interviewer asks essentially the same question three times with slight variations.

**Question One:** This question is very straightforward and clear and not in any way leading. The key phrase is:

"would you try to overturn . . . ?"

**Question Two:** This time the question is more leading. The key phrase is

"Will you not throw . . . . ?"

In addition, he tags a second question onto the first before pausing for an answer. Even more leading, it is actually a statement used as a question. The key phrase is:

“You won’t support . . . . ?”

**Question Three:** This question, like the second part of question two is very leading and also phrased as a statement. The key phrase is:

You wouldn’t . . . . ?

**Conclusion:** The three repetitious questions about whether Bush would overturn the FDA’s approval of the RU-486 abortion pill become increasingly leading. The interviewer gradually progresses from whether Bush will try to overturn the ruling himself to focusing on other methods Bush might use. But he doesn’t change his questions enough to cut through Bush’s evasiveness.

### **Recommendations for alternative questions:**

There are several principles in asking non-defensive questions.

- Ask questions about the process that is happening as well as about the content.
- Ask questions that are direct.
- Ask questions that are sincere—not leading or sarcastic.

You will notice that I also make very clear choices about how I use third person (a president) and second person (you, Mr. Bush) in my questions. These following examples provide a range of possible questions. In most interviews only a few of them would be used.

Initially, sometimes people think that such questions are too “nit-picky” or that they wouldn’t actually get a more open answer. However, the person being interviewed *is* usually making those subtle shifts as a calculated evasion, so calling the person back to the issue in these ways inhibits her/his ability to side-step an issue. The beauty is that these questions can be genuine, not leading, and still hold others more responsible for what they say. I have found such question asking to be extremely powerful.

### **Possible Questions:**

**Questions:** What is your opinion about the FDA authorizing the use of the abortion pill?

Are you pleased or upset by it?

Would you rather see the pill used or not used?

- *These questions establish his view of the approval.*

**Question:** When you say you “don’t think” a president can overturn it, does that mean you have some question about whether you could or not?

- *This question goes from third person back to first person.*
- *It clarifies what Bush meant by a phrase in his answer instead of just repeating the same basic question.*
- *His answer holds him accountable for making his own position clearer about whether he thinks there is any possibility of overturning the ruling.*

**Question:** Did you shift to talking about what “a president” can or can’t do to avoid making a commitment about what you intend to do?

- *This question is about Bush’s motive in switching to third person rather than about content.*
- *It starts with a third person reference and then switches to second person.*

**Questions:** What do you mean when you say that a president can’t “unilaterally” overturn it?

Does that mean he can’t do it alone, but could get the FDA to re-evaluate it?

- *Both questions stay in third person.*

- *These joint questions both ask for clarification about the meaning of one word Bush used in his answer.*

**Question:** Is it possible that you would appoint a person to the FDA to review the decision to grant use of the [abortion pill]?

- *This question is in second person.*
- *If he has any intention of having the FDA review the decision, it will be harder to say no to "Is it possible" than "Do you plan to"*

**Question:** When you say "No, you will not overturn it and then follow that statement by bringing up a possible exception, what does that mean?

- *Here I ask Mr. Bush directly about a contradiction in what he said and ask him to comment on what it means.*
- *I don't mention the women's health issue, I just ask him what it means to say no and then bring up an exception.*

**Slight Variation:** When you say "No," you would not overturn it and then follow that statement by bringing up a possible exception, does that mean you might try to overturn it?

**Question:** Will you consider having the FDA re-evaluate whether the pill is safe for women?

**Slight Variation:** Is it possible that you will re-open the issue of whether the pill is safe for women?

- *This question is about content, but specific to his mention of women's safety, not a general question about whether he wants to overturn the ruling.*

- *Here, I use the phrase "will you consider" instead of "Do you plan."*
- *If he says "Yes," to considering it, then I might go a step further and ask, "How likely is it?"*

**Questions:** Given that the FDA has spent many years evaluating the safety of the pill, what is making you raise the issue of its safety again?

Is the safety issue the one issue you think could give you a rationale for trying to overturn it?

- *Both of these related questions ask about motive.*

**Question:** What was your intention in a recent interview when you said you would have your F.D.A. appointee review this decision?

- *This question is also about motive.*

**Question:** Given that you are saying a president cannot overturn an F.D.A. decision, what made you say in a recent interview that you would have your F.D.A. appointee review the decision?

- *This question asks Mr. Bush to show the relationship between what he said in the past to what he is saying now.*

These questions are very direct and hold the person to a tight standard of accountability for what he/she says. The questions focus on any subtle evasive shifts made in the answers, as well as shifts from comments the person made in the past. Various factors influence which questions are best to use. The following list applies to the previous example.

- The kinds of defensive maneuvers the person uses— such as switching from first person to third person—to avoid making a clear statement about his own intentions
- Previous statements made by the person
- Changes the person makes in the words he/she uses when answering the question.

Each of the three times he answered the question, Governor Bush changed his statement in ways that I believe were significant. By using the types of questions I have recommended, I think the interviewer could have gotten more accurate information faster.