2 WHAT ARE THE KEY QUESTIONS?

SETTING THE STAGE

Most poorly written analysis lacks focus. The reader is left wondering, "What is the point of the product? Where are we going with this story? What is the thesis or the key argument?" A well-crafted analysis is tightly focused on a single primary message. The best way to formulate that message is to ensure that it responds to your clients' needs, answering thought-provoking questions that they are—or should be—asking. Questions stimulate and guide the analytic process, engaging and enabling interaction among analysts, reviewers, and clients to develop a message that will hit the target. Quite simply, questions beg for answers.

Articles on fast-breaking events should be directed to answering a single key intelligence or policy question. More extensive and less time-sensitive articles should be designed to answer a key question and several closely related subsidiary questions. In the government, Key Intelligence Questions (KIQs) guide analysts in their research, monitoring, and analytic production. These questions usually are more general and overarching than the ones you will generate to focus your products because they are used for a variety of purposes, including resource allocation and collection priorities. Nonetheless, they provide a good starting point for developing the questions and issues that you will address in your products. In business, analytic products should focus on a specific, well-defined issue.

> "In order for answers to become clear, the questions have to be clear."
>
> —Abdulkarim Soroush, Islamic Philosopher[1]

LOOKING MORE DEEPLY

Often the key intelligence or policy question is provided by the client or your boss. In this case, you must understand exactly what is needed. Do not be shy about seeking clarification if the question appears overly broad or poorly formulated. For example, a question that asks for "everything you know" about a particular subject is a disservice to both the analyst and the requester. These questions usually mask much more specific needs, but the requester has not had the time or does not have the knowledge to research, think, or articulate these needs.

17

You can save yourself, the requester, and all the editors substantial time over the long term by going back to determine exactly what these needs may be. Formulating a choice of questions that you believe might be applicable can spur requesters' thinking; yes-or-no answers are much easier to elicit than waiting for clients to have time to work their way through the problem themselves.

In some circumstances, you will find the question is specific, but the assumptions driving the question are unsupported. This places the analyst in a more difficult position. For example, prior to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, intelligence analysts were frequently asked, "Where are the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) hidden in Iraq?" This question assumed that the weapons did exist—an assumption that later proved to be false. If, in this instance, the analyst was uncertain the weapons existed, the best strategy would have been to place the original question in a broader context by rephrasing the question to read, "What is the status of the WMD program in Iraq?" In this way, the analyst still responds to the question posed by the requester but does so in a way that offers additional perspective on the issue.

If direct clarification from the requester is not possible, then the analyst's duty is to rephrase the question in a more meaningful way. Just as when you identified your client base (see Chapter 1), this is best accomplished by conducting your own Red Hat Analysis exercise[2] by putting yourself in the shoes of the requester and asking, "What exactly do I want to find out? What is my primary concern or interest?"

To do this well, particularly if you are new to the area of interest, you will have prepared for the Red Hat Analysis by

- *Asking essential and foundational questions to understand your account.*[3]

    o **Essential questions** capture the core purposes for your analytic responsibilities. Are certain nations planning or carrying out disinformation campaigns against the United States? Are newly developed weapons systems able to harm targeted adversaries? Is the risk acceptable for your company to build a new facility or complete an agreement to work in countries undergoing political change?

    o **Foundational questions** are the building blocks that must be probed to enable you to answer the essential questions. These questions tend to be open-ended or if closed-ended, then the "yes/no" or factual answer suggests the need for elaboration. Foundational questions provide the basis for research, information collection, and monitoring: Which nations are suspected of carrying out disinformation campaigns? What tactics are they using? What are the targets? What do these elements tell us about the nations' intentions and objectives?

- *Scanning the environment to find out what others think about the subject.* What issues surface repeatedly in the media or government publications? What can you learn from agendas or notes from decision maker meetings? On what issues are other intelligence and policy organizations focusing?

- *Identifying trends.* What can you learn from available data sets like economic indicators, crime statistics, episodes of civil unrest, health statistics, or environmental indicators?

- *Engaging in Outside-In Thinking.*[4] How will developments outside an organization or not directly related to an issue affect it? Consider, for example, how the invention of cell phones and the internet have impacted our personal and professional lives—from making contact to accessing knowledge to shopping and elections. By the same token, developments such as in artificial intelligence and machine learning merit the attention of all analysts who seek to understand the impact of "outside" drivers on "inside" issues.

- *Considering the "white space."* White space in publication design is empty or negative space that focuses visual attention on what is there. In so doing, it can help aim your attention toward what is known and what is important that is missing, poorly articulated, or not yet defined. White space provides the opportunity to reflect on what is missing or could be reframed to be more relevant and valuable to your client. Analysts then can help bridge differences or advance understanding by addressing questions in new or different ways.

- *Brainstorming key questions.* MIT Leadership Center executive director Hal Gregersen advocates brainstorming with colleagues for questions instead of for answers[5] to energize thinking and yield unexpected insights. For intelligence organizations, this is a common technique for rethinking the KIQs that guide their research programs. The brainstorming can help identify better ways to frame issues, identify new or evolving drivers, and get beyond biases or established ways of approaching the issues.

Five Characteristics of a Good Question

A good intelligence or policy question should require deeper levels of thinking that go beyond merely summarizing surface-level facts (see the discussion of the Analytic Spectrum in Chapter 4 that defines four levels of thinking).[6] The question should be[7]

1. *Relevant.* The question should focus on that aspect of an emerging issue, problem, or challenge that is of greatest interest to the client. Has recent reporting signaled the possibility of a new challenge or opportunity emerging? For example, are recent technological developments likely to drastically alter the market for your product? Does social media contain indications of looming political instability and social unrest that could undercut (or support) the client's key policy objectives?

2. *Timely.* Is there an action-forcing event that warrants alerting the client to this issue at this time? For example, does the client need to know something before meeting with someone in the coming days? Or before attending a meeting to set

policy on this issue? Have we gained critical new insights about the negotiating position of an adversary or a competitor? Will the new development require that action be taken to preempt an undesirable condition before it is too late? Is there a critical time frame outside of which the issue loses relevance?

3.   *Precisely worded.* Is the issue framed precisely, in context, and with syntax the client will understand? Is the question stated clearly with sufficient focus to enable the client to take action?

4.   *Actionable.* What are the implications of this issue for the client? What is the "So What"? Will this issue require action by the client? Are there obvious implications if the client acts or does not act? Will the client or his or her organization be harmed? Does attention need to be focused on what actions should be taken to prevent or mitigate risk? Does the client have the power to influence the outcome significantly? Is the response posed in such a way that it offers several possible courses of action and identifies opportunities but does not prescribe policy or suggest which option is preferable?

5.   *Answerable in more than one way.* Is the question posed in such a way that the answer has more than one credible alternative or course of action? Can the question be answered by a range of possible hypotheses and not simply by a yes-or-no response? Is the question devoid of any hidden assumptions that might lead the client to take an ill-advised action not supported by the facts? Are there key uncertainties that could greatly affect the outcome?

Refining the Question

Helping clients frame their question to inform their decision making is a key analytic task.[8] If the analyst does not understand exactly what information is being sought by the client and interprets the question too broadly, then substantial resources will be wasted and the client will be disappointed with the response. Analysts should consider the following questions when framing a question prior to writing their paper:

- Is it clear what would constitute an answer to the question?

- Is it obvious what information is needed to answer the question? If not, try to clarify exactly what information or analytic judgment the client seeks.

- Is the client really interested in something else but has cast the question too broadly or narrowly, assuming the analyst knows what is being sought?

- Are there any hidden assumptions underlying the question?

- Does the client's decision depend on whether the answer meets a threshold or a set of thresholds rather than a precise answer? If so, frame your response appropriately.

For open-ended questions, some of the best techniques to use in preparing a response are Multiple Hypothesis Generation, Quadrant Crunching™, What If? Analysis, and

Foresight analysis. For yes-or-no questions, techniques to consider include the Key Assumptions Check, Structured Analogies, and Analysis of Competing Hypotheses.

The Five Ws and an H

A highly effective strategy for identifying the key intelligence or policy question is to ask the six questions often used by journalists: Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How. Practical experience in using this strategy has shown that a better order for asking these questions is Who, What, How, When, Where, and Why. We recommend changing the order for two reasons: (1) The new order best follows the structure of a standard English sentence, and (2) the "What" and the "How" often overlap or are used to describe similar aspects of the issue.

Techniques that use the so-called Five-Ws-and-an-H strategy include Circleboarding™, Starbursting, and Mind Mapping.[9] Each technique enables you to explore all aspects of a problem or an issue. Jot down two or three responses to each of the questions and then go back and assess which set of responses is most deserving of attention. Prioritize the six sets of responses and reframe the original question to address the set of responses that was given the highest priority.

The Circleboarding™ technique adds a seventh question: "So What?" (see Figure 2.1). The inclusion of this question stimulates discussion beyond just consolidating what is known by spurring the analyst to identify weak points in the group's knowledge and encouraging discussion of what assumptions are being made.

These processes are particularly helpful when the question asked by your client appears too broad or too encompassing. In conducting this simple exercise, note what types of information are available to answer each question. Also consider whether any major information gaps exist that would require more research or the tasking of others to collect more information.

FIGURE 2.1 ■ The Circleboarding™ Technique
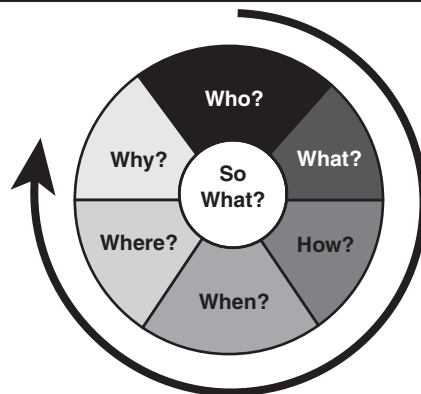
Source: Copyright 2020 Globalytica, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

The Question Method

The Question Method (see Figure 2.2) is another simple technique analysts can use to organize a long-term research project or a short-fused memo.[10] It helps analysts structure a paper by focusing first on the question of greatest interest to the client or customer set and then on subsequent questions in descending order of priority.

One of the greatest strengths of the Question Method is that it eliminates inclusion of any information that is not deemed to be of direct interest to the client. By organizing the paper around a small number of key questions, the time needed to edit and review the paper is significantly reduced. We will build on the Question Method as a component of the AIMS (**A**udience, **I**ssue or intelligence question, **M**essage, and **S**toryline) approach to conceptualizing a product discussed in Chapter 4.

FIGURE 2.2 ■ Using Key Questions to Organize Your Product

1. Identify the key issue or problem your principal client or client set is currently wrestling with or likely to confront in the near future.

   - Remember that clients at different levels are likely to be dealing with different types of decisions on the issue.

2. Brainstorm a list of focused key questions relating to that topic that the client is likely to ask or that the client anticipates will be asked of her or him.

   - Answering a focused question that clients are currently asking increases the chances your product will be useful. It will have immediate appeal.

   - Answering a set of focused questions is easier than generating an overall assessment on a topic from scratch.

3. Add any questions to the list that the client may not be asking but probably should be.

   - Draw on your expertise and analytic tools to add any questions that the client—because of more limited time and knowledge of the topic—has not thought about yet.

4. Select the questions on the list that you can answer or to which you can contribute a useful perspective.

   - If you cannot answer an essential question, consider starting work to get the answer.

   - If you have received a direct question from a client, be sure to include this question near the top of your list.

5. Prioritize and organize the list of questions to guide your collection, collaboration, and research—and the outline of the finished product.

   - Organize (order) the questions into a story line that will most effectively present the information and analysis, starting with the issues of greatest concern or interest to the client.

   - Your organized set of questions now becomes the outline to begin researching and drafting the finished product.

   - Remember that the questions may change as your research and drafting progresses.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A well-crafted analytic product contains a single, primary message that answers a key intelligence or policy question.

- Analysts can help clients by using questions as a means of engagement to determine if they have correctly determined their needs. A Red Hat Analysis is one technique that enables analysts to put themselves "in the client's shoes."

- Analysts can best prepare for an effective Red Hat Analysis by asking "essential" and "foundational" questions to frame the analytic need; scanning the environment to understand what others think about the issue; identifying trends from available data; engaging in Outside-In Thinking; considering the "white space" of what is missing, poorly articulated, or not yet defined; and brainstorming key questions with colleagues.

- A good intelligence or policy question is relevant, timely, precisely worded, actionable, and answerable in more than one way.

- The journalists' list of Who, What, How, When, Where, Why, and our addition of the question "So What?" provides an efficient schema for exploring the key intelligence or policy questions on which to focus an analytic product.

- The Question Method is a fast and effective technique for organizing a paper that addresses a client's key concerns in priority order.

CONSIDERING THE CASE STUDY

Review Case Study III, "Blackout on the Eastern Seaboard!"

- What are the key questions a senior policymaker is likely to ask of energy infrastructure and national security officials when fashioning his or her initial public response to the blackout? Formulate "essential" and "foundational" questions and ensure that the responses satisfy the five characteristics of a good question.

- What are the key questions those responsible for restoring power are likely to ask about the event? Formulate "essential" and "foundational" questions and ensure that the responses satisfy the five characteristics of a good question.

- How would you use the Five-Ws-and-an-H strategy to identify the key question for a senior decision maker?

- How would you organize a paper on the implications of the blackout using the Question Method?

NOTES

1. Ali Asghar Seyyedabadi, "The Muddled Dream of Returning to Tradition: An Interview With Abdulkarim Soroush," *E'temad-e Mellli*, November 19, 2006, translated from Persian by Nilou Mobasser, www .drsoroush.com.

2. For more information about the Red Hat Analysis technique, see

Randolph H. Pherson and Richards J. Heuer Jr., *Structured Analytic Techniques for Intelligence Analysis*, 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press/ SAGE, 2021), 198–203.

3. Development of essential and foundational questions is adapted from Pherson Associates training materials (www.pherson.org).

4. For more information about the Outside-In Thinking technique, see Pherson and Heuer, *Structured Analytic Techniques*, 191–194.

5. Hal Gregersen, *Questions Are the Answer: A Breakthrough Approach to Your Most Vexing Questions at Work and in Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018).

6. Many books on critical thinking, particularly in the educational domain, use Bloom's Taxonomy to describe levels of cognitive processes. These abilities include Knowledge (recalling facts, opinions, and concepts), Comprehension (interpreting information in one's own words), Application (applying learning to a new situation), Analysis (determining internal relationships), Evaluation (making judgments using criteria and standards), and Creation/Synthesis (linking facts into a coherent whole or new understanding). Anderson's revised taxonomy (Remembering, Understanding, Applying, Analyzing, Evaluating, Creating) renames the categories as gerunds and identifies Creating as a category of its own, dropping the concept of Synthesis. See Lorin W. Anderson and David R. Krathwohl, eds., *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2001).

7. This checklist is adapted from Pherson Associates training materials (www .pherson.org).

8. Much of the information for this section was taken from "Selecting an Analytic Technique or Approach, Step One: Refining the Question," distributed by the United Kingdom's Professional Head of Defence Intelligence Analysis, UK Ministry of Defence. The material is used with their permission.

9. The Circleboarding™ technique is discussed in Pherson and Heuer, *Structured Analytic Techniques*, 101–103. Starbursting is discussed on 104–106. Mind Mapping is discussed on 106–112.

10. This technique was first developed by David Terry; it was revised by Randolph H. Pherson in 2010 and was incorporated in Pherson Associates and Globalytica course materials used to train analysts in the United States and overseas.