

The next level in Precision Answering: Learning to use qualifiers

Precision Q+A is a skill that lends itself to lifelong learning because there are so many complex and fascinating ways to become better at asking questions and at answering them precisely. This month we want to take a closer look at a next-level skill for moving your Precision Answering up a notch or two. We will focus on qualifiers—words or short phrases that come before a core answer and that convey crucial information the questioner might choose to explore.

Every word counts

In a Precision Q+A discussion, especially when conducted in its most concise form, every word counts. Consider, for instance, the following exchange between Andy and Adrienne:

Andy: *How long will it take to finish writing this project summary?*

Adrienne: *About 50 hours.*

If this were an everyday conversation between Andy and Adrienne, the answer of “about 50 hours” could refer to a number in a broad range above and below 50 hours, or it could simply mean that Adrienne is making a guess and for some reason, 50 sounds good. Andy doesn’t really know, and isn’t likely to ask a follow-up question. But if this were a Precision Q+A discussion, Andy could assume that Adrienne chose to answer with “about 50 hours” on purpose, because there is important information that would be lost by simply giving the bare number. Andy can choose to ask more, or not, depending on his purpose at the moment. Adrienne can walk away feeling as if she was totally candid and open in showing places where Andy might want to look further into the issues surrounding the prediction of 50 hours.

In Precision Q+A there is a constant dance between the desire to be concise and the necessity to be accurate. Qualifiers help with this dance because they allow for short answers while also serving as a kind of “red flag” that alerts questioners to areas where they might want to know more. Consider this exchange between Beth and Barry:

Beth: *How long will it take to finish debugging this code?*

Barry: *Probably between 40 and 60 hours.*

If Beth is looking for a general estimate, she can choose to move on to her next question. But if she is in the midst of a careful planning process and she needs a deep understanding of risks to the schedule, she is very likely to see the word “probably” as a red flag and stop to investigate further.

The most common qualifiers

Because qualifiers help you avoid oversimplification when you are giving very concise answers, it can be helpful to have a mental list of the most common qualifiers and situations where they are useful. Consider “probably,” one of the most common qualifiers, used in Beth and Barry’s conversation. The word “probably” indicates that you are giving a picture that represents what you think is most likely to happen, but that you know there is a non-trivial chance that something better or something worse could happen. In Barry’s case, if he finds a showstopper bug his estimate might double or even triple! But, in his best judgment at the time he is talking to Beth, he doesn’t expect to encounter showstopper bugs in the code. If Beth, however, is planning for the worst case, she will really want to know what’s behind Barry’s “probably.”

Other common qualifiers and the situations where they are useful include:

- **Currently**—Use this to convey volatility; in the near future there is a significant chance that circumstances could change in important ways
- **Main**—Use this to convey what, in your judgment, is most important while also indicating that some other areas are potentially worth considering
- **Most**—Use this to convey that you are talking about the majority or most common instances, but there are non-common or outlier instances that may be significant
- **Best case**—Use this to convey that you are providing an optimistic view or assuming that everything goes without a hitch
- **Worst case**—Use this to convey that you are giving a pessimistic view or assuming that many obstacles will arise
- **Most likely (or probably)**—Use this to convey that you are talking about what you assume to be the likely case while also indicating that less likely cases might be nontrivial
- **My first impression is**—Use this to convey that you are offering a response that comes immediately on the heels of an experience, especially when your impression or interpretation might be significantly different if you had time for reflection or research
- **Off the top of my head**—Use this to convey that you are making a quick judgment or intuitive estimate, especially when this judgment or estimate might change significantly if you had time for reflection or formal analysis

Hearing the qualifiers

When you use qualifiers, you need to be sure that you are working with someone who is listening closely and expects you to be doing Precision Answering. When you are doing Precision Q+A with someone who is paying attention to accuracy, qualifiers become especially important. For example, if Corinne asks Calvin a question about risks, she will hear very different messages depending on the qualifiers (if any) that Calvin chooses:

Corinne: What are the risks to shipping on time?

Calvin: There are two main risks. 1)... 2)... [But there are a whole host of other risks that I judge to be less important. You might want to know about them!]

Calvin: Currently there are two risks. 1)... 2)... [But the production schedule is changing on a daily basis, so the risks to shipping on time may look very different tomorrow than they do right now!]

If this were just an everyday conversation, it would be easy to just hear “two risks” and completely disregard the additional words. In Precision Q+A, however, qualifiers are not “filler” words. They are sometimes as meaningful as the core of the answer itself. When used judiciously, qualifiers convey a great deal of information in a very small number of words. That’s the art of Precision Answering.

Practice

Have you recently given a presentation? Look back at your slides and ask yourself several questions:

- Do you have qualifiers in your bullet points?
- Are there places where you should have included qualifiers to be more accurate?
- Are there misplaced qualifiers that should have been deleted?

Are you preparing to give a presentation? After completing your analysis, think about places where you want to offer qualifiers that might be important for your audience. Where would you want to insert a red flag which, in effect, invites people to ask more questions if they decide they need additional information? Start with the list of common qualifiers above to find the most accurate way to phrase your bullet points. When you do a dry run of your presentation with your Precision Q+A partner, use common qualifiers in your answers whenever appropriate.

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If you’re looking for other forms of support as you learn to use PQ+A in a non-PQ+A world, contact QuestionMaster@vervago.com.