Asking Effective Questions in Class

In your courses, you may not always get a particular topic or concept. When that happens, it’s important that you seek clarity by asking your professor effective questions, either during class, or privately during office hours. When deciding what to ask, and how, there are a few tips that will make sure you’re asking the most effective questions possible to get the most effective answer possible.

1. Consider what you’re trying to accomplish with your question.

   - For Clarity, ask questions like, “What is meant by...?” or “Can you explain how...?”
   
   - For Analysis, ask questions like “What is the meaning of...?” or “How would you explain...?”
   
   - For Comparing and Contrasting topics, ask questions like “How are the following topics similar...?” or “What sort of differences exist between...?”

2. Avoid the following types of questions:

   - Simple yes or no questions, like “Is oxygen an element on the periodic table?”
     Why? These questions add little to a discussion and limit follow-up questions.

   - Vague questions, like “Why is American history difficult?”
     Why? These questions lack focus and may lead to even more confusion.

   - Leading questions, like “Do you think the carelessness of Romeo and Juliet’s families played the most prominent role in their fates?”
     Why? These questions suggest its own answer and discourages you from thinking on your own.

   - Biased questions, like “Why was Captain Ahab so stubborn?”
     Why? These questions lack objectivity, and you may risk alienating other students in the class.

3. Don’t be shy.

   - If you’re not getting a topic or concept, chances are you aren’t the only one; an effective question may help the entire class.

   - Professors like when students want more information; an effective question may afford the professor an opportunity to tackle a subject from a different direction.