

Tools for the art of the ask element: **CORE**

Rules for Tools

1. The best attitude for using tools in the art of the ask is to “play.”
2. Each tool offered here is described in a summary form.
3. Where added explanation is warranted, reference links may be provided.
4. References may be a longer explanation, a video, an article, a book, or even a reference to an organization that can offer more or added explanation (even further tools).
5. Tools are not listed in any particular order, which might otherwise imply rank.
6. Any tool here can absolutely be used to practice ANY of the five elements.
7. If a tool came from a specific person or source, it will be noted after the tools name.

Develop the Habit of Doing a Brain Huddle (Jill Bolte Taylor)

As her fascinating book Whole Brain Living describes in detail, your brain is made up of more than 170 billion cells, neural and non-neural. According to neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor, many of those cells work together in groups, groups that she described as functioning like “characters” that help each of us navigate.

Jill’s four characters are:

- Left Brain (Character 1 and Character 2) and Right Brain (Character 3 and Character 4)
- They are also Thinking Characters (Character 1 and Character 4) and Emotional (Character 2 and Character 3)
- Each represents an authentic part of who we are; but each plays a different role:
 - **Character 1**, one of the thinker characters, is: more orderly and executive in its function. Jill uses words like the following to describe Character 1: analytical; punctual; precise; linear
 - **Character 4**, also a thinker, is a quite different thinking group of cells: more open, visual. Jill uses words like these to describe Character 4: flexible; fluid; compassionate; thinks in pictures; big picture
 - **Character 2** is one of the emotional characters and is: our worrier and protector character. Jill describes Character 2 as: cautious; fear based; selfish; right/wrong based, and rigid
 - **Character 3**, the other emotional character in our head is: our wild child embracer. Jill describes Character 3 with words including: grateful; risk taking; expansive; creative; sharing

While there is a lot to Jill’s theory, the basics are as follows:

1. Each character is vital to our survival and our ability to thrive

2. The characters are at their best when they work together
3. It is entirely normal for one character to, in any one situation, become outsized, essentially muting the rest, even when that character is the right one to allow to take the lead
4. We can get very proficient at employing all of our characters to be their best and work together by doing a BRAIN Huddle.

A Brain Huddle's steps follow the initials in the word "B R A I N" and work as follows:

B – Breathe ... and focus on your breath. This enables you to hit the pause button, interrupt your emotional reactivity, and bring your mind to the present moment with a focus on yourself.

R – Recognize ... which of the four characters' circuitry you are running in the present moment.

A – Appreciate ... whichever character you find yourself exhibiting, and appreciate the fact that you have all four characters available to you at any moment.

I – Inquire ... within and invite all four characters into the huddle so they can collectively and consciously strategize your next move.

N – Navigate ... your new reality, with all four characters bringing their best game.

By practicing this technique often, as a habit, you can better empower your brain not only to ask better questions, but to live in the question space more comfortably, more productively.

The 5 Habits of the Mind (Deborah Meier)

The 5 Habits were developed by Deb to take on challenges from the everyday to the monumental. At their core however, they are meant to be an ongoing proactive, not simply employed to "fix" something and then go back to an old norm that doesn't employ these habits.

The 5 Habits, are five questions that work and enable you as follows:

1. **How do we know what we know?** Asking this question is quite simply the habit of checking your assumptions. We rarely, if ever, do this. But assumptions change as the environment changes. We forget, too. Both are reasons to tune back in and make sure the foundation we are building on is sound.
2. **Is there a pattern?** When we get information and insights back from our questions, what we are looking for are patterns, not anomalies. Patterns are the most reliable indicator

of something substantive – an opportunity, a threat, even the seeds of the next question we must ask.

3. **What if ...?** Once we are tuned into our assumptions, once we are seeing a pattern of possibility, it's time to get curious and creative. What if questions do this for us. "Given our assumptions, and the pattern we are seeing, what if we ... ?" Especially when done as a shared exercise, this is the habit that allows for the opening up of new possibilities.
4. **Is there another way?** I think of this as the "check" against falling in love with your own ideas – something humans all too easily do. The fact is, there is ALWAYS another way. This habit reminds us of that, makes us prove our choices just that added necessary bit more, makes us think, then rethink.
5. **Who cares?** At the end of the day, if no one cares, if someone does but you don't know who they are or why they care, then none of the rest of it matters. Value is realized when someone else realizes it – someone beyond its creators.

It's a repeat message, but these habits are consciously questions, and consciously recommended to be made into habits. Deb told me that she has repeatedly seen a pattern AFTER people successful use these habits, once or for a short time. "They turn the questions into statements," she said, statements like, "These are and have long been our assumptions;" or "The patterns we see are ...". Note that, when turned to statements, there is no exploration, no affirmation, no new discover, none of it. Asking and questions are the key.

The 3 Acts of Creation (Larry Robertson)

In my book on creativity, *The Language of Man: Learning to Speak Creativity*, I wrote about the 3 Acts of Creation that that are:

- Always present in any creating
- Ever link to asking
- And ask of us that we see all three as part of any creation or innovation that's complete

(They are also ongoing.)

The 3 Acts of Creation and how they work are:

Act 1: Choice: Every action is a choice. Even choosing not to act is a choice. Most often, we choose when we think we can choose something good, as in a good outcome. This we do enthusiastically. But no matter what, there is always a choice being made. Awareness of that is pivotal.

Act 2: Reaction: The second act is defining for the first. How we react to the result of a choice, be that result good or bad, is really what defines the impact and value. It's not the immediate result of the choice. For example, if the outcome of a choice is good and our reaction is to call our choices and our work done and we get lazy, the outcome can turn bad, often quickly. Similarly, if the result of a choice is bad, we may hesitate to actively choose going forward. This isn't a good choice in any way. It's a choice to not have a hand in your future.

Act 3: Improvisation: Inevitably, choices and their results do not come ready-made. This is truer still in uncertain times. Most often, either to make a choice or to deal with its outcomes, we must try things we haven't before ... go places we've not ventured previously ... or think in new ways we haven't done up to that point. There's no guidebook for such things. We have to improvise. To do that well, we have to ask – then choose, then react, then repeat. This is how we create.

A supporting story ...

When I shared the 3 Acts with David Pearl (one of my interviewees for *Great Question*, the creator of Street Wisdom, and the author of *Wanderful*), he shared his similar observations and added meaning to the 3 Acts:

"It's quite a brilliant observation," David began. "Choice," David continued, "is a GORGEOUS word. It is not what we 'do' next, it is what we 'choose' to do that matters – a distinction that seems like splitting hairs, but really reminds us that the power lies in the act and in the question ... in seeing that there are options, and asking: 'Which shall I choose?' It is that repeated action that is the power, not the individual choices made.

"Reaction," he went on, is often that finality we too often link to our choices – 'This or that? Choice made. Outcome resulted. Job done.' We tend to focus in on speed and time in our reactions, ever trying to 'speed to end.' The once and done, he said, very cartesian. And, it's not very helpful, nor fruitful.

"That last Act ... Improvisation ... it's what allows play. People sometimes call it dithering," he said, "but really it's asking ... it's exploring ... it's wondering, 'is there another way?'" David shared that he'd worked often with the director Stanley Kubrick, and shared that Kubrick was known to constantly ask actors: 'Do you have another way?' – not as a statement that their way was bad or good, but in an effort to first *collect* the dots, THEN to seek to join and connect them afterwards, with a multitude of options on the table that allow not just for choices, but for improvising, often beyond the obvious choices and ways."

Change the W Questions (Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot)

This tool, another from my book *The Language of Man*, and more precisely from MacArthur Fellow and brilliant sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. And it's both simple and surprisingly powerful.

To use it, you simply take any Who, What, When, Where, Why, or How question and replace its natural 'W' word (How, of course, being one of these words even without the W) with one of its siblings.

For example, "What is art?" is transformed – as is your thinking – when you ask instead, "WHO is art?"

What may sound silly at first, if actually played through, gives a very different angle and the tried-and-true answers our "regular" questions tend to give back to us. Changing the W makes us think. It makes us stretch. It makes us uncomfortable, even. Which makes us ready to find new direction and new light and explore in a whole new way.

A Question Burst (Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana)

Question tools get passed around, and that's a good thing. But giving credit where credit is due is an important part of that process. These days, the idea of a question burst has lots of versions and lots of users. But way back when, the earliest known advocates and creators were Luz and Dan.

The idea of a burst is simply to generate questions – lots and lots of them. The idea is not to stop and answer them. It is a pure and amazingly productive tool for seeing the range of things you know, don't know, and could know, while generating paths forward to find out with each and every question you generate.

I learned how to use this tool from two other interviewees from *Great Question*, JoAnn Garbin and Teri Sun. This is **how I learned to do it:**

In a group as small as a pair, but better with more:

- **Pick the Question Gatherer.** One person puts forth the idea, puzzle, opportunity, issue, or similar they have been wrestling with. It will be this person the group is working to help – help by helping that person to gather questions that can open up the path forward.
- **Pick a "Meaty" Topic.** It's particularly powerful topic is a meaty one or is exploring new ground. The Gatherer should take no more than 2 minutes to explain what they are wrestling with.
- **Check in with How You Feel.** First, the person bringing the topic is asked to note how they feel about the topic before anything else. This can seem like a big reveal, maybe even unnecessary. But it turns out to be truly powerful.
- **The Burst.** The next 5 minutes (set a timer) is the wide-open time in which, knowing only the challenge and a bare minimum of information from the Question Gatherer, the rest of the group asks ... only asks ...

- There are no preambles allowed, no explanations about why you asked what you did, or efforts to show how brilliant you are. Just ask.
- The goal isn't to solve – saying things such as, “Have you tried ‘X?’” with X being an answer or solution.
- The questions are best when they are short and crisp.
- The Question Gatherer's role is to write the questions down VERBATIM. Their role is NOT to edit, change, or rework the questions.
- Their role is also NOT to respond with answers, reactions as to how they like the questions (or don't). They are only to silently gather.
- It can also be helpful to appoint one person to keep everyone honestly within the guidelines, and encourage them back to them when they inevitably drift.
- **The Post-check.** After the burst, the gatherer once more expresses how they feel, this time AFTER the burst exercise.

For more ideas in the same zone, I highly recommend Dan and Luz's book *Change Just One Thing*. While aimed at a different objective (getting students to develop the habit of asking more in a classroom setting), the book is loaded with insights and even actions anyone can take to amp up their question asking.

Ask “What are” and “How” (Lizzie Marks; Roland Harwood)

This is a combined tool, but with a similar lesson to each question being suggested you ask instead of what you probably typically ask.

The first comes from interviewee Lizzy Marks. She and other teachers at her middle school in Vermont are taught to ask not, “Do you have any questions?” but instead:

“What are your questions?”

It's a deceptively simple yet oh so powerful twist. It reminds us, quite bluntly, that because questions are core to who we are, we always have questions. Even if we choose not to ask them out loud, we ought to be consciously aware of them.

Interviewee Roland Harwood suggested his own powerful question of this variety in his book *On the Edge*:

Instead of asking if, ask how.

“If” is tentative before it even gets going. By contrast, “How” assumes a way exists. It invites exploration, and most definitely invites more questions.

Do Something New (Bonnie Pitman)

Interviewee for Great Question Bonnie Pitman had much to share in the way of tools and ideas for ramping up your asking, several of which were shared in the book. This one she shared separately in our conversation, and though it starts personal, it's a powerful tool for any of us:

Do something new.

Bonnie has stretch this into a daily practice, and in impressive fashion. She began it on July 8, 2011, and as of the time I interviewed her in 2023, she was still going. It really is a question practice. It requires questions to function, ones including:

- What will I do today that's new?
- What defines new?
- Is the definition of new different than it was yesterday?

Here's how it works for Bonnie:

- **The New and The Goals.** She aims to do something new each day – new from any of the other days she's done this since she started. The goals are to:
- **The Aim.**
 - Aim at things to do that are joyful
 - Aim at and engage what she's curious about
- **At Attention.** To do the new thing mindfully, and with her full attention (not just check it off or fail to really check it out)
- **The Powerful Final Moves.** Then – and importantly – she both REFLECTS on the experience and RECORDS what she did and what she reflected

Among the benefits, her exercise causes her to focus on something else, not just the defaults that exist aplenty in each of our worlds. But there are things science says it does too. The research says this tool:

- According to neuroscience, it increases 'cognitive reserve'
- Novelty, which is what new is all about, improves brain health – it lays down new neural networks and creates new connections in our brain
- It sends your brain in search, not of defaults, but innovations
- Maybe best of all? It's fun!

3 Steps to Jumping Off Your Neural Defaults (Greg Galle)

Greg is the guy who taught me the powerful exercise of "What's half of thirteen?" covered in the book. He's one of the most creative, outside the box thinkers you'll ever meet. Better, how has a bag of tricks for getting OTHERS to think outside the box, or to outright chuck that old box. One of those tools is a three-parter he uses to move clients off the often staid and lifeless

obvious questions they have that make them think they've already done their work around asking.

The three steps of this tool for jumping off your neural default are:

1. **Kitchen Sink:** Even when clients say they have a lot of questions, those questions are usually a jumble (of functional and GREAT, or as Greg puts it, performance questions rather than innovative ones). The idea of the Kitchen Sink is to get all of those surface questions out on the table – not out of the way or out of the discussion, but to relieve “the obvious” from dominating.
2. **Verboten:** The Verboten step builds on the first. Greg then tells the client, “For now, you are not allowed to ask those Kitchen Sink questions. Given that, What are your NEXT level of questions? This is so remarkably simply, and two steps make it so: 1) Get it all out there formally, that stuff on call on your head, then, 2) Get it out of the way and ask anew, deeper, less defensively, curiously, creatively.
3. **Opposite Assumptions:** After that, they go back to the Kitchen Sink, but this time, rather than running after the answers, from the questions they are asked to dig beneath each for assumptions ... to explore what they are really asking ... why they are asking ... how right they are in the assumptions they are making ... whether or not they are cognitively aware of those assumptions, right or wrong and aware of what they are building on ... and also, how much each matters to their success. THEN, Greg asks them to look at the OPPOSITE assumptions. What do things look like when the assumption is flipped fully? What does that open up, preclude, or reveal.

Here's the power of this 3-step exercise:

“All of this is creating distance from where most would typically start,: Greg said. “It’s helping them see or discover another path, because there ARE always other paths. These steps get the brain looking for then exploring them. It’s a stepping off of the well worn neutral pathways to find another vantage point. It is both a practice AND a cultural injection. In every way, it’s a needed shift.”

Asking Amplifiers (Larry Robertson)

Sometimes, we already have a good tool and we just need to amp it up a bit. These are things, randomly stumbled into or gathered over time, that can give your questions a needed boost. Not surprisingly, **each sends you back to what's core:**

- **Ask more than once.** This is the idea, popularized by the Japanese practice of asking 5 Layers of Why, that suggests that pretty much *any* question can be pushed deeper. In the 5 Layers of Why, you are guided to ask Why, then to ask Why again, but in each added

layer to ask it about the answer to the previous why. The belief of many, myself included, is that while you could do this endlessly, by the fifth layer, you will likely have reached the truly substantive and valuable. This tool of asking more than once simply suggests you apply the layers to other questions to gain more yield.

- **Ask with a delay (or pause) in between.** My very first book was titled *A Deliberate Pause*. It was because that turned out to be the repeated pattern of the most successful entrepreneurs, to pause and make space to see more, indeed to ask more. If your questions are getting you stuck, a delay in your asking may just be the cure.
- **Ask from someone else's shoes.** Remember Greg Galle's "Opposite Assumptions" step earlier? This is a version of that. It's about getting out of your own obvious, dramatically so, by changing your position entirely. Any question, just like any assumption, can be flipped. When it is, it yields a whole other vantage point to see and learn from.
- **Ask from the "Kill the company" viewpoint.** This is a group exercise that is much like the "someone else's shoes" tool. The difference? The other shoes are owned by the person of company that wants to orchestrate your undoing. The exercise, popularized by Lisa Bodell, suggests that instead of accounting for your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats as you normally would – that is, from YOUR vantage point – pretend you are your competition. How would they seek to undo you? It's a heck of a reality check, and its "adversary" viewpoint is one you can port anywhere to pretty much any topic.