California University of Pennsylvania Honors Program

How to Ask a Question of Someone Presenting His or Her Honors Thesis

Attending an Honors thesis presentation can be beneficial no matter how far along you are. Whether you are an incoming freshman still figuring out how exactly the Honors Program works or a graduating senior watching a classmate present her work, you can learn a lot by attending a thesis presentation. You can understand a new perspective on a topic that you may or may not know, and you can gain insight into the kind of work being done by your colleagues. You also are providing support and a friendly face for the presenter.

As with any learning experience, asking questions is vital to furthering your understanding of a subject. Asking a question shows that you are absorbing the information being presented and then challenging your understanding of it; it means going beyond the role of passive listener. Asking a question can mean wanting clarification or elaboration, or it can mean drawing connections between the subject at hand and something else: outside information or personal experience or a particular train of thought. However, no matter how many possible questions you might ask, there are still a few simple things to keep in mind that can make the process a little easier.

First, understand that there will be a Q&A session after the speaker’s presentation. Depending on how formal the presentation is, you may be able to ask a question during the presentation, but it is typical to wait until this Q&A session begins so as not to interrupt the speaker.

Bring a pen and paper to take notes during the presentation. This helps you keep track of the presenter’s points so you can refer back to them. Also, writing out the points that the speaker makes can help you better judge the presentation as a whole and whether there are any aspects that you don't quite understand or that you desire more knowledge of. If a question occurs to you during the presentation, write that down too so that you don’t forget it, and if that question has still been left unanswered by the end of the presentation, ask it. Remember, there are no dumb questions.

Raise your hand and wait for the speaker to acknowledge you before asking your question. Begin your question with a show of support for the presenter. You might say, “I learned a lot from your presentation…” or “I really enjoyed your discussion of …” Also, if your question refers back to a point that the speaker made earlier in the presentation, be specific as to what exactly you are referring to. As an example, you might frame it like: “Earlier, you briefly talked about Mark Twain’s views on Christianity. Did you happen to do any research into how these views may be found in any of his literary works?” Don’t make your question any more complex than it needs to be, and be mindful of others who may also have questions they’d like to ask.
You’re not trying to one-up the speaker or create an argument. By asking a question, your goal should be to further your (and the rest of those in attendance's) understanding of a subject, show support for a fellow Honors student, and, possibly, even challenge the speaker to think about a subject in a way that she might not have considered previously.

Above all, asking a question is about pursuing a train of thought. It’s about taking the material that has been presented, latching onto something that stuck out or that you found intriguing, and following it up with a genuine question that you have. Don’t overthink it.

(By Shawn Reese, September 2013)