

# The Three Question Exercise

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If you have an undying desire to put your ego at risk, the Three Question (3) exercise will do it, but the payoffs are terrific. In its most basic form, the exercise involves asking participants to write down any three questions they have about an issue related to the larger discussion. Questions can be general in nature (Why do we even bother to plan?) or specific (Why doesn't the current plan include a section on mental health services and facilities?); they can be specific to a subject (will the plan address water quality by individual streams or by the watershed as a whole?) or they can be procedural (what happens next?). Be warned, however, the 3Q exercise means that the person at the front of the room has to feel fairly comfortable with the subject and, at the same time, be willing to admit when he or she does not know something.

I started using the Three Question Exercise (3Q) while teaching Freshman Composition. I asked the students to take out one sheet of paper and a writing implement of some sort (pen/ pencil/ crayon) and put everything else away. Once the shuffling quieted down, I asked them to write down any three questions they had either about the class or about writing in general. I spend the remainder of the class taking questions from the floor. If someone asked a question I didn't have an answer for, I would ask them to circle the question and I would give them an answer during the next few classes. At the end of the class, I collected the questions and used them to adjust my class materials for the next two to three weeks, especially if saw a pattern to the questions.

## **Setting the Rules of Engagement**

When I changed professions at 40, I brought many of the same techniques I had used in the classroom with me into the public planning sector, including the Three Question (3Q) Exercise. There are, however, some significant differences between the classroom and a public forum. Students know that the fate of their college career, or at least the first discussion of grades with their parents, depends on being at least marginally respectful. The same can not be said for the public forum. There were no final grades hanging over the heads of participants, so they may not feel the same level of constraint. At the first public forum I held, I trotted out 3Q. Among the questions from the floor were at least a half a dozen questions concerning our zoning administrator's character flaws, about twice as many questions about the character flaws of elected officials, and one date request to go watch an exhibit of monster trucks. The evening after I used 3Q for the first time at a citizen meeting, I sat down and wrote a list of basic ground rules.

1. Please be respectful of your fellow participants. While we understand you are passionate about your position, please allow others to have their say as well.
2. Listen. (See Above.)
3. Please check personal animosities at the door. (See Above.)

In the past, participants in public meetings were generally civil and respectful.

Unfortunately, the tenor of public meetings has changed in the past five years. A gentle reminder to remain calm, and respectful, up front, does a great deal to calm potential clashes and encourage civil conversations. You can print the “rules of engagement” on individual exercises (see the Organ Cave example), on the reverse side of the agenda, or both.

### **Basic Meeting Materials.**

Regardless of whether you are doing this with citizens or with students, there are some basic materials you are going to need to bring with you to the 3Q session,:

- A meeting box (a few of packs of 5” x 7” index cards, sharpened pencils, sign-in sheets, a set of dry erase markers, name tags, a roll of tape, paper clips, rubber bands, and a manilla envelop)
- A standard set of maps for your jurisdiction or of the area covered by the school (future land use, zoning, cool environmental maps).

Setting up a “meeting box,” a small banker's box (10” x 12” x 3”) that can be easily stored on a shelf in your office or in the truck of your car. A meeting box saves prep time, cuts down on the number of trips to and from the car, and makes juggling the items you have to carry far easier.

For public sessions, always have a sign-in sheet that includes space for email addresses and phone number. Your sheet should also have a place to write in the name of the event and the date. After each session, add the contact information to the email list for your departmental newsletter or for future meeting announcements. For classroom presentations, the teacher is the point of contact for any follow-up materials.

Do not use the smaller (3x5”) index cards. They limit the amount of information participants can include in their questions, are more easily lost, and encourage really illegible writing.

There are two things you can bring to a meeting that will help calm the waters: maps and food. I have yet to find anyone who isn't fascinated, on some level, with maps. Perhaps it is a product of growing up with National Geographic, but people love maps and they trust maps. Somehow, the visual representation of their jurisdiction seems more honest and less manipulated, although there are certainly plenty of examples of map manipulation available to disprove the theory. Generally, presentation maps should be a minimum of 24” and preferably 30” to 36” in size. People should be able to see their neighborhoods, but not their individual houses, on the map. While most people do not care one way or another that their houses have been individually noted on a map, the relatively few who are prone to paranoia and conspiracy theories do. It is better to leave it off unless you are using a map that deals specifically with the distribution of housing.

There is one exception to the “don't show individual structures” rule: elementary school children. Kids 12 and under love being able to see their houses, especially if you have an air photo of their school's service area. (See the article on maps and the public schools.)

### **Running a 3Q Session: Classroom**

3Q sessions are used to two types of classrooms: government/civics and environmental/earth science. For reference, you will need the zoning and future land use maps, a map that shows the distribution of public facilities, and an environmental resources/critical features map. Of the three maps, the last map, the critical features map is probably the most important because it helps students understand constraints

and the concept of externalities (the unintended consequences on non-consenting parties).

**Step 1.** Before you leave the office, write the name of the school and the date on a sufficient number of cards to cover the class you are visiting. You can have the students do the same thing, but it saves time in the classroom and makes the “in-class” process seem less like a standardized test. Also take a few minutes and jot down three or four “ice-breaker” questions you can ask the class. The questions may be general or specific:

- What is planning and why do we do it?
- How many of you have attended a local board or council meeting?
- How many of you read the paper or watch local news?

If you are meeting with an environmental science class, you might want to write some questions that deal with specific local critical features (geology, flood plains, soils, slopes). Here in the bottom of the Allegheny range, almost all of my sessions started with a question about karst: “What is karst and why do planners need to know something about geology?”

**Step 2:** Hand out the 5”x7” index cards to each student and to the teacher and ask them to write down any three questions they have about “x.” I use “x” here, because your subject or the breadth of your subject may vary. Make sure you know your comfort zone and focus the initial question to play to your strengths and your knowledge base. You will still get questions you probably will not have a ready answer for, but it will help to minimize the number of times during the course of the class that you have to say “I don't know...”

Write down three questions you have about \_\_\_\_\_.

- Planning and Land Use in the (county/town/city/region);
- Planning and Government;
- Planning and the Environment;
- and the list goes on.

**Step 3 (In conjunction with step 2).** Spend a couple of minutes explaining the process and talk about what will happen to the questions they write that do not get answered in the class. See **Step 5** for a longer explanation.

**Step 4.** The process, itself, can be handled two ways: 1) take questions from the floor, or 2) collect the cards and select the questions you are reasonably comfortable answering. Most classes last approximately 50 minutes. If you subtract out the “administrative” and “bedlam” times, you are left with roughly 35 to 40 minutes for the question and answer period. Realistically, you probably won't answer more than 15 to 20 questions, but try to make sure that you answer at least one question on each card. If you are taking questions from the floor, start with the students who either look completely bored or pained. You want to get the “fringe” students involved in the discussion early on. It will drive the level and quality of discussion.

**Know your audience.** Remember that you are talking to teenagers and that you want them to have a somewhat better understanding of and engagement in planning when they leave the classroom. To do this, you have to create a connection with them in fairly short order. Generally, humor is the best way to get their attention and keep it. What ever you do, don't lecture. Twenty-five years ago, when I first started using the 3Q process, the biggest challenge was to keep their eyes from glazing over; now it is keeping them from reaching for their favorite gadget and form of social media. Teenagers being teenagers, they will give you the benefit of the doubt for about three

minutes (the approximate length of an average youtube video). To be honest, they are a far tougher crowd now than they were two decades ago, but if you can get and keep their attention, there are enormous payoffs over the long run--especially if you are talking to juniors and seniors. It is a good bet that within ten years of graduation, they will be your department asking for something. Finally, lose the tie. If you are inclined to dress up or wear a suit, make an exception for the day you visit a classroom. As with their parents, kids see suits and ties and think "bureaucrat."

*Step 5.* The hardest, but most necessary, part of the 3Q process happens after you leave the classroom. Take the time to actually answer all of the questions that were written down but not asked and either send the written responses to the teacher or post them online and provide the students with the URL. While it is a bit time consuming the first couple of times you spend an afternoon writing responses, it has three benefits: 1) it gives you a chance to build a database of questions and answers for future use; 2) it gives you a chance to broaden your own knowledge base; and 3) it tells you where the knowledge gaps are in the broader population. Kids generally ask questions or give opinions they have heard at home. Answer the questions for the kids, you will answer the questions for the parents.

### **Running a 3Q Session: Public Forum or Community Meeting**

#### **Resources:**

The Organ Cave  
3Q Exercise

While much of the process is the same as the classroom-based process, changes in political winds and the tenor of public meetings has made the use of the 3Q session far more problematic. If you are in an area where the politics of planning are acutely on edge, do not take questions from the floor. Adults are far more likely to write "gotcha questions" or questions that are designed to side-track the session than are students, so maintaining some control over the questions you choose to address during the community meeting is a good idea.

That said, if you are meeting with a group with whom you have a reasonably high comfort level, taking questions from the floor will send the message that you trust them and you believe the trust will be reciprocated. Unfortunately, there are no guarantees.

#### **The Meeting Box**

Public input processes take time. Given that they are rarely held during business hours, public input sessions spell extra time beyond the required hours of the day. One way of cutting down on the amount of time required to set up and dismantle public input meeting materials is to create a "meeting box." A typical meeting box includes:

- Colored pens (to be used with flipcharts);
- Ink pens or sharpened pencils;
- Colored pencils (if you are doing a map project);
- Name tags;
- Ruler or straight-edge;
- Legal pad;
- Stapler;
- Rubberbands;
- Paper clips;
- Drafting or masking tape; and
- 12 or so bandaids (you would be amazed at the number of paper cuts that occur during the course of a meeting.)