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Questions Surrounding Questions: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Use of Research Questions in Academic Writing

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Monday through Thursday, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown is mandated to set aside an hour in which he publicly responds to questions posed by members of Parliament. Government backbenchers strategically write questions that, given their party, will allow the Prime Minister to either discuss the virtues of a policy or attack it. Hence, even the most seemingly innocuous questions can be laced with rhetorical intent. However, these leading questions often appear in places we least expect them—like research questions. Surprisingly, the use of research questions in academic writing has received almost no scholarly attention. In fact, the only study that has been conducted on research questions is a 1994 article that was limited to medical journals. But more recently, Kenneth Hyland performed a study of all forms of questions, found across multiple types of academic texts, and discovered that questions are most commonly used by authors seeking to lure the audience to the author’s viewpoint, limiting the potential for critical evaluation. Unfortunately, his study failed to examine the role that the research question plays in this discourse. The fact that researchers have begun to question the potentially unethical use of questions in research, and that the research question has become an increasing presence in all scholarly rhetorical criticism— including 99% of the speeches you will see this year— the use of the research question in a venue that has traditionally avoided it merits investigation. So in order to explore the objectivity and academic effectiveness of research questions in our field, I performed a content analysis of top rhetoric journals using Hyland’s method for analyzing questions found in the article “What do they mean? Questions in Academic
Writing,” published in the 2005 edition of *Discourse Studies*. Because Hyland explores the definitive characteristics of different types of questions as they appear throughout the genre of academic texts, it is perfect for our analysis. So we’ll begin by examining Hyland’s methodology, then we’ll apply it to some leading communication journals, and finally, we’ll draw some critical conclusions.

Hyland conducted an analysis of over two hundred academic texts, including journals from eight disciplines, fifty-six textbook chapters, and sixty-four undergraduate papers. After doing so he set forth a methodology for analyzing questions in academic writing. He argues that one can understand the functions and impacts of questions by placing them into one of two categories: (1) questions that frame the discourse and (2) non-framing questions.

First, questions that frame the discourse set the agenda for the discussion. They are written with not just a question in mind, but also with a foreknowledge of the answer. Authors utilize authoritative discourse, distinguishing themselves as the expert, and the audience as the novice. While these questions engage the audience, they cast the author as the superior in a one-way transfer of knowledge. For example, a philosophy textbook asked: “Think of yourself as an obvious example of a person. What are the characteristics that make you a person?” By adopting almost patronizing language, the author asserts themselves as an expert with the answer and can therefore manage the structure of the argument and the flow of information. In other words, the framing questions are like a road map, guiding the audience from one thought to the next, while discouraging any detours—intentionally restricting other possible interpretations of the research.

Second, whereas questions that frame the discourse rely on the pedagogic model of expert-to-novice knowledge transfer, non-framing questions seek to create a more egalitarian
relationship. Hence, these questions are not asked of readers, but instead, on their behalf. For instance, a biology article asks: “Given the complexity of mycorrhizal functioning in the real world, is there any hope of understanding these systems well enough to manage them in forestry and agriculture?” Notice, the author does not assert superiority over their audience, but instead, draws upon the audience’s own knowledge of the discipline, recruiting them as an equal partner in a collaborate intellectual effort.

Now that we understand Hyland’s methodology for categorizing questions, we can examine the question’s role in communication journals. I’ve spent the last year conducting a content-analysis of roughly five hundred journal articles published in five leading communication journals over the last five years. (This is why I sat alone at lunch in grade school.) All research questions found were then coded according to Hyland’s respective categories.

First, questions that frame the discourse, or set the agenda for discussion. These represented 92% of the total questions found. Broadly, they represented a clear effort to lead the audience to a specific, biased conclusion. An article in the November 2007 Western Journal of Communication, included the research questions: “Why did Bush's speeches fail as constitutive rhetoric?” and “What rhetorical opportunities are afforded by the failure of constitutive rhetoric?” Through their strategic use of language – namely the repeated use of the phrase “failed rhetoric” – the author implants in the audience members' minds that Bush’s speeches were, in fact, rhetorically flawed before engaging in the research. This means that interpretations of what constitutes “failed rhetoric” have been restricted to the author’s definition, limiting the potential for discourse.
Second, non-framing questions. These were far less common, representing 8% of the total sample. One article in the May 2005 Quarterly Journal of Speech, asks: “But how does one account for the dismissiveness of more recent readings of earlier research on ideology? And how are we to understand our own, contemporary “terministic screens” when we approach this literature?” Rather than portraying themselves as superiors, these authors use inclusive language, framing their research questions as invitations for the audience to join their quest for answers, rather than be informed by the authors themselves – maintaining an egalitarian relationship that allows the audience to question the author’s findings.

Now that are familiar with Hyland’s categories of research questions, and have examined how rhetorical scholars employ them, we can examine three critical conclusions regarding academia and what this means for us as forensicators, who posit our own research questions every round.

First, these findings suggest the research question is oppressive in nature. In my study of the communication journals, the vast majority of the research questions were found to be framing questions that restrict critical thought. While Hyland notes research questions can sometimes be necessary for guiding an audience, specifically in scientific studies or when teaching an audience that is less experienced with the subject matter, because rhetoric journals are generally intended for academic peers, the discourse occurs between intellectual equals. Therefore, any attempt by authors to control the discourse with a research question is unnecessary, if not insulting, to their colleagues – creating an atmosphere that discourages critical thought.

Second, while oppressive research questions exist, most rhetoric journals don’t subscribe to research questions at all. In fact, when conducting the content-analysis I was shocked to discover that less than 1% of the journal articles analyzed contained a research question. More
often, authors would employ a hypothesis, which clearly states their intent from the beginning, implicitly inviting the reader to evaluate the arguments based on their own knowledge, without either side having unique authority. This is reminiscent of the Socratic Method, in which individuals engage in dialogue, assisting each other in finding answers. Hence, in promoting the Socratic Method amongst those who read journals – namely, higher level students and professional academics – rhetoric journals without research questions may be the most effective at advancing esteemed academic principles.

Finally, forensics norms have taught us to expect research questions; competitors, trying to meet the competitive expectations of the event, will often craft a research question as an afterthought, when it should have been the guiding force for the research. In his article “Forensics in the Year 2000: Competition v. Educational Values,” Hamm Durell warns that we must be wary when the competitive side of forensics overshadows its educational goals. If we want to ensure forensics provides an educational experience, we need to re-evaluate the use and effectiveness of the research question. I’m not saying we have to abolish the research question altogether, but if we do use questions, we need to make sure they are used ethically. Or competitors can use a hypothesis, which accomplishes the same objective as a research question, but engages the audience more ethically. Regardless, we need to re-evaluate the research question to ensure that forensics is more than just how we spend our weekends, keeping in mind that many of us are preparing for academic careers.

So today, we examined Hyland’s methodology on questions in academic text, applied it to the use of research questions in prominent communication journals, and finally drew some critical conclusions that force us to re-examine the role of questions in rhetorical research in and out of forensics. We as members of the forensics community comprise some of the brightest
minds in the country and much of the future of communication research. Therefore, it is our responsibility to question our own use of questions.