

Green-light Questions

Questions can be keys that open a door to a person's life or beliefs. Or, they can act as padlocks, barring you from discovering the information and stories you need to do your job. Good questions make the difference between an answer and a quotable answer. Reporters just starting out often blame taciturn sources -- stonewalling police, tight-lipped lawyers, paranoid neighbors --- when the questions they ask may be the problem. Be sure you're asking green-light questions.

A **green-light question** is an open-ended question. It can encourage the subject to provide expansive, amplified responses: anecdotes, opinions and context. "How did your family react?" or "What qualifies you to run the city?" are green-light questions.

Yellow-light questions are closed-ended and permit a yes or no answer. Use these with caution because you probably won't get a quotable answer and may miss out on some information a subject would have otherwise divulged. Practice turning yellow-light questions into green-light questions. For example, "Are you a racist?" could become "How would you describe your attitude toward blacks?"

Overly complicated questions, or questions that use loaded language, are red-light questions. Stay away from them.