

## Category Review: Basic Critical Questions

The questions in the center of your Precision Questioning Toolkit form the heart of critical thinking: How do we know something is true? Whether the issue is a financial statement, a policy position, or a scientific research paper, Basic Critical Questions, or BCQs, can be made more precise in two main ways.

### Data Questions

How often do you hear people make assertions like this that are begging for close analysis?

“Several of our partners have told us we need to rework those contracts.”

You could ask “How do you know this is true?” but that’s a rather unfocused question. A strong Precision Questioner is not going to review *any* contract without first looking into the *data*. Data questions not only focus on the data collected in support of a claim, they also take into account the methodology that was used in collecting the data. In this case, data questions include:

- Have we asked *all* the relevant partners about the contracts? If not, have we asked a well-chosen *sample* of partners? How was the sample chosen?
- How recently did we ask them? Could their views have changed?
- Were they all asked the same set of questions?
- How were they asked: by email, on the telephone, a paper survey?
- To whom did we speak at each partner’s office? Was it always the person with the deepest understanding of the contracts?

Questions like these quickly expose strengths or weaknesses in the data supporting the claim.

### Source Questions

The second main set of *precise* BCQs consists of questions about the source of the information. Specifically, these questions examine the *credibility* of the person or organization that is collecting and analyzing the data. Consider this statement:

“According to Benclare Consultants, we can expect a 14.2 percent increase in global biofuel production in 2008.”

Data questions would focus directly on the numerical information and statistical inferences that are behind the “14.2 percent increase,” whereas source questions focus on Benclare Consultants and their credibility. Some examples:

- How long has Benclare Consultants been analyzing the biofuels industry?
- Who paid them to conduct this research?

- Who uses their research?
- Historically, how accurate has Benclare been in predicting the growth of biofuels production?
- Do they tend to offer best-case, worst-case, or likely-case analyses?
- How wide is their reach? In which countries do they have offices in which data is gathered? (Notice how this question overlaps with data questions.)
- Have they worked in other sectors of the energy industry? What is their track record making predictions in those other areas?

**BCQ Planning Tool**

Think about the projects on which you are currently working. Are you ready to make a recommendation on a decision or offer a solution to a problem? On what data are you relying? On whose opinions are you relying? You might as well BCQ everything now. These aren't the kinds of questions you want to be considering for the first time in response to pointed questions from your sign-off audience.

<b>Project</b> e.g., decision, problem, product, process, milestone	<b>BCQs to Ask Yourself</b> i) questions about data, statistics, and methodology ii) questions about sources and their credibility