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BY DIANE E. TEICHMAN

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?

Specific Terms in Q&A Produce Direct Responses

For over 20 years, my work as an interpreter in thousands of legal and investigative procedures has enabled me to be both the questioner and respondent. My purpose is to serve as a telephone would, providing a word-for-word transfer of the question-and-answer process.

Over the years, I have heard many obscure responses to seemingly clear questions. The resulting frustration causes either misinformation or an early termination of the statement. In many cases, the reason for the vague responses can be found in the questions themselves. When I hear a susceptibly worded question, which can be interpreted several ways, I can anticipate the procedure heading into a nosedive.

Responsiveness patterns develop from many possible perceptions the respondent has of the procedure. Further factors affecting people's responsiveness are uneasiness with the physical setting, cultural customs and feeling despair from a personal loss or feeling imposed upon by their own attorney. Once you recognize a responsiveness pattern, you can match it with its corrective questioning form to maximize your productivity.

Cultural experiences

If you are using an interpreter, you must verify that the interpreter will not paraphrase or modify your wordings or your effort will be undermined. Respondents require an interpreter because they have spent most of their lives in a culture foreign to ours. Very few have ever been questioned by the likes of an adjuster, investigator or an attorney.

Differences in income and educational levels can unnerve respondents. If their homeland was governed by a dictatorship or military regime, questioning often meant authorized interrogations that could result in death. You may inadvertently assume the semblance of an authority figure who can hurt them. The resulting responsiveness patterns include resignation; the belief that no matter how they answer they will be judged guilty or you won't believe them and their claim will be denied. Another is fear-based withholding in which they withhold information or lie under oath, fearing that providing information will cause retaliation against someone.

Displaying disrespect for the routine procedure carried out by an authority is also a possible response. In certain ethnic groups, age sets another reliable pattern of responsiveness. Elderly male Hispanics, for example, seem to enjoy relating more than you asked for, in a whirlpool of stories, without coming close to answering the question. Through learning about the respondent's native culture, you can modify these responsiveness patterns by adjusting your wording and behavior.

A more conversational approach

When conducting recorded statements on a regular basis, it becomes a routine procedure for an adjuster or investigator. In contrast, respondents may be experiencing their first exposure to what is routine to you. I often see even the friendliest and most relaxed respondents put off by an immediate sequence of questions asked by an adjuster in a time crunch. The respondents' body language indicates this as they become withdrawn. Suddenly, as if insulted, they retaliate with non-responsiveness. A social, conversational approach can avert this problem. Introduce your purpose, but replace any monotone in your voice with a tone of curiosity. Use questions that have the wording broken down to simplistic terms. Granted, an investigative recorded statement is not meant to be a refined conversation, but you will benefit from the customary cooperation of this style.

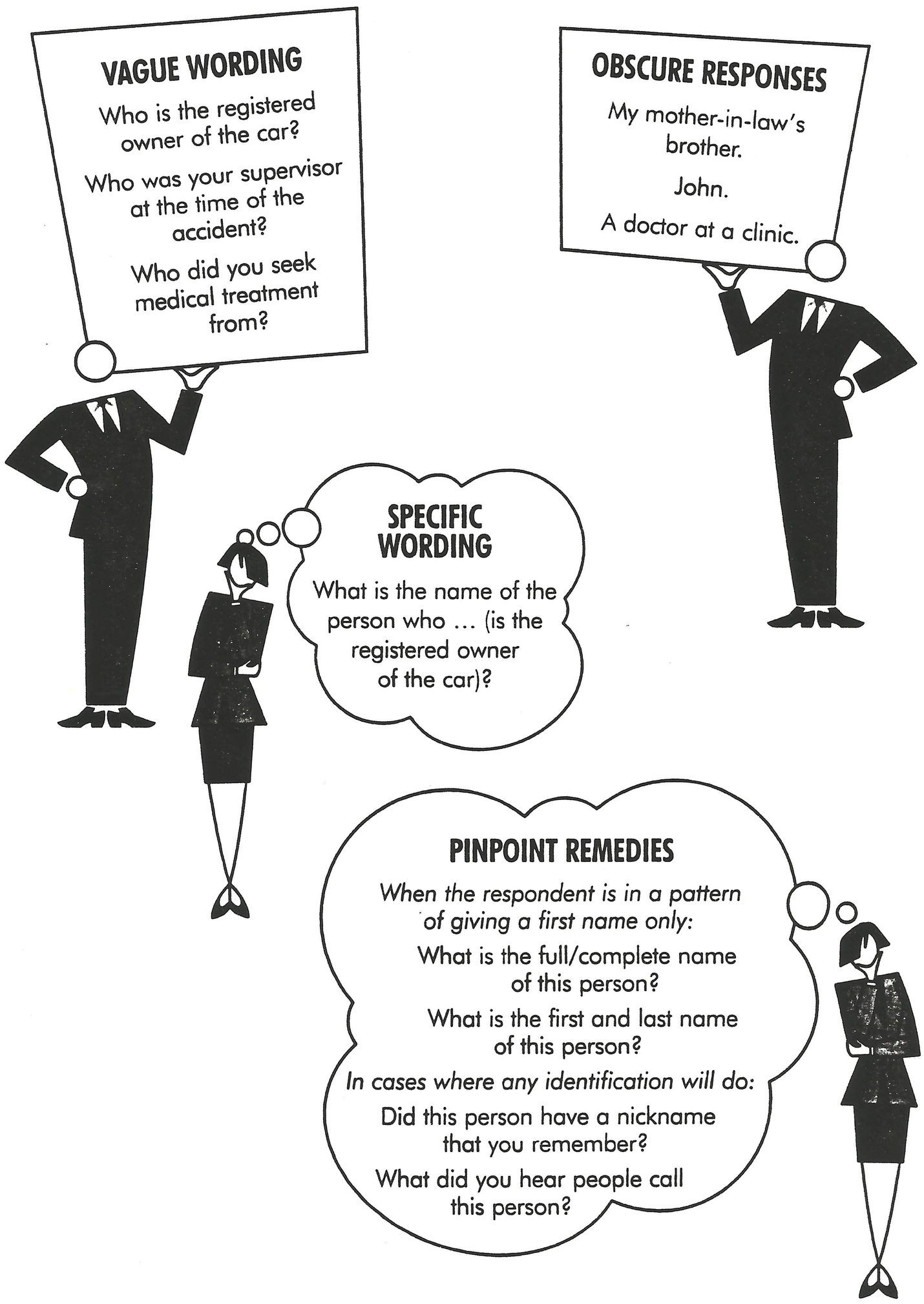
Unfortunately, the rule of relying on the basic Ws — who, what, when, where and why — can leave you wanting. People easily perceive another request in your question and respond accordingly. I see immediate non-responsiveness when these

single words are left to open interpretation. So, to save time and avoid confusion, identify exactly what you want from the beginning.

The following contains part of my collection of commonly used — but vaguely worded — questions, followed by the actual, baffling responses they have incited, some of which will probably look familiar. After each response, a more specific wording of the same question is provided to successfully repel confusion. For cat-and-mouse situations, I have also provided a few pinpoint wordings that are hard to retreat from without being obviously evasive and uncooperative. These wording tips will productively streamline your next Q&A, with or without an interpreter.

WHO: IDENTIFICATION OF A PERSON

A question beginning with "who is ..." appears that you are asking for a name. Unfortunately, the majority of the responses to "who is" are anything but a name. Unless you specify what it is you want to know about the person, you leave the respondent with a wide range of possible detours. When dealing with a list of named people, avoid lapsing into the third-person "he" or "she"; instead, keep identifying each person by name. Without re-mentioning the name you'll run the risk that the respondent is not talking about the same person you are. The result is a not-so-funny re-enactment of Abbott and Costello's "Who's On First?" comedy routine.



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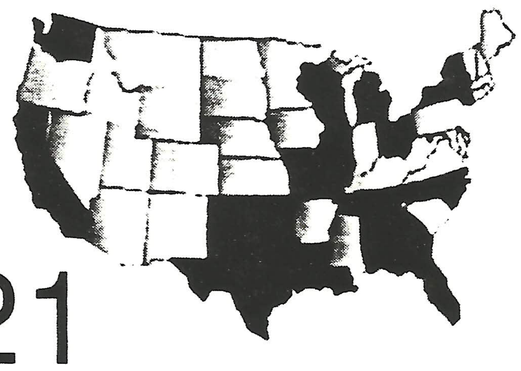
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THE 'DODGE BALL' GAME PLAYED WITH 'WHERE'

Even identifying a location can be relative — just ask three different people directions to the same place. Some people respond to a question of where a place is by telling you how to get there. It is common for people who don't speak the language of the host country to find their way around by association or reference points. When you want a specific address, or at least specific street names, you will need to word your question accordingly.

When you want to know the direction of travel, a destination or the location where the trip started, the question word "where" becomes too open-ended. Replace it with your target information; instead of "Where were you going?" ask "What was your destination?" Otherwise, the response may be true and correct, but it will not tell you what you need to know. Since ordinal directions — east, west, north or south — usually require claimants to have aptitude in geography, they are rarely used outside of investigative professions, and it's best not to refer to them.

VAGUE WORDING

Where was the doctor's office?

Where did you live before?

Where do you work?

Where did this accident happen?

OBSCURE RESPONSES

Not far.

At some apartment where my uncle lives.

In a construction company.

Near a gas station; one with a tiger.

SPECIFIC WORDING

What is the address of...?

What is the street address of...?

What is the location of...?

PINPOINT REMEDIES
(When they don't know the address)

How would I get there from your house?

Please tell me the name of a cross street before this place and one after.

Was this a residential or a commercial area?

HOW: MEANS, MEASUREMENT, METHOD

Here is an example of how easily the same question can have more than one answer:

"How were you injured?"

"I broke my arm." "Suddenly." "When I fell." "Critically." "In the accident."

The question word "how" has many different definitions. In the example above, the confusion lies in the two interpretations of the question. One is the nature of their injury, as in "What parts of your body were injured?" and the other is how the injury happened, as in "What happened to you, in the accident, that caused you to be injured?"

Avoid confusion; replace "how" with a request for precisely what you want to know.

VAGUE WORDING

How did this accident happen?

How do you know this person?

How did you get to the doctor's office?

OBSCURE RESPONSES

In a frightening manner

Enough to like them.

I went down Park Street and turned left on Main.

SPECIFIC WORDING

What were the events that led up to this accident?

How and when did you meet this person?

What form of transportation did you take to the doctor's office?

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DISTANCE

Distance is not naturally measured the same by all people, which allows for responses that are impressions. People who don't need to measure distance in their daily lives have little experience measuring in specific terms like feet, inches, car lengths and even miles. Many non-English-speaking respondents use the metric system. To direct their focus on measuring the distance, use the word distance. The wording "how far" already suggests an extreme distance.

VAGUE WORDING

How far was it between your car and the other car?

How far were you standing from that machine?

How far were you going?

OBSCURE RESPONSES

The normal space.

Just close enough to hear it.

Not all that far.

SPECIFIC WORDING

How much distance was there between your car and theirs?

What was the distance, in feet or inches, from you to the machine?

What was the distance that you were going to travel?

PINPOINT REMEDIES

What was the distance, in car lengths, between your car and the blue car?

Tell me how many cars would fit into the distance between your car and the blue car.

What was the distance, in miles, that you were going to travel?

TIME DURATION

VAGUE WORDING

How long did you go for treatment? (Two comprehensions)

How long were you trained?

How long were you standing there?

The question of how long a routine procedure or event lasted attracts irrelevant evaluations. An accounting of the time is rarely given in unprompted settings. Unless an impression of time is acceptable, the most direct approach should be used. Using the word "time" in the question helps to encourage a calculable measurement. (Tip: The wording "how long" implies a long time.)

Dates mean more to adjusters and investigators than the unassuming respondent can imagine. If you need dates — at least approximate ones — and you want to save time, request a month, day and year. To avoid possible objections, include the wording "if you can remember." When you need to identify a period of time, it helps to note occurrences in their life or during the year that the respondent can use as a reference point.

OBSCURE RESPONSES

It seemed like forever.

Whenever someone would train me.

Until there was nothing left to see.

SPECIFIC WORDING

How much time did you spend on each individual visit to the doctor?

How much time altogether did you spend going to the doctor?

How long were you in training before working on your own?

Tell me how much time, in minutes or hours, that you spent watching this?

PINPOINT REMEDIES

How much time did you spend with the doctor, not including waiting, on each visit?

How much time altogether, in weeks or months, did you go to the doctor?

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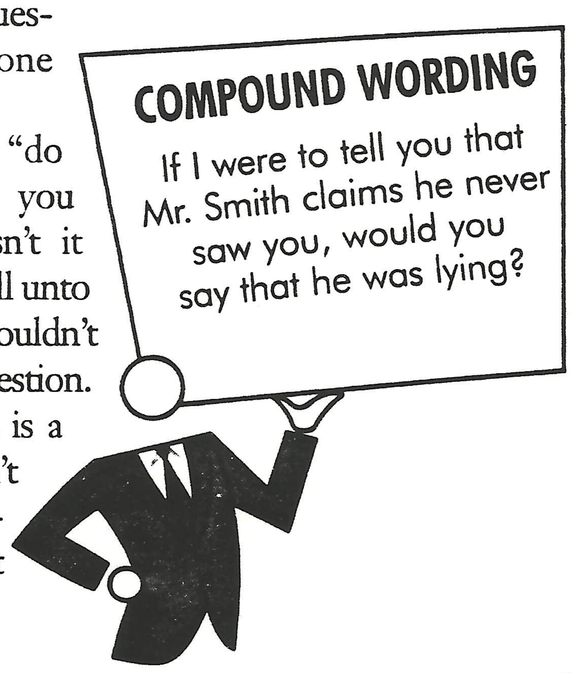
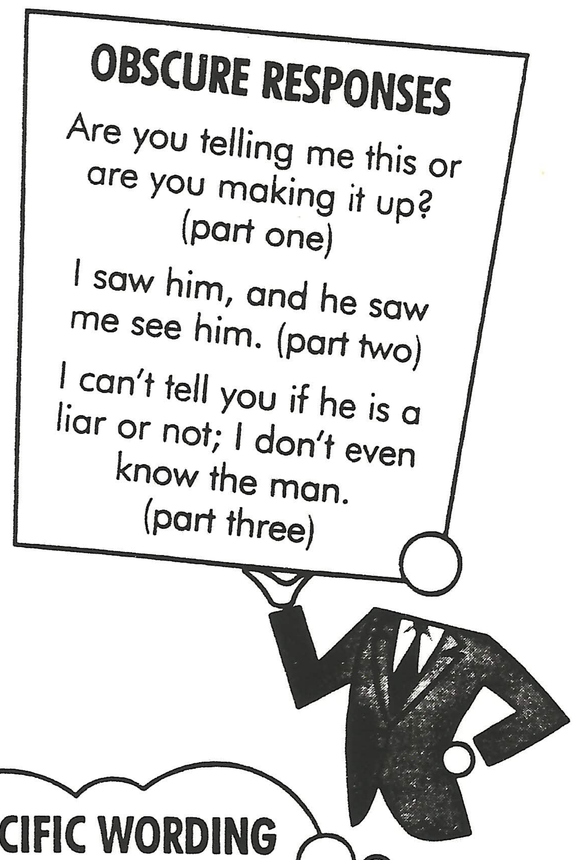
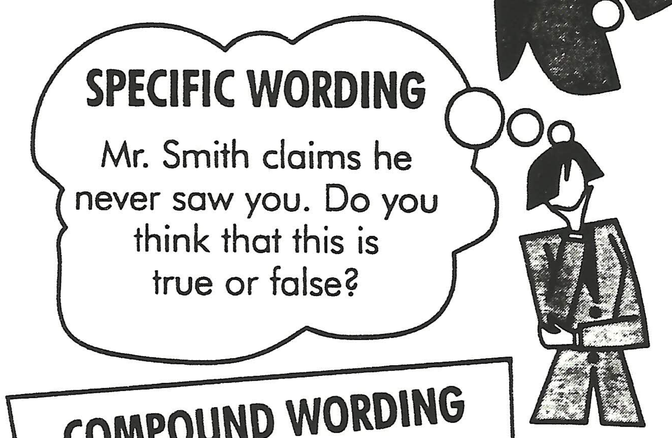
DEADLY COMPOUND QUESTIONS

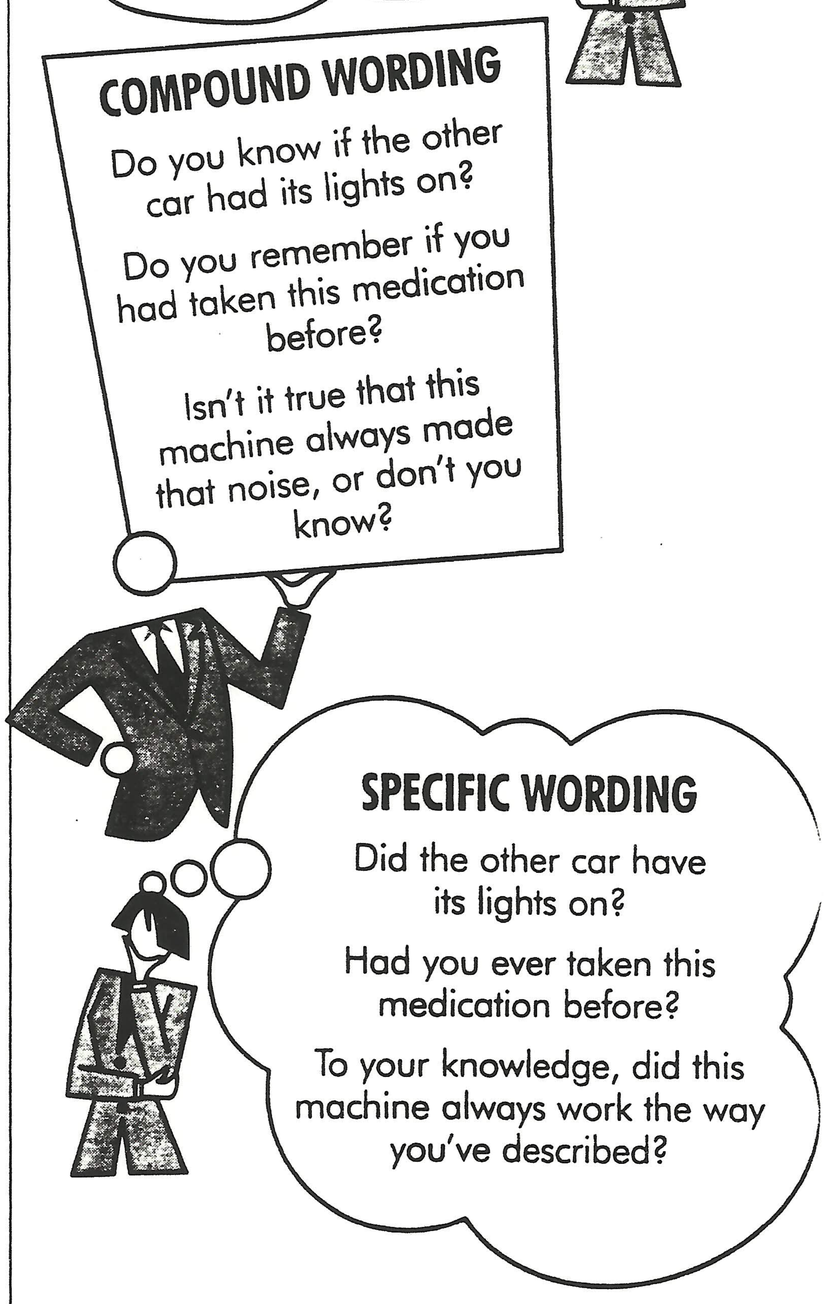
Compound questions are natural and attractive, but can bounce flat because they introduce too many debatable factors. Respondents will answer only one part of the question and ignore the rest. If the response is a "yes" or "no," you may never know which part of the question they responded to. There is also the risk that you aren't repeating the information provided verbatim, and respondents won't tell you this. Add that to the condition of a defensive respondent and you can be accused of distorting the facts. Eliminate the options by breaking up the questions and get one answer at a time.

The phrases "do you know," "do you remember" and "isn't it true" are questions all unto themselves. They shouldn't preface another question. When the response is a yes or no, you can't know which question the respondent is answering.









The knowledge of the backdrop for the respondent's potential responsiveness will prepare you for unforeseen challenges in a Q&A. From the start, the use of specific wordings in your questions successfully streamlines any investigative statement, enabling you to get that answer! ▲

Diane E. Teichman is president of Houston-based Linguistic Services, a foreign language services firm providing interpretation, translation and consultation services to the legal, insurance and investigative professions. The above article is adapted from her soon-to-be-published book, "Get That Answer!"

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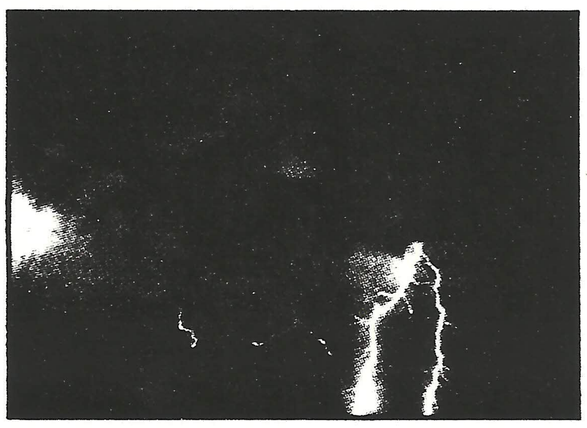
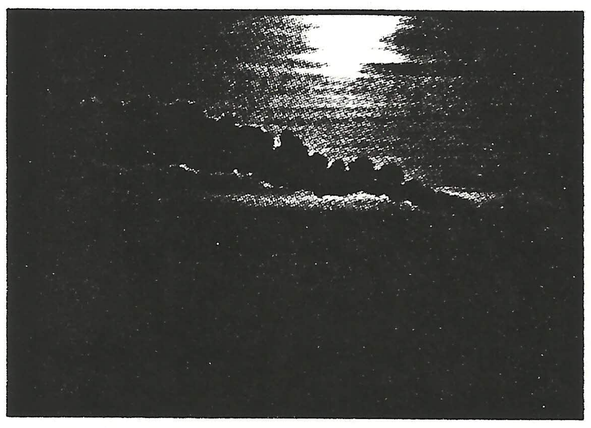
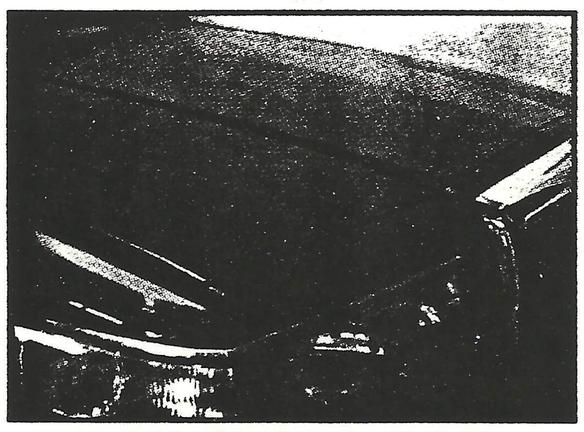

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