

## Purpose

Interviews can give you rich data about people's opinions, experiences and insights; in addition to collecting data, they can also be an empowering experience for the person being interviewed and can build relationships with stakeholders

## Key Points

- Interviews are usually semi-structured, allowing for questions to be adapted to fit the conversation
- They usually last 60-90 minutes from introduction to closing
- The key is to get people talking on a topic
- The interviewer should prompt conversation with a purpose



## What is an interview guide?

An interview guide is the outline of questions you use when interviewing participants in an evaluation. Most interviews in the field are **semi-structured** interviews. This means you have questions you plan on asking and you have an order that you expect the interview to follow. However, you do not need to ask the questions word-for-word, you can change the order of questions to fit the flow of the conversation, you can leave out questions that are not relevant or that might not be appropriate, and you can add questions that let you better understand what the person is telling you.

## What are the parts of an interview?

Semi-structured interviews usually have four sections:

- Introduction
- Opening question
- Body of the interview
- Closing

## What should be in the introduction?

The introduction should be warm, welcoming and conversational. You want to set the person at ease by letting them know what to expect. Avoid jargon and technical terms. The introduction typically includes:

- Thanks for taking the time to do the interview
- The broad topic you are talking with people about and a brief road map of what you will be asking them about in the interview
- How long the interview will last
- A plain explanation about confidentiality. This usually includes that although you know who they are, you

will not share their name with others; when you write up the report of what you learned, you will be focusing on common themes you hear across many interviews; and that if you use a quote to illustrate a point, you won't say who it came from.

- Tell them that if you ask about something that they don't want to talk about, to let you know and you will move on.
- Permission to record, if you want to record the interview. If they do not give permission, they can still be interviewed; you will simply have to take more notes.
- Check if they have any questions before you get started or if they need anything to be comfortable

### **What makes for a good opening question?**

Your opening question is a single question that is designed to get them talking about what is meaningful to them. It is focused on the topic you are studying, but you want this first question to be broad. Remember: people usually want to participate in interviews because they have a story they want to tell. So frame your opening question in a way that put out there what they want to say. The rest of the interview will unpack the details and/or focus the conversation on your purpose.

The following are some examples of opening questions:

- In an evaluation of workshops for parents and caregivers to build their skills for early childhood literacy: "Why did you want to take part in these workshops?"
- In an evaluation of parents' experiences with obtaining counseling for their child: "What has it been like to try and get counseling for your child?"
- In a study of after-school programs : "What is most important for me to know about your after-school program?"

### **What kinds of questions are effective?**

#### **Main Questions**

After they have told you what they want in the opening question, move into your main question. There is no magic number for how many questions to ask. However, a good guide is that if you are planning on hour-long interviews and you have more than 10 main questions, you are asking too much. People will give very short answers and you won't get the rich description you are seeking. If you have fewer than 4 questions, you may not have enough — it depends on the nature of the questions and how talkative you think the participants will be.

Interviews are a **conversation with a purpose** so keep the language conversational and focus the questions on your purpose.

## Probes

The key to getting rich, deep responses is to have good probing questions in mind. These are questions that you may or may not ask, but that you use when you need to prompt the person for more detail. Remember that the person you are interviewing will look to you for cues about whether they are talking about things you are interested in and how much detail you want. So they will usually start by giving you a relatively brief answer to your question. They will then pause and look at you. If you then ask some probing questions to get more details, you have conveyed: "I am listening to you. I value what you are saying. I want to hear more about it, and here's what I'm most interested in hearing." So probes should be used to **prompt deeper conversation**, not to interrogate.

Developing your probes requires that you know **what an adequate answer is**. This does not mean that you are looking for a specific answer. Rather, it's that you know ahead of time the kinds of details that will make for a full, rich answer.

For example, in a study of masculinity in adolescent boys, the following main question and probes might be used:

**Main Question:** Tell me about a time when there was a physical fight between two boys at school.

**Probes:**           Where did it happen?  
                          Who was involved?  
                          What do you know about what started it or lead up to it?  
                          Was there an audience? If so, what did they do?  
                          How did it end?

Probes are only asked if they are relevant to what you are hearing and if they are needed to fill in the blanks so you fully understand the person's experience or views. You do not ask a probe if the person has already given you the information, it's not relevant to what they have said, or it would not give you a richer understanding of what the person is talking about.

## How does the interview end?

The last question you should ask is along the lines of, "Is there anything else you want to tell me about or that you think I should know?" This gives the participant one last chance to tell you about things you may not have thought to ask but that may be important to them.

Then wrap up by:

- Thanking them for their time
- Giving them your contact information in case they think of anything else they want to tell you or they have questions
- Giving them any resources or information about your program/agency and the services you provide.

## Examples of Questions

The following are examples of question lead-ins that can help to generate rich answers:

- Tell me about what happened when \_\_\_\_\_.
- When, if at all, did you first experience \_\_\_\_\_?
- Can you tell me about the events that led up to \_\_\_\_\_?
- Tell me about what you thought when \_\_\_\_\_.
- How, if at all, have your thoughts or feelings about \_\_\_\_\_ changed since \_\_\_\_\_?
- What changes have happened in your life since \_\_\_\_\_?
- Tell me how you go about \_\_\_\_\_.
- Can you describe what a typical day is like when you \_\_\_\_\_?
- As you look back on \_\_\_\_\_, are there any other events that stand out in your mind?
- What are the most important lessons you learned about \_\_\_\_\_?
- What helps you to manage \_\_\_\_\_?
- Who has been the most helpful to you in dealing with \_\_\_\_\_ and how have they helped?
- How have you grown as a person since \_\_\_\_\_?
- What advice would you give to someone who \_\_\_\_\_?

Questions adapted from Charmaz, K. (2002). Qualitative interviewing and grounded theory analysis. In *Handbook of interview research: Context & method* (Eds. J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

### Recommended Resources

Carter, S. K. & Bolden, C. L. (2002). Culture work in the research interview. In *Handbook of interview research: Context & method* (Eds. J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

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Reinharz, S. & Chase, S. E. (2002). Interviewing women. In *Handbook of interview research: Context & method* (Eds. J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Warren, C. A. B. (2002). Qualitative interviewing. In *Handbook of interview research: Context & method* (Eds. J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.