

## Purpose

Probing shows the person you are interviewing that you are interested in what they are saying and it guides them to give you more detailed answers that are relevant to your evaluation questions

## Key Points

- Planned probes ensure you get sufficient details on the topics you want to know about
- Silent and Uh-huh probes convey that you are listening and want to hear more
- Probes for clarity make sure you understand what the person is saying and that you are not filling in the blanks with your own ideas
- Probes for meaning clear up any confusions you may have or reconcile differences between what the person says at one point versus another

## What is a probe?

Probes are questions that you have in mind that you may or may not ask and ways that you respond to what you have heard. They are used to prompt for more detail, to get a richer picture of what the person is describing, and to guide the interview in the direction you need it to go.

## Why should you probe?

When you ask a question in an interview, people usually give short answers initially. They are not sure if what they have to say is relevant to your question or how much detail you want. Your response to that initial answer will determine how deep the interview goes.

If you simply move on to the next question, you are sending the message that you want short answers. If you invite more detail, you are sending the message that you are interested in what they are saying and want to hear more.

## How do I probe?

There are five main types of probes:

- Planned probes
- Silent probes
- Uh-huh probes
- Probes for clarity
- Probes for meaning



## Planned Probes

When you develop an interview protocol, it is important 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 the kinds of details that you need to hear in order to have a full, rich understanding of what the person is describing. You then plan probes so that, if the person hasn't already told you the details you need, you remember to ask for them.

For example, if you are interviewing students about the climate in their school around violence and masculinity, 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?

## Silent Probes

The use of silence is a powerful way of probing during an interview. It indicates that you are attentively listening, ready for them to say more, and it gives the person you are interviewing time to think about what they want to say next. If you rush through the questions, you will be cutting the person off when they actually have more to say and conveying that you only want short answers.

In addition to silence, body language is a kind of probe. Use your body to show interest. Make sure you are sitting with an alert posture, are facing the person you are interviewing, and are maintaining eye contact. Even when they are not looking at you, make sure you are still looking at them with interest so when they do glance at you, you don't appear distracted. That said, don't be rigid in your body posture or be scrutinizing them with your gaze. You may feel a bit nervous at the start of the interview, so take a couple of deep breaths and settle in comfortably. The more relaxed you are, the more relaxed the person you are interviewing will be.

## Uh-huh Probes

Uh-huh probes are short verbal responses you make that convey you are listening and want to hear more. These include short phrases such as:

- "I see."
- "I understand"
- "Can you say more about that?"
- "That sounds difficult/rewarding/exciting/etc."

### **Probes for Clarity**

Probes for clarity are used to make sure that you understand what the person is explaining or describing. When we hear something that is similar to our own understandings and experiences, it is easy to “fill in the blanks” and assume our thoughts are the same as the person’s we are interviewing. A good indicator that you should probe for clarity is precisely when you think you are on the same page as the other person. If you are, the probe will confirm that. If you are not, it will unfold a whole other level of conversation and understanding.

- “Can you give me an example of what you mean by \_\_\_\_?”
- “Can you tell me about a time that happened?”
- “You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_. Can you explain more?”
- “Earlier you were talking about \_\_\_\_\_. Can you tell me more about that?”
- “You said \_\_\_\_\_. That sounds different than \_\_\_\_\_. Why do you think those are different?”

### **Probes for Meaning**

Probes for meaning are used when you are not quite sure what the person is describing or when they have spoken in generalities and you need them to be more specific. If you really don’t understand what they are talking about, don’t be afraid to ask. It will show you are interested and want to understand.

- “I don’t know much about that. Can you tell me more?”
- “Can you give me an example of what you mean by \_\_\_\_?”
- “What would it look like to do \_\_\_\_?”
- “Why is \_\_\_\_\_ important?”
- “How does \_\_\_\_\_ help/hinder your work