

Interview skills

1. What is an interview?

An interview is a research method used to acquire information. An interviewer has a conversation with a person of interest – also known as an interviewee. An interview can be used in many different situations. It is a question and answer conversation in which the interviewer collects information from the person being interviewed.

2. What is the use of conducting an interview?

The information contributes to answering a central question. For example, a journalist may interview a scientist to find out more about developments in cancer research or an architect may interview a client to learn about the clients wishes concerning a new office. An interview gives someone an opportunity to access information that would otherwise not be available using other methods like a questionnaire or online research.

3. Preparing an interview

a) *What information do I need?*

Before you conduct an interview, it is good to know what the goal of the interview is. In other words, which main question(s) are you dealing with that you need to have answered. A good start is to establish what your prior knowledge is on the subject you are dealing with. To add to this prior knowledge - depending on your personal background and experience – you can study the subject by collecting relevant literature. Depending on the interview, you can look for published interviews, especially recent ones, with the interviewee or for publications by experts in the same field that discuss the (work of) the interviewee.

What information have you not been able to collect? This is where the interview will come in. Now you can decide which question(s) will help you to collect this information and what the goal of your interview is going to be. In addition, defining a goal will help you decide which person may be suitable for your interview.

b) *Whom am I going to interview?*

Suitable interviewees can have all sorts of jobs, for example:

- Scientists
- Policy-makers
- Representatives of interest groups like environmental organizations

To determine which person is most suitable to interview, it is important to frame your question(s) as concrete and clearly as possible. Next, you think about which specific person will be able to answer your question(s). What background and experience should this person have? Which people does this person mainly cooperate with? Which knowledge does this person specialize in?



c) *Which tools do you use?*

How will you record the interview? Tools that you can use are writing pad, video camera, photo camera, or even multiple media equipment at once. Always ask for permission if you are going to use recording equipment or a photo camera! Also make sure that you tested all the tools (does your pen work, do you have full batteries for media equipment).

d) *Practical matters*

Make an appointment

- Decide if you contact the interviewee directly, via telephone or via e-mail
- Explain clearly who you are, what your aim is and why you will conduct an interview
- Explain clearly what will happen with the information that the interviewee gives. Will it be shared publicly?
- Ask for permission (see part c)
- Estimate the time you need to conduct the interview and ask how much time the interviewee has
- Decide on a location. Make sure it is a quiet environment without background noises from people or machines.

On the day of the interview

- Be on time for your appointment
- Make sure that you have all the needed materials and that all your equipment works
- If you are late or if you are unable to attend the appointment, contact the interviewee
- Keep track of the time during the interview, making sure that you are able to ask all of your questions

Assignment 1

What is the central interview question and what is the goal of the interview? Answer the following question about your interview:

- What is the central question that your interview aims to answer?
....
- What is the goal of the interview?
....
- Does the expertise of the interviewee correspond to the central question?
....

4. Designing the interview questions

a) *Structure of a semi-structured interview*

In a semi-structured interview the questions and answers are not set in a specific order, but the topic of the interview will be. Often the topics will be structured in a logical order. This structure is an important factor affecting the type of answers the interviewee will provide. Start the interview with general questions that are easy to answer. Follow through with question that are more challenging. For example, you may start with questions that require factual answers and continue the conversation with critical questions.

b) *An interview schedule*

During an interview it is useful to make use of an interview schedule. This will help to structure the interview in such a way that both you and the interviewee feel at ease. This is how you can set it up:

- Introduction

During the introduction you introduce yourself and explain the goal of the interview. Be on time and be prepared. It is also good to spend time creating a comfortable setting. Make sure your preparations are quick and without issues. Create a 90 degree angle between you and the interviewee, sitting across from each other make it too formal. Start with some small talk. You can ask about the workplace or surroundings, make a comment about the weather. Finally you can emphasize how valuable the time and expertise of the interviewee are for you.

- Core: dealing with subtopics

This is where you look for to-the-point, clear answers from the interviewee. Allow yourself enough time to think about an answer. Is it useful? Is it relevant? Is it clear? If you are not sure about an answer, use these follow-ups:

- Repeat the question
- Clarify your question
- Repeat the answer by asking things like:
 - “So am I right in saying that you think....?”.
 - “In short, your solution to ...”.
- Ask non-directional questions
 - “What do you mean by...”
 - “Can you tell me more about this?”
- Ask directional questions
 - “How did that happen?”

- Conclusion

- “Do you feel we have covered everything about...?”



c) Types of questions

Open questions

“What do you think about the results?”

“Can you tell me something about your research?”

Open questions give the interviewee an opportunity to freely discuss matters that are important to them. They can answer in their own words and decide the direction of the conversation. However, if you use open questions there is a possibility for the interviewee to (seriously) digress. The why-question is a special kind of open question that challenges the interviewee to further explore their thoughts on the subject. A why-question can come across as if the interviewee needs to justify themselves, so use them sparsely.

Closed questions

“Do you think women are treated differently in the workplace than men?”

“Did you like this book?”

Closed questions can be used to acquire specific information or to check whether you understood the answer of the interviewee correctly. These questions will either provide you with yes, no or other types of short answers. It can be easier, but relying on closed questions can give the interviewee a frustrated feeling because they have limited opportunity to share their knowledge.

d) Phrasing your questions

- Don't ask more than one question at a time, avoid plural questions.

Not: Question 1. Which background do you have, what is your current job and how many hours per week do you work?

Yes: separate questions. Question 1. Which background do you have? Question 2. What is your current job? Question 3. How many hours per week do you work?

- Ask neutral (non-guiding) questions
- Don't supply examples
- Keep your opinion in the background

*Not: what do you think about the **sacrifice** of natural habitats for economical gain?*

Yes: what do you think about the policy on....

- Avoid questions that require a socially desirable answer

Not: are you against war?

Yes: in your opinion, are there circumstances in which war would be unavoidable?



- Ask clear questions:

- 1) Use an active form

Not: How many rats are being used by you for your experiment?

Yes: How many rats do you use for your experiment?

- 2) Use singular sentences

Not: given the surprising results of your research, which energy source has your preference, seeing how the effects of greenhouse gas emissions in the long term will be less than expected?

Yes: which energy source do you prefer currently?

- 3) Be as concrete as possible

Not: what do you think about the policies on education by the new government?

Yes: what do you think about the plans of the new government to start testing school children at the age of four?

- 4) Choose words that are adapted to the interviewee

Assignment 2

Write down the following for the interview:

- How to introduce yourself
- The goal of the interview that you can mention in the introduction
- A couple of easy questions to start off the interview
- Six core questions that you ask to learn more about the subject
 - Keep the goal of the interview in mind when you formulate these questions!
 - Try to alternate between open and closed questions
- One question to conclude the interview