

Interview Guide Preparation and Use

Interview guides can be helpful to researchers who are conducting semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews. You can anticipate that each in-depth qualitative interview will last about one hour to one and one-half hours. An interview guide approach involves you in developing **five or six neutral, open-ended interview questions**, each of which is focused on one aspect of your topic. Qualitative interviews offer a means of collecting in-depth information about your topic so you will want to limit the number of questions you pose in order to enable your participant to have time to talk about the topic at length, without feeling rushed.

How do you create an interview guide? Begin by concentrating on your research question. In order to keep your research question uppermost in your mind, print it at the top of your interview guide. Then think about the critical points you would like your participants to address related to your research question. Think about Patton's six possible foci for questions on any topic (experience/behavior, opinions/values, feelings, sensory impressions, knowledge, and demographic data).

- * Draft an initial list of **OPEN-ENDED** questions that you will rewrite and refine (it often takes several iterations prior to settling on your final questions).
- * **Avoid numbering** the questions so you don't trigger yourself to ask them in the order that you have written them.
- * Ease into the interview. Try starting the interview with small talk that evolves into asking a **neutral question** that invites your participants to describe something related to the topic of your study.
- * Be sure the questions you ask during an interview **don't lead the participant** to respond in a certain way. Try to address all aspects of the participants' experience with and perspectives about the topic you are studying (positive, neutral, and negative). In other words, if you ask about challenges, also ask about strengths or positive aspects of whatever it is you are studying.
- * Be sure each question addresses just **one issue** or point.
- * Type your questions on the guide using a **minimum of 14-font size** so you can easily glance at them during the interview.
- * As your **closing question**, ask something like... "Is there anything you would like to add?" or "Have we missed something you think is important?" or "What else should we talk about regarding this issue/topic?"

How will you use your interview guide? One word: flexibly.

- You do not need to ask the questions using the exact words you have written.
- You do not need to pose the questions in the order you have written them (thus you don't number them)
- Memorize your questions and then weave them into the conversation.
- What does an interview guide look like? Here is an example:

RESEARCH QUESTION: What is the meaning and lived experience of fibromyalgia from the perspective of young adult women aged 18 to 26 diagnosed with the condition?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

- **Neutral initial question:**
One option: Please help me better understand what fibromyalgia is

 - **What has living with fibromyalgia been like for you?**
 - **How diagnosed? Signs or symptoms? Response of family, friends? Vision of future?**

 - **What is a typical day like for you?**

 - **What have you found to be helpful in dealing with fibromyalgia?**
 - **What has been not-so-helpful or a challenge to you?**

 - **What advice do you have for people living with the condition?**
 - **Young women?**
- (If not addressed: What does fibromyalgia MEAN to you?)**
- **What else would you like to share with me about living with fibromyalgia?**

Some aspects of your research question will emerge as a consequence of the conversation. In the case above, issues related to what fibromyalgia MEANS to the person will undoubtedly **emerge from the data they provide**. Asking about meaning directly may not be as productive as **listening for meaning** and then using follow-up probes and questions to gain clarity about interviewees' perspectives. You can include a question about meaning in parentheses to ensure you don't forget to ask about it if your participant had not fully addressed their perspectives about meaning by the end of the interview.

Know that **you may not need to ask many of your questions**—your participant may naturally talk about your key research topics during the course of the interview. As participants spontaneously talk about the key aspects of your research topic, you can invite them to elaborate further, clarify, or provide more detail by using conversation continuers.

PROBES and Conversation Continuers

Until you are more practiced at using probes and conversation continuers, you may want to keep some statements handy for use during your initial interviews. Probes are helpful devices to help you ensure that your participant addresses a particular aspect of a question on a sub-topic. If your participant does not mention the aspect of a particular question, a probe helps you remember to ask about it.

In the ideal world of interviewing, your participant will offer insight about some particular topic before you need to directly ask about it.

You can use motivational probes (“**conversation continuers**”) liberally during interviews in order to gain more detail, to invite your participant to elaborate on something, provide more clarity about an issue, or to help you more fully understand some process. These are statements that help you facilitate the interview. For example:

Can you give me an example of what you mean?

Please tell me more about that.

What you are sharing (or have said) is important. Can you say more?

How does your experience before that time compare to your experience now?

Tell me more about that experience (or that time)?

How do you see that (or yourself) in the future?

If you could change anything about that experience, what would it be?

SILENCE on your part is powerful. Remember to PAUSE FOR 5 SECONDS after posing a question, or using a probe or conversation continuer. Often your silence will facilitate a response from your participants since it provides them a small bit of thinking time.

Since many of us are uncomfortable with silence, practicing waiting five seconds after asking a question can be helpful. Just ask your question and then count to yourself one-thousand one, one-thousand two, and so on, up to five. Try practicing the five-second pause after posing questions to your partner or loved ones.

Remember:

- Interviews are *guided conversations* with a purpose and **with the participant doing most of the talking.**
- Avoid sharing your opinions and experiences as much as possible during the course of the interview “conversation.” Your aim is to establish and maintain rapport but also to maintain the focus of the interview on your participants’ perspectives and experiences.
- Avoid using the interview as an opportunity for you to lapse into a role other than that of researcher (i.e., educator, counselor, administrator, or someone who has expertise or experience in the topic you are studying). This is no time to show what you know.
- Your role is that of CURIOUS STUDENT, active listener, and facilitator. The role of your participant is, with your help, to TEACH you about the topic from her or his perspective. In this circumstance, it is the participant who is the expert in his or her experiences and perspectives.
- You may not need to pose some or all of your questions if, during the conversation, your participant addresses the question(s) on your interview guide.
- As the interview facilitator, use “*conversation continuers*” liberally.
- Use topical probes after you have given the participant ample opportunity to address a particular issue but has not addressed the aspect(s) of the topic that you want to be sure to explore.
- A qualitative interview is NOT a question-answer session or read-aloud survey.
- **The welfare of the participant takes precedence over any research goal you may have.** If your participant appears distressed or uncomfortable, address your observation with him or her. Remind the participant that s/he can stop the interview at any time. If s/he wants to continue the interview but still appears to be uncomfortable, you can pause or stop the interview on their behalf. Be gentle. Offer the participant another opportunity to do the interview at another time to ensure that s/he understands you value the insights offered but value his or her wellbeing above all else.
- Practice your interviewing skills with your friends, family, and loved ones.