

# Tips on conducting qualitative interviews

The ubiquity of the “interview” in contemporary society can mask what Harold Garfinkel (1967) termed the “seen-but-unnoticed” work that goes into everyday activity. For researchers, an important routine activity is the conduct of a “good” interview. In qualitative research, interviewing is one of the most popular and widely-used methods to generate data. For novices to research, it may come as a surprise that conducting an interview with a stranger is not quite as easily accomplished as one might anticipate. What strategies help with generating the kinds of data in qualitative interviews that might be used to examine research questions? Here are some tips...

## Preparation and planning

Preparation for a qualitative interview begins long before recruitment of participants and scheduling a time to talk to someone about a research topic. The planning phase begins with identifying a research topic and designing the study. Researchers must answer these questions:

- What research questions will add to understanding of the topic?
- What kinds of data might be generated and collected to inform understanding of each question?
- How might talking to participants provide information to examine the topic?
- Are interviews the most effective means of examining the research questions?
- What other methods might be used to collect or generate data? (e.g., surveys, observations, documents, examination of naturally-occurring data?)

## Selecting an interview format

It would be mistaken to think researchers use the term “qualitative interviews” consistently. This is not the case. Interviews range in terms of theorization, structure, purpose, and conduct. Interviews might also be conducted in dyads or groups. Some researchers incorporate different means of elicitation during the interview – that is, they incorporate activities in which participants generate time lines, drawings and diagrams, or discuss artifacts, images, or even video of interaction in which they are participants (e.g., a teacher might be interviewed about a lesson that they have taught that was captured on video). I’ve written much more on this topic elsewhere (Roulston, 2010).

## Recruitment of participants

In the recruitment phase, researchers indicate to participants what topic is going to be discussed. Any topic may be described in an infinite number of ways, so the outline of the purpose of a study will guide participants to think about what “category-position” (Baker, 2002) they are being asked to speak from. How one lets participants know about the topic will steer the interview from the outset, so it is important to consider how topics are explained to participants, and how participants actually orient to a researcher’s descriptions of the interview topic. For example, in some cases participants select to speak from a different category-position than that selected by the researcher.

## Selecting an interviewing setting

These days, most interviews conducted for research purposes are audio-recorded. In some cases, audio-recording may not be an option, so the interviewer will need to take notes of what participants say. It’s important to think about the background setting for audio-recording interviews, because clear and audible recordings are needed for accurate transcriptions. Noisy restaurants, then, are not the best settings in which to conduct interviews – although at times, this may simply not be avoidable.

## Rapport

Most texts on qualitative interviewing talk about the development of “rapport” – that ineffable quality in which two people enjoy talking to one another, and willingly share their hopes, dreams and ideas. In ordinary conversation, this is likely to be a two-way street, in which both speakers engage in that sharing. Qualitative interviews frequently take on an asymmetrical quality, in that the interviewer steers the topic of talk by asking questions, and the interviewee explores the topics invoked in the questions asked. The artful interviewer is able to facilitate such talk in a way that allows interviewees to feel comfortable in expressing themselves.

## The art of asking questions

Skillful interviewers talk less and listen more. For researchers who enjoy a good conversation, it may be challenging to refrain from saying too much. This is not to say that all approaches to interviews call on interviewers to be “neutral” or that they must always refrain from expressing their views. For example dialogic and feminist approaches to interview may call for more engagement on the part of the interviewer. Yet, if the researcher is seeking to understand participants’ experiences, perspectives, views and beliefs... than the most effective way to do this is to take on the role of “learner” and listen carefully.

## Following up

Quite often when we talk to one another in daily life, we provide the “short” version of events we have experienced first. It is only with further encouragement from others as listeners that we provide more detail. A similar sort of thing occurs routinely in qualitative interviews. That is, participants provide the abbreviated version when initially answering interview questions. The skillful interviewer follows up on these accounts by asking questions to elicit further detail. This is easily done if follow up questions take the form of these prompts:

- You mentioned ..... tell me more about that.
- You talked about ..... walk me through what happened.
- You said that... help me understand what was going on.

The key to these kinds of prompts is that they use the participants’ own words to seek more information. When I began conducting interviews, I was more likely to “formulate” participants’ talk. Formulations are those statements in which speakers sum up prior talk, delete ideas, and transform what has been said into their own words (Heritage & Watson, 1979). The trouble with formulations in conducting interviews is that by introducing the researcher’s formulation of what participants say, it is much likely that participants will produce just the kind of descriptions that the researcher was seeking. Because speakers orient to prior talk it is common for speakers to repeat words uttered by earlier speakers. So, although it is not necessarily wrong for interviewers to sum up prior talk in their own words, this practice can be somewhat hazardous if researchers are seeking participants’ own descriptions of events and experiences (rather than participants’ repetition of the interviewer’s talk).

Here I’ve introduced a few ideas for getting started with qualitative interviews. There is a very rich literature on qualitative interviewing which continues to grow. You will find further resources [here](#). The well-informed researcher will use this literature to guide their practice and think about issues relevant to the specific topic. Rather than think about interviews in a prescriptive way, as a list of “do’s and don’ts”, I prefer to think about interviews as context-specific and socially-situated. That is, interviews will vary widely depending on the project design, the topic, the researcher, participants and the specific cultural and geographical context in which the research study is located. It is also useful to listen to examples of experienced interviews. While not a social scientist, the host of the popular radio show *Fresh Air* in the US, Terry Gross, provides excellent examples of good practice. Having honed her expertise over some 13,000 interviews, Gross’s expertise as an interviewer has been widely recognized (Burton, 2015, October 15). Reviewing others’ interview transcripts and listening to how other interviews ask questions, as well as what happens next can be very useful for identifying practices to follow.

For those of you in the process of conducting interviews... all the best! Enjoy the process of learning from others.

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## Further reading

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