Conducting an interview

Adapted from https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/researchassignment3.html

Your interviewing is for academic purposes, not for a talk show or for a newspaper. Mainstream media often engages in confrontational or aggressive questioning in order to spark disputes, embarrassment, or scandal, which is unnecessary for genuine research. Often mass-media interviews serve primarily as a source of "sound bites," snippets of quotation that sound neat, but end up water-down or simplifying the debate rather than engaging in a sincere, nuanced analysis. You on the other hand, are seeking to understand something better as a part of your argument. You are seeking to become an expert on the subject at hand.

Types of Interviews

1. **Informal, conversational interview** - no predetermined questions are asked, in order to remain as open and adaptable as possible to the interviewee's nature and priorities; during the interview, the interviewer "goes with the flow".
2. **General interview guide approach -** the guide approach is intended to ensure that the same general areas of information are collected from each interviewee; this provides more focus than the conversational approach, but still allows a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting information from the interviewee.
3. **Standardized, open-ended interview -** here, the same open-ended questions are asked to all interviewees (an open-ended question is where respondents are free to choose how to answer the question, i.e., they don't select "yes" or "no" or provide a numeric rating, etc.); this approach facilitates faster interviews that can be more easily analyzed and compared.
4. **Closed, fixed-response interview -** where all interviewees are asked the same questions and asked to choose answers from among the same set of alternatives. This format is useful for those not practiced in interviewing.

Before the interview

Think about what sort of person would be a useful candidate for an interview. A professional who works within the field? An academic who studies that issue in particular? A published author who has already written books on that topic? **A person in the local community who has dealt with this issue in his or her personal life?** Identify that person and make arrangements to contact her. Allow yourself sufficient time to locate them

Initial contact

1. Explain who you are, why you want to talk to them, and what you wish to find out. The purpose of that interview should be made clear to the interviewees before you meet them.
2. The interviewees should know in general what sort of questions they will be asked, and approximately how long the interview will last.
3. Arrange a time to meet, a time to call them on the phone, or a date for an e-mail exchange. If you meet face-to-face, pick a public location, but one with few distractions. Let them know how long you expect the interview to take. Many interviewees will feel most comfortable if you interview them at their offices, i.e., on their "home-turf" where they are psychologically at ease.
4. Ask to obtain permission in writing to quote the respondents, to cut-and-paste e-mail responses they write, or to use a tape-recorder during the session if you will be doing any of these activities. You can type up and mail a form for them to sign, or bring it with you to the interview for their signature. I include an example below:

|  |
| --- |
| Example Form:"I [respondent's name] hereby give my permission for [student's name] to interview me and quote my responses in a scholarly research paper. I understand that this research paper will be submitted to a professor at the University of XXXX. I understand that I waive any claim to copyright to this material should the student ever publish it in a scholarly journal or in electronic format online. I understand that the author [will / will not] maintain my anonymity as a part of this interview. I hereby give my permission in the form of my signature below."Signature\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ |

5. Ask if the interviewee has any questions to ask before you begin.

Preparing for the interview

1. Plan to wear appropriate apparel for the interview. Dress a bit more formally than normal so the interviewee will treat you seriously and respectfully, rather than dismiss you as some college student who is barging into her life demanding an interview.

2. Prepare a list of questions in advance. Decide if you want an informal, chatty interview (which often puts interviewees at ease), or a more formal, structured interview (which often is more time-efficient and covers material more completely).

3. Since relying on one's memory is haphazard, be prepared to record responses in some way. Take a notebook for jotting down answers, or bring along a partner to take notes. Even better, bring along a tape recorder and ask permission for the interview to be recorded.

Meeting the interviewee

1. Explain any issues of confidentiality. Explain who will get access to their answers and how their answers will be analyzed.

2. If comments are to be used as quotes, get written permission to do so.

3. Explain the format of the interview. Explain the type of interview you are conducting, its purpose, and its nature.

4. Explain how to get in touch with you later if necessary.

Asking the questions

1. Ask only one question at a time. Don't jumble the response by trying to combine multiple questions at once.

2. Attempt to remain as neutral as possible. Often researchers suggest that the interviewer should not show any strong emotional reactions to their responses to avoid altering the responses.

3. Encourage and elicit responses with non-committal body language, such as nodding, or murmuring "uh huh," and so on. Don't suddenly jump up to take notes, or it may seem that you are unusually surprised about an answer, which may influence the subject's response to the next few questions.

4. Don't let the respondent stray to another topic, but steer them back to the topic at hand with your questions.

5. Phrase your questions in such a way as to ensure an open-ended response. Don't put words in the interviewees' mouths, but let them choose their own vocabulary and phrasing when responding.

6. Keep questions neutral in tone. Avoid judgmental wording or evocative language.

7. Word the questions clearly. Make them concise.

8. Pick pertinent inquiries. Part of this is also becoming familiar with the vocabulary of that field or topic, so you can ask intelligent questions.

9. Use caution when asking "why" questions. This type of question suggests a cause-effect relationship that may not actually exist. These questions may also invoke a defensive response, e.g., the interviewees may feel they have to justify their response, which may inhibit their responses to future questions.

Tips

1. Begin the interview with simple, factual questions that the interviewee can easily answer. This will help put the interviewee at ease, and make her more talkative for later, more complicated questions.

2. A good way to start is to ask about the interviewee's qualifications or knowledge. For example, "How long have you studied or worked on X?" "What first made you interested in X?" These questions, called ice-breakers, help establish a rapport with the subject.

3. After easing into the interview with simple questions, you can seek information about personal opinions or about more controversial issues.

4. Ask questions about the present before moving into questions about past events or future events. People have an easier time talking about what is taking place currently than they do recalling the past or speculating about the future.

4. The last question should be an invitation for the interviewee to add any final points or comments of his own.

5. If you are using a tape-recorder, check to see that it is working over the course of the interview.

That evening

1. Go over your notes and make sure you can read your writing while it is still fresh in your memory.

2. It is polite to send a thank-you card or letter expressing your gratitude to the individuals interviewed, and offer them a copy of the final paper, if they wish to have one. If your paper is later published, it is also polite to acknowledge the interviewee's assistance in a section thanking those who helped in the creation of the paper.

**Activity for next Tuesday**

Practice is key for conducting solid interviews. You’ll quickly learn what works, and what doesn’t.

Prepare 3 questions related to your research topic/theme and pose them to a person in your daily life. Consider what kind of information you want to get of your interview subjects, and how to tailor your questions to meet that objective. What is your relationship to your chosen subjects? Can you pose a question without much background information or trust building?

* listen more than you speak
* avoid yes or no questions
* eliminate cues - you want independent answers
* example: bad - how do you like the new community plan?

good - what do you think about the community plan?

* prepare your topic beforehand, both by researching and deciding questions
* make good use of probes
* enjoy the interview
* keep a record, either a written one, or recorded

After the interviews think about what went well, and what could have gone better? How did you feel? If your subject has the time, ask them for feedback.