

Introduction

In general, an 'interview' can be defined as a conversation or questioning of a person. As a research tool, interviews are conversations with a pre-determined purpose, the purpose being the research questions being studied.

The structure of interviews depends largely on the topic in question. However, it is important to be aware that interviews are normally classified as structured, semi-structured, or unstructured.

Structured interview:

This type of interview is similar to a written survey questionnaire but it is read aloud to respondents. Structured interview schedules contain a number of pre-planned questions, each of which is asked in the same order to each respondent. This type of interview is most often used for door-to-door and street interviewing. See the 'Questionnaires' guideline for more details about this approach.

Semi-structured interview:

Here the researcher works out the questions to be asked in advance, but is free to change their order or wording, give examples or add questions, depending on the flow of conversation.

Unstructured interview (also called **in-depth** or **informal** interview): This type of interview starts with a general question in a broad area of study and lets the conversation develop more naturally. Although the researcher will have particular themes of interest to explore, the content and structure of the interview is very much guided by the interviewee.

The following information applies to semi- or unstructured interviews.

Interviews are most commonly used to:

- learn how people talk about their experiences, feelings and interactions
- explore areas not previously researched
- stimulate new ideas and develop theory
- obtain information on which to base a survey
- explore previously obtained quantitative results in more detail

Interviews should not be used:

- when large numbers of the population are to be targeted
- when you seek to generalise about the wider population

Advantages and disadvantages of using interviews

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flexible way of finding out information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sometimes difficult to recruit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Verbal and non-verbal cues may help understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of standardisation raises questions about reliability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide rich data in respondents own words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Considerable skill is required to probe respondents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to target 'hard to reach' groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The open-ended nature of responses may make interpreting results difficult

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Useful for sensitive or embarrassing topics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The researcher as interviewer may influence responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid imposing categories or limited choice of answers on respondents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time-consuming

General advice on planning and undertaking interviews

It is important to plan every stage of the interviewing process before actually carrying out interviews to ensure that they meet the aims of the research.

Interview schedule

Before going into any interview situation it is important to have your interview schedule prepared. Interview schedules should normally contain the following:

- A statement on how the interviewer should introduce the research and explain any ethical issues identified
- A brief account of how to explain a particular question or group of questions
- The questions to be asked (word for word)
- Prompts and probes for each question and suggestions as to how they may be used
- Reminders to thank participants for taking part, suggestions about how to end the interview

Prompts and probes

Prompts are used to illustrate parts of a question, to give examples when a question is not clearly understood or to encourage interviewees to think about a wider range of issues.

For example:

Question: How easy is it for you to get to see your doctor?

Prompts: Access to building/ appointment system/ waiting times

Probes are used to encourage interviewees to describe, discuss or explore issues in more detail and should be used sensitively so that interviewees do not feel pressurised to talk about issues that make them feel uncomfortable.

For example:

Could you tell me more about that?

Could you give me example of when that happened?

Pilot testing

Interviewing is a skill that needs to be practiced. It is always advisable to pilot (do a 'dummy run') the interview before undertaking the real thing. Piloting generally serves two purposes. Firstly, it allows the researcher to become familiar with the interview schedule and, secondly, it allows the researcher to improve their performance by practicing each part of the interview.

Length and timing of interviews

The length and timing of interviews depends on the topic of the research and on respondents' willingness to talk. On average, interviews normally last between 45 and 90 minutes. It is not advisable for interviews to go on longer, because whilst some respondents may be happy to talk for long periods, concentration may start to lapse after about an hour. If an interview must go on longer than this, you should offer respondents the opportunity to have a break part-way through.

Recording data

Researchers generally have two options when it comes to recording interview data. The first is to take detailed notes and the second is to record the conversation electronically. While there are advantages to both, it is usually advisable to record interviews so that you can recall what has been said after the interview without having to struggle to get all the interviewee's words down on paper as they speak.

Recording produces a more accurate and detailed record of the conversation. However, while recording is preferable, not everyone will want their interview to be recorded in this way. You must be sensitive to interviewees' wishes and ask permission to record the interview before it begins.

Where to interview

Where an interview takes place can make a significant difference to the quality of information collected. Always try to avoid conducting interviews in busy, noisy social spaces such as pubs, clubs or leisure centres unless it is possible to find a quiet place within them. When arranging interviews, remember your own safety and never arrange to interview people you do not feel comfortable with or agree to meet strangers in places where you feel vulnerable. If you have to arrange an interview away from your normal place of work it is advisable to let someone else know where you are going, who you are meeting and how long you expect to be, so that they can raise an alarm if you fail to return. (See 'Researcher Safety' guidelines for more information).

Analysis & reporting of data

There are various ways of analysing interview data. However, what is important is that you adopt a systematic approach. In most cases, analysis will involve 4 main stages which are interconnected and repeated. These can be summarised as:

1. Reading or listening to interviews
2. Identifying words, phrases or issues that recur
3. Selection and organisation of themes
4. Writing up and drawing conclusions

The final report will normally contain direct quotes from interviews to illustrate the themes or issues raised. (See 'Analysing and reporting qualitative data' guideline for more information).

Costs

Interviewing is a time-intensive and costly activity. The overall cost obviously depends upon the number of interviews carried out and the number of researchers involved. Having interviews professionally transcribed verbatim will increase the cost significantly. Always budget for an appropriate period of time for data analysis and writing up.

Level of difficulty / training required

Effective qualitative interviewing is a specialist skill and should not be confused with other types of interviews where respondents are encouraged to provide information such as recruitment or social care interviews. In research interviews the researcher role is to encourage people to talk about their experiences while the researcher remains objective i.e. not leading participants. If you are considering undertaking qualitative interviewing, it is advisable to attend some specialist training in advance – please contact us to discuss your requirements.



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Ethical considerations

Before undertaking any type of research you should consider the ethical issues involved. Nowhere is this more important than when undertaking semi- or unstructured interviews, where the researcher has reduced control over the issues that are raised. You will need to give considerable thought to the psychological well-being of participants before and after the interview and be prepared to deal with issues or seek advice if the interview has raised sensitive material for respondents. For more information regarding ethical issues please see the 'Ethical issues in research' guidelines.

What next?

If you would like to know more about this topic or any other aspect of research or consultation, please get in touch:

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