

48 Interviews

Interviews are a fundamental research method for direct contact with participants, to collect firsthand personal accounts of experience, opinions, attitudes, and perceptions.

Interviews are one of two methods of survey research, the other being questionnaires. Interviews are best conducted in person so that nuances of personal expression and body language are recognized in conversation, but they may be conducted remotely by phone or using social media.

Interviews may be structured and follow a script of questions, or relatively unstructured, allowing for flexible detours in a conversational format. However, even in unstructured interviews, the researcher typically has a guiding set of topics that he or she hopes to address in the session. Unstructured interviews have the advantage of being conversational and more comfortable for participants, but rely on the researcher to guide the session and collect the necessary information within an allotted time. Structured interviews may be perceived as formal and impersonal, but are easier to control in terms of questions and timekeeping, and are easier to analyze.

Questions asked during interviews will vary depending on the nature of the design inquiry. If the research is designed for exploratory purposes, then the unstructured format and flexible diversions are fine. However, if designed for more rigorous purposes where consistency across sessions is required, questions should be read exactly as scripted by each interviewer, to avoid the introduction of subtle bias or altered interpretations by the researcher or respondent. In all forms of interviews, the researcher needs to be personally sensitive and adaptable, yet organized and responsible in adhering to the protocol of the session.

Targeted audience is another way to distinguish types of interviews. For example, stakeholder interviews focus on information from specific roles or people who may have a vested interest in the particular inquiry. Key informant interviews concentrate on people who have specialized or expert knowledge to contribute. Interviews may also be conducted individually, with couples, or with strategic groups. Paired or group interviews are efficient and often provide more natural conversation, with participants reminding or challenging each other about details and history. However, the researcher must also be aware of the undue influence that one person can have over another, and find ways to moderate the risk of dominated interviews or conversations.

Interviews are often one component of a research strategy utilizing complementary methods such as questionnaires or observations, to verify and humanize data collected using other means. Interviews can be made more productive when based around artifacts, the inspiration behind integrated methods such as touchstone tours, personal inventories, and picture cards.

Further Reading

Kuniavsky, Mike. *Observing the User Experience: A Practitioner's Guide to User Research*. San Francisco, CA: Morgan Kaufmann, 2003.

Behavioral Attitudinal	Quantitative Qualitative	Innovative Adapted Traditional	Exploratory Generative Evaluative	Participatory Observational Self reporting Expert review Design process
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