



Interviews are a means to gather in-depth information around a topic. They are particularly useful for obtaining multiple points of view, interpretations of events, and the story behind participants' experiences. The questions you ask shape the depth and breadth of the responses. The responses given become the basis for detailed descriptions of a situation, event, system, or process.

## Planning for the Interview

The planning you do prior to interviewing strongly influences how useful the interviews will be in answering your inquiry questions. The items listed below address the purpose and format of the interview, as well as logistical issues.

1. Clearly articulate the purpose of the interview and what inquiry issue/question is to be addressed from the information gathered.
2. Determine the interview format. Interviews can range from informal interviews to very structured interviews.
  - **Informal, conversational interview** – This form of interview often occurs within the context of the event under discussion. The interviewer and interviewee are responding to the context so no predetermined questions are asked. The intent is to remain as open and adaptable as possible to the interviewee's priorities. During the interview, the interviewer "goes with the flow."
  - **General interview guide approach** – Using an interview guide ensures that the same general areas of information are collected from each interviewee but the same questions might not be asked of each interviewee. This approach is more focused than the conversational approach, but still allows a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting information from the interviewee.
  - **Standardized, open-ended interview** – The same open-ended questions are asked of all interviewees. Respondents are free to choose how to answer the questions, (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 than the less structured interview approaches.
  - **Closed, fixed-response interview** – All interviewees are asked the same questions and asked to choose answers from among the same set of alternatives. This format does not allow for the depth of information being

sought in qualitative interviews. Consider whether responses to these types of questions can be obtained more easily in a questionnaire.

3. Develop the interview questions. The types of questions you ask are related to the purpose of your inquiry. Depending upon your purpose you might ask questions related to what the interviewee has done or is doing in a situation, what he/she knows, thinks, and/or feels about a topic, and what he/she has observed and heard. Include background questions such as age, gender, education, length of time teaching, etc. as appropriate to your inquiry. Develop questions that are:
  - **Open-ended.** Open-ended questions allow interviewees to choose how to respond and to use their own terms to describe situations.
  - **Neutral.** Use neutral terms and avoid wording that might influence responses (e.g., evocative or judgmental wording).
  - **Clear.** Word your question clearly and succinctly. Be clear on terms that are particular to a program or situation.
  - **Individual.** Do not combine multiple issues into one question. Develop a question to address each issue.

Order your questions in a way that engages the interviewee quickly. Begin with some fact-based questions before including questions about matters that might be controversial. Do not include a long list of fact-based questions. Include questions about the present before asking about the past or future, as it usually it is easier for people to respond to questions about the present. Include a final question that allows respondents to provide any other information they prefer to add and their impressions of the interview.

Ask others, possibly other CLIP members, to review the questions to ensure that the questions are clear and will obtain the information needed to answer the inquiry question.

4. Choose an interview location that is convenient and comfortable for the interviewees and that has few distractions.
5. Acquire and test out your audio recording equipment, including extra batteries and tapes. If recording is not possible, consider having another person with you to take detailed notes.

## **Recruiting Interviewees**

Send a written invitation by letter or email with an RSVP. Personalize the invitations and explain the purpose of the interview and why you want his/her opinions. Specify the place, date and time, including the length of the interview. Attempt to limit the interview to no more than one hour.

Make follow-up phone calls to confirm the time and location and inquire about special needs (e.g., handicap access) Consider sending a reminder email the day before the interview.

## **Conducting the Interview**

1. Ensure that the interviewee is comfortable.
2. Explain the purpose of the interview.
3. Explain that participation in the interview is voluntary and that the interviewee's privacy will be protected.
4. Explain the format of the interview and how long you expect it to take.
5. Ask if the interviewee has any questions before beginning the interview.
6. Ask for permission to record the interview. Periodically verify that the tape recorder is working.
7. Begin asking your interview questions, one question at a time. Although you are following a list of interview questions, you should probe and inquire further when responses are not clear or sufficiently complete. Indicate that you want detailed responses. You might ask, "Can you walk me through it?" or "What happened next?" "Could you give me an example?" or simply, "Please tell me more." If the interviewee reacts non-verbally to some question, ask about this so that you are clear on what he/she is attempting to communicate.
8. Encourage responses with occasional nods of the head, "uh-huh's, etc. but remain as neutral as possible. Don't show strong emotional reactions to their responses.
9. Be careful when you are taking notes. If you jump to take a note, it may appear as if you're surprised or very pleased about an answer, which may influence answers to future questions.
10. Provide transition between major topics, for example, "we've been talking about (some topic) and now I'd like to move on to (another topic)."
11. Redirect the interviewee if he/she begins to stray to another topic, provides too lengthy a response, or begins asking you questions.
12. At the conclusion of the interview, thank the interviewee and tell them how they can get in touch with you later if they want to.

## **Following the Interview**

1. Verify that the tape recorder worked throughout the interview,

2. Write down any observations about the interviewee or interview. For example, where did the interview occur and when, was the respondent particularly animated at any time? Were there any surprises during the interview? Did the tape recorder break?
3. Clarify your written notes to make sense of any illegible notes and fill out any comments that are not clear.
4. Arrange to have your interview tape transcribed.

### **Analyzing Information from the Interview**

See documents entitled “Tips for Analyzing Qualitative Data” and “Activity Illustrating Analysis and Interpretation of Interview Data” in Module 5 for information on how to analyze the information from your interviews.