

# 2d – A Guide to Data Collection Techniques

## Interviews

An interview is a way of questioning someone connected to the chosen research topic. It involves more flexibility and a greater number of open questions than one might design for a questionnaire used with general members of the public.

Usually the process for an interview involves contacting a known person beforehand and asking permission to come and talk to them about a particular topic. These interviewees are usually connected to the issue under investigation – possibly someone in authority, involved in a local community group or someone directly affected by a possible change.



In some cases, the researcher may supply a sample of the questions they intend to ask so that the interviewee can prepare a response or find out the answer to particular questions. It is often the case that a set of interview questions is designed specifically for a particular person and rarely are they repeated to another participant in the exact same form.

As with a questionnaire, the wording of a set of interview questions should be carefully planned. Ambiguous questions can take the interview in an unintended direction and leading questions can sway the opinions of the interviewee unintentionally. Testing the interview on someone who does not know the aims of your study can be a good way of removing questions that could cause problems when you use it for real with the interviewee.

Generally, interview questions tend to be more open-ended and unlike questionnaires, can be expanded upon as the interview progresses. For example, the interviewee may bring up an issue that the researcher had not heard of or thought about and further, more spontaneous questions to the interviewee may result in a greater insight into an area of the study that previously had not been thought possible. A flexible approach to the questions to be asked is best and a good interviewer will change their interview plan as needed as the interview is happening rather than unnecessarily stick rigidly to their pre-written set of questions.

Before the interview you should check that the interviewee is happy for you to use their words as quotations, or alternatively, if they wish to remain anonymous. Equally, check the amount of time they can give you for an interview: some, less important questions may have to be omitted if you run out of time.



You may decide that it is best to record the interview to allow yourself to concentrate on what the interviewee is saying: it can be difficult to engage with someone if you have your head down whilst making notes whilst they are speaking. A digital voice recorder can be a good idea for this purpose, though do check with your participants that they are happy to be recorded in this way.

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**Focus Group Interviews** can be an excellent way for researchers to allow people to discuss an issue without them feeling like they are taking part in a more formal process. A focus group is a group interview where the attendees are selected by the researcher and given a set of topics or questions to discuss. The researchers themselves do not play an active part in the interview itself and instead take on the role of observer, allowing the interviewees to discuss their opinions on an issue openly. Focus groups can work well when the researcher is looking into the possible impact of a new development, such as the building of a new supermarket, that may divide opinion amongst local residents. As with normal interviews, it is important to record the interview and check that the participants are happy to be quoted or if they wish to remain anonymous in the write-up.

Recruiting people to take part in a focus group interview can be difficult as they often last longer than a normal interview and all participants have to agree to be in the same place at the same time. Some researchers may decide to pay for people's travelling expenses or provide light refreshments for the participants if the interview takes place over an extended period of time. Those that have most time to take part in focus group interviews may belong to certain demographic groups (for example students and those who have retired) and not others (for example, those in full-time work) which may mean that your resulting interview transcript only reflects a certain section of opinion rather than a broader one experienced by a more diverse group.