

Perfecting your interview questions

Interviews can be time-consuming and tricky to arrange. Once you have organised them, you will want to ensure you make best use of the opportunity to capture the narrative of the project you're evaluating. What follows are ten tips for perfecting your interview questions.

1 Don't forget why you're interviewing people, remain focused.

This might seem obvious, but return to the brief - will you get the answers you need? Additional questions might seem 'interesting' but your interviewees won't appreciate it taking any longer than necessary, and it may be unethical to probe further than necessary. You'll also be grateful of this when you later analyse your materials.

2 Share your interview questions with your stakeholders.

You may be evaluating a project as an external consultant, so the stakeholders should appreciate your unbiased approach. However, they may also like to see the questions, and give feedback or suggestions. Beware though, of them adding to your evaluation objectives or changing the wording to assert an unwanted influence on the answers. It may also be useful to include the questions used in your final report, as an appendix to remind the stakeholders what was mutually agreed as an approach.

3 Don't overwork your interviewees.

Try and use simple and straightforward wording as much as possible. If you use overly complicated language of the project's objectives, it can feel like you're asking them to do the research work, when it is the researcher's job to *interpret* from the responses and make their evaluation and recommendations.

4 Start with simple icebreakers.

Your first couple of questions should be easy to answer, and might offer interviewees the opportunity to broadly summarise the project and their role in it.

5 But don't leave your key questions too late.

If there are questions that absolutely must be answered, even if they are contentious and awkward, do not leave them too late. If an interview runs over time and you have to skip questions, make sure you can ensure these are addressed.

6 'Is there anything else you'd like to bring up?'

If you do have spare time, then allow the interviewee time at the end to speak freely. There are two reasons for this - 1. There may be questions that you didn't realise needed asking, in which case you might incorporate these in your future interviews. 2. Participants should be given the opportunity to voice their opinion as much as possible. They have offered you their time after all. Even if you don't incorporate these final comments in your evaluation report, they will appreciate being listened to.

7 Interviews are places for qualitative responses.

If you are looking for quantitative feedback or data about a project (attendance figures, funding amounts, etc), this might be better approached through a questionnaire or email, especially if this is information people will have to unearth in their own time, looking through documents. Instead, ask open, exploratory questions allowing reflection and the narrative of their project to be revealed.

8 Don't ask binary 'yes/no' questions.

In wording these open, qualitative questions, try to avoid asking anything that can be answered with a simple yes or no. You do have the benefit of being there to ask them to expand, but it's best to start with 'What was the audience's response to the project?' rather than 'Did the audience like the project?' These answers also make for better quotes in the writeup.

9 Don't ask leading questions.

The above example of an exploratory question also demonstrates the problem of questions sometimes leading the interviewee to a certain answer, asking them to agree with a statement, for example. 'To what extent did the audience enjoy the project?' assumes that they *did* and that we're just trying to pin down how much. If a project aims to target a young, local audience, rather than asking this directly, we might instead ask 'What kind of audiences did the project attract to your events?' and hope that those young people are mentioned in the response. If the interviewee doesn't mention them, it may be that they've simply forgotten, so you might tease this out with a follow up question, but it is certainly valuable if it comes out organically from a general discussion of the audience first.

10 Don't ask leading questions.

Show them to a colleague to identify any problems, or changes of wording required. They may not know about the project you're evaluating, but they will be able to work out if they seem overly taxing, hard to understand, or leading.