

Talking To People - Interviews

Asking questions

- Interviews must always begin with obtaining the permission of the person you are interviewing to use the information they are sharing with you. You must clearly explain the purpose for which the information is being gathered
- To conduct successful interviews, you need to know what questions to ask
- Begin with simple, non-threatening questions that will put those being interviewed at ease
- Interviews can be structured with specific questions. Be mindful, however, don't follow these to the exclusion of capturing other information people are offering you that falls outside these questions
- Interviews may also be relatively unstructured, i.e. more like a discussion. Remember, however, that this method, may give you insufficient scope of some your areas of interest
- Sequencing of questions is important. People should not be asked questions early on in the interview that will influence their later responses.
- Open questions require people to answer in their own words
- Closed questions provide a multiple choice of alternative answers
- Some common problems in developing questions are: complicated or confusing language, asking two questions at once, building questions on a hidden premise, asking leading questions, asking questions that are intrusive, patronising or insensitive, and asking questions that are too long.

Recording responses

- You need to be an active listener. Hear what is being said and don't modify the responses to suit your own needs and preconceptions
- Be accurate. Records responses on paper verbatim (that is, word by word). This is important even if you are tape recording the interview.
- Write direct quotes in "quotation marks"
- Write your own comments in capital letters or some other way that distinguishes them from your respondents' comments

- After the interview, read your notes thoroughly and make sure that they make sense, that nothing has been left out and that they are accurate. Changes or additions must be done straight after the interview or you will forget.

Individual or group interviews?

- Depends on the purpose and content of the interview
- Individual interviews generate deeper information but are more time consuming
- Individual interviews may be more appropriate if there are confidentiality issues to be taken into consideration
- Group interviews are more time efficient and generate responses from a greater number of people. The size of the group should be capped at a maximum of ten people for manageability.
- Group dynamics can complicate responses as participants interact to strive for consensus, or a couple of people dominate the conversation, limiting the range of responses.

References

Wadsworth, Yoland, *Everyday Evaluation on the Run*, Action Research Issues Centre, Melbourne.

Peavey, Fran (1994) "Strategic Questioning", *By Life's Grace*, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, PA, USA: 86-111.
www.crabgrass.org/strategic.html

<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/iview.html>

a more detailed description of a typical interview, and of a series of interviews.