

A Short Guide for Conducting Research Interviews

An interview is a great way to get information and insight into a research topic, and it can be fun for you and the person you are interviewing. Most people enjoy sharing their expertise, experiences, and insights if they've been given enough time to do so. If you plan to interview a child, a patient, or another vulnerable individual OR will ask for medical, psychological, or legal information, ask your professor about the ethical standards that apply to your discipline, including those relating to confidentiality and obtaining written consent to use the material gathered. The following is a step-by-step guide to conducting a productive interview.

Before the Interview

- Ask the person you would like to interview for an appointment as quickly as you can. This gives you the best chance of getting a “yes” in answer to your request because the window of opportunity for meeting with the person is the longest possible. Be courteous and as flexible as you can in arranging the date and time of the interview. It is a good idea to confirm the date, time, and place of the interview in an email.
- When you ask for the interview, be clear about the purpose of the interview, how the information will be used, and how long the interview will take (30 minutes or an hour are typical timeframes). Be clear about whether the information given will be attributed to the person being interviewed or will be anonymous.
- For a face-to-face interview, be sure to arrange a meeting place where you and the person being interviewed feel safe and comfortable. If you are interviewing a professional, his or her office during regular business hours might be a good arrangement, but other public places may also be appropriate.
- Try to arrange for a face-to-face interview, but phone or email interviews can also work. Providing written questions to get written answers is not *ideal* because it is hard to ask for clarification or to ask follow-up questions about answers that surprise you, but email interviews can be effective if you give yourself enough time to follow up with additional questions or requests for clarification.
- Research your topic and, if possible, the person you plan to interview before the interview occurs. Then you can focus your questions and your limited interview time on getting insights and information not available through other types of research.

- Prepare your questions in advance:
 - Be sure your questions are clear.
 - Unless you want a very clear or precise answer, questions that can't be answered "yes" or "no" may be the best for encouraging fuller answers, and may give you an important explanation or interesting story.
 - Try to create questions that don't include assumptions or bias. For example, "What do you think about this issue?" is better than "Don't you think that (inserting your own view on the issue)?"

- The particular questions you ask will be, of course, related to the subject of your research and should be tailored carefully to get you the information you need. For an interview of an expert, some typical questions might include:
 - Why did you get into this field?
 - What education, training, or other preparation did you need to get into the field?
 - What are you working on now and what is interesting about it?
 - What do you spend the most time doing?
 - What continues to inspire you or hold your interest in this field?
 - Where is this field going in the future? What will you be working on?
 - Is there anything else you think I should know?

- Consider whether you want to record the interview. Generally, this is a good practice because it will give you an exact record of the interview, frees you up to think about the responses to your questions rather than taking careful notes (though you still might want to make some notes), and the person you interview will be reassured that you will quote accurately. However, in a few situations, such as an interview on a sensitive subject or if you are interviewing a very shy person, recording may make the person interviewed uneasy and they may be more guarded. Generally, however, it makes good sense to record research interviews. Plan to take a your own recording device.

During the Interview

- Arrive on time and be friendly and courteous in greeting the person you are interviewing. It may be helpful to remind them of the purpose of the interview.

- Make a note of (or record) the full name of the person you are interview, along with the date, time, and place of the interview, so that you can create proper citations for the interview in your paper.
- If you are recording the interview, you must ask the person you are interviewing for permission to record the conversation, preferably with their agreement recorded on your recording device at the first part of the interview. (In some states, the law requires you to get the consent of anyone you record.) If they decline, go ahead and conduct the interview without recording it, keeping as careful notes as you can.
- Relax and have fun at your interview.
 - Having prepared your questions in advance and researched the background of your topic, you will be free to listen to the responses to your questions with greater understanding and ask important follow-up questions.
 - Respect the time of the person you are interviewing, keeping to the agreed upon timeframe or asking if he or she can continue a little longer.
 - Thank the person for the interview.

After the Interview

- Immediately after the interview, consider transcribing the recording you've made because it will help you to understand any nuances that you might have missed during the interview. If you don't transcribe your recording or didn't record the interview, go over your notes to make sure they are complete.
- Send a thank-you note or email even if you thanked the person you interviewed in person.
- Properly cite the information gained in the interview in your research paper according to your documentation style.
- Consider sending the finished research paper to the person you interviewed with a final note of thanks. As an expert, he or she will probably be interested and may become a valuable academic or professional contact.