

Tips for a successful interview

PREPARATION

DO YOUR HOMEWORK: Learn about your subject. Research before you conduct your interview. Use websites, articles, and conversations with others to increase your knowledge. That way you are not asking obvious questions the answers to which you should already know.

SET A PURPOSE: Based on what you have learned about the person and the context for the interview, identify the main themes you want to explore in the interview.

LOOK FOR SPRINGBOARDS: Identify the important pieces of background information that might provide a structure or foundation for your questions. What do you want to know more about?

CREATE QUESTIONS: Create a list of questions, but do not follow the list so closely that you are not listening to the answers. You may miss important information if you concentrate more on the questions than the answers. Remember, you are having a conversation. The value of coming up with questions is to organize your thoughts, not to provide a guideline that must be followed in order. Highlight or start with the questions that you do not want to forget to ask.

INTERVIEW NECESSITIES: Bring extra paper and pens, just in case. Also, bring extra tape and batteries if recording. Ask in advance if you are permitted to record.

PRACTICE: Go over your questions and imagine what your interview will be like. Practice, practice, practice!

INTERVIEW STRATEGIES

START EASY: Make your interviewee comfortable/relaxed and start with short, simple questions (lay the groundwork). Avoid having pre-set expectations about the direction of interview.

ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS: Ask open-ended questions and use prompts (for example, tell me about, describe, how, how so, why, tell me more). See Effective questions (Activity Sheet #5C) for more details. Avoid leading questions that seem to have pre-determined answers. Try to frame questions without too much preamble (explanation). Spend as much time as possible listening, not talking.

HAVE A CONVERSATION: Do not read a question from a page as it interrupts the flow of conversation and seems artificial. Of course, give the interviewee eye contact. Use silence as a technique to encourage the interviewee to continue on a topic. Watch the interviewee for non-verbal communication: 70% of all communication is non-verbal, so pay attention to body language and facial expressions.

Find an anecdote (small story) to illustrate a point (for example, give me an example, tell me about a time when ...). Ask the challenging questions towards the end of the interview as it may change the tone. Lastly, give the interviewee an opportunity to elaborate on a topic before ending the interview (for example, ask "What else would you like to include in the interview that has not been mentioned?").

PAY ATTENTION TO DETAILS: Write down all specific information you may forget – spelling of all names, ages, addresses, and statistics. Double-check any pieces of information you are unclear about. Ask how you might contact the interviewee in case you need clarification or to follow-up on a topic.

Effective questions

Open-ended questions

- are designed to encourage a conversation about an interviewee's experiences, emotions, attitude, or opinions.
- tend to be less leading than closed-ended questions, which encourage a limited response, a single-word answer such as 'yes' or 'no,' or perhaps even just a nod. They may not be "bad" questions but they do not provide a "springboard" for follow-up questions.
- typically begin with the 5 Ws (who, what, where, why, when, and how) or phrases such as the ones listed below. Often, they are not a question at all, but a statement meant to prompt a response.

Open-ended phrases

- What would happen if ...
- I wonder ...
- What do you think about ...
- In what way ...
- Tell me about ...
- What would you do ...
- How can we ...
- How did you ...

Leading questions

- direct or sway the interviewee to answer in a particular way.
- should be avoided because they can taint the information/evidence you are collecting and result in misleading assumptions and conclusions.

For example:

<i>Leading questions</i>	<i>Open-ended questions</i>
<p><i>Do you get along with your parents?</i> This questions prompts the person to question their relationship. It hints that maybe they do not get along.</p>	<p><i>Tell me about your relationship with your parents.</i> This direction is non-judgmental. There is no hint that there might be something wrong with the relationship.</p>
<p><i>How fast was the red car going when it smashed into the blue car?</i> This question implies (hints) that the red car was at fault, and the word "smashed" implies at high speed.</p>	<p><i>How fast was each are going when the accident happened?</i> This question does not assign any blame or make any assumptions about the accident.</p>