

## 12 Handy In-Depth Interviewing Tips

1. *Probe, Probe, Probe in a Nonalien Way:* The MOST IMPORTANT question for your interviews is probably not on your question sheet. Rather, the most important question is the probe, which is a question you ask in order to learn more about what an interviewee just told you. Probing more in depth makes the interviewee think more about his or her thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and thus allows you to learn just what is behind these things. Sometimes you can anticipate what issues will need further probing. If so, then it is helpful to write down probing questions underneath your main questions to remind you to probe further. Some specific interview probes you might use include: "Can you describe what the place looked like?"; "How did that make you feel at the time?"; "Can you give me an example of that?"; and "What did you mean when you said \_\_\_\_\_?"
2. *Avoid \$100 Words:* Don't ask questions like "What is your gender ideology?" or "Tell me about your role overload." Rather, phrase questions in a way that a generally educated respondent would understand. For instance, instead of asking "What is your gender ideology?," ask "What do you think the proper role for a woman [man] is?" or "Who do you think should be responsible for housework?" The answers to these questions will let you know a person's gender ideology.
3. *Turn a Clark Kent Question into a Superman Question:* Many closed-ended questions can be turned into an open-ended question by beginning the question with a "why" or "how" instead of "what," or by following up the answer to a close-ended question with "Why?," "Why not?," "Why do you feel that way?," "How does that make you feel?," and other pithy phrases. For example, a question like "What chores do you do on a regular basis?" is rather closed-ended. However, adding the follow-up "Why do you do these chores in particular?" or "How did you and your spouse decide who does what chore?" opens up the question for further elaboration by the interviewee. In general, try to use "how" more than "why," since "why" questions sometimes cause interviewees to feel that you are judging them. When you feel that asking a "why" question is appropriate, make sure to ask this question in as nonjudgmental way as possible (see 5 and 11).
4. *Probe, Probe, Probe:* Did I mention this? Good. Don't forget it.
5. *Do a Homer Simpson:* Sometimes you will ask questions that seem very commonsensical to your interviewees. One tactic for handling this problem is just to "play dumb." Tell them that you really don't know what they are talking about. This will make your interviewees further explain things, which will provide you with much better data. Another way you can do this is blame it on the assignment and say that even though you know what they will say, the assignment and your mean old professor and teaching assistant requires them to say it. Playing stupid is also a good way for you to not seem judgmental when asking a "why" question, since you can say that you want to know "why" because you sincerely don't understand and not because you think they're wrong for feeling, thinking, or behaving in a certain way.

6. *Battle the "You Know What I Mean?" Demon:* You may find that your interviewees will end a statement by the phrase "You know what I mean?" or some other variant. Kill this demon every time you see it. Do not allow it to kill you by nodding your head and saying "Yep." Rather, say no, you don't know what they mean, or ask the interviewees to just clarify what they mean for your sake. This demon raises its ugly head especially with questions about thoughts and feelings. This is why this demon is especially evil, because unless you have the magical ability to know what's in a person's head, then you really don't know what they mean.
7. *Order Attention Pay to:* The questions that you ask should flow logically from one to another, or you should have transitions between sets of questions to let the interviewee know that you are now going in a different direction. Asking questions that do not logically follow one another makes the interview process seem disjointed and artificial, and this can have a huge impact on the interview dynamic. Questions that seem orderly put the interviewee at ease and make the interview seem more conversation-like, and this practice will cause the interviewee to open up to you more. It will also make you seem as if you've got your act together, giving you legitimacy as an interviewer.
8. *Be a Good Ant and Don't Lead, Follow:* Try to avoid leading questions that may make interviewees feel obligated to answer in a particular way. "How did the division of housework make you upset?" is a leading question because it assumes that the person was upset about the issue. However, the question "How did the division of the housework make you feel?" gets at the same thing, but it does not lead the interviewee into a specific emotional direction.
9. *Probe, Probe, Probe:* Just in case it hasn't burrowed its way into your mind forever by now. I'm serious. Do it. You'll be sorry if you don't.
10. *Enjoy the Silence:* Oftentimes there will be "dead air" during the interview. Avoid the temptation to fill it. Give your interviewees time to think about the answers that they want to give. Don't worry. Interviewees are usually quick to tell you if they don't understand a question or if they don't have anything else to say about a topic.
11. *Don't Be a Judge Judy:* You may not agree with some or a lot of what your interviewees say. However, it is really not your job as an interviewer and researcher to morally judge your interviewees. Rather, your goal is to document, understand, and try to explain why they think and feel in certain ways. Therefore, during the interview try not to take a judgmental tone or stance toward what the interviewee says. Also remember that you can express judgment in nonverbal ways, such as how you look at a person when they give an answer or the critical tone you use when asking follow-up questions. Try to keep these nonverbal cues in check during the interview.
12. *Shut up:* Do not put words into people's mouths. Rather, let them say things in their own words, especially with questions that deal with thoughts, opinions, and feelings. Remember, if you say it, it's not data. It is only data when the interviewee says it. If you go back over an interview tape and you notice that you talk as much or more than the interviewee did, then it was probably not a good interview.