# Asking the right questions during user research, interviews and testing

## Interviewing users is an art — whether you are running usability testing, focus groups, ethnographic research or whatnot. Here are some good practices for asking users the right questions, and asking the questions the right way.

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**Formulating the questions**

Interviewing users require a lot of effort and planning. Depending on how extensive the research is, you might spend several weeks preparing for the sessions, several days talking to your users and several hours capturing and organizing your notes. You want to make sure all that effort won’t be thrown away because you didn’t take the time to properly plan your questions.

**Start by defining broader themes**

This may sound a bit obvious, but the first step is to really think through what you are trying to get out of the interviews. At this point, think about **themes** you are trying to uncover, not specific questions just yet. Make sure you are aligned with the rest of the team that those are the topics you want to touch upon when talking to users.

A few examples of what these **themes** may look like:

“Why do people shop online?”

“How do people shop online?”

“For your customers, what is the difference between online and offline shopping?”

**Break down your questions to make them answerable**

The themes above sound similar, but there are fundamental differences between the topics each one is trying to uncover. Make sure you align with your team on the broader goal of research; this can save everyone tons of time later in the project.

The examples above are **themes**, and not the actual **questions** you would ask your users — if you did, you would get answers that are just too generic or vague. The next step is to break down, for each theme, the specific questions you want to ask your users:

From:  
“Why do people shop online?”

To:  
“What types of product do you buy online?”  
“What types of product do you avoid buying online? Why?”  
“What do you like the most and the least about the checkout process?”

**Don’t ask questions that will influence the answer**

A common mistake when framing questions for the interview is to rush things out and try to get to the expected answers as quick as possible. When you walk in the room for an interview, there is a good chance you already have an idea about the answers users will give you — but don’t let that intuition get in the way of extracting impartial, unbiased results.

From:   
“How anxious do you feel when an online purchase can’t be completed successfully?”

To:  
“Try to remember the last time an online purchase couldn’t be completed for some reason. How did you feel then?”

**Ask about specific moments in the past**

Answers become less generic and more accurate when user are thinking about a specific time in the past when that situation happened. They are more likely to give you more genuine and detailed answers — and they will try pretty hard to remember that specific occasion. Make sure your question is prompting that moment in the past:

From:  
“What goes through your head when an online purchase fails?”

To:  
“Tell me what went through your head the last time you tried to buy something online and the purchase failed.”

**Prioritize open-ended questions**

Some users feel very comfortable in interviews, and will give you thorough and complete answers, even without too much prompt. But in some cases, users will answer only what is being asked. Not because they’re lazy or mean, but just because different people have different personalities.

To avoid unproductive interview sessions (or sessions that will end too soon), make sure your questions are open-ended. Give users some room to elaborate their answers, as opposed to making super binary questions.

From:  
“What was the last thing you bought online?”

To:  
“Tell me about the last time you bought something online.”

From <https://uxdesign.cc/asking-the-right-questions-on-user-research-interviews-and-testing-427261742a67>