

## Writing good interview questions

For this class we will be conducting semi-structured interviews. This means that while you will have an interview script, it should be considered more of a set of ideas to explore rather than a rigid set of questions that must all be asked or be asked in a particular order. The idea is to follow the interviewee wherever they are willing to take you and to try to get as much out of the journey as it pertains to your topic as you possibly can.

This may also mean you will need to bring them back on topic a time or two, but that is OK! Your interview should be a conversation rather than an interrogation. Let it flow but also let them do most of the talking!

What you want to do is find ways to get your interviewees to tell you a story. You want to know more about what they think, feel, believe, understand, and their attitudes concerning your subject matter. You should provide them with the cue (your question) then let them pick the direction to take it from there. What does that mean? Here are some guidelines:

1. Avoid yes or no questions.
  - a. A question like “Do you like coffee?” implies a yes or no answer. Instead consider something like, “If you could only have one thing to drink in the morning, what would it be and why would you choose it?” “What are the different ways you enjoy it?” “How does your enjoyment of it change throughout the day or year?”
2. Avoid double-barreled or confusing questions
  - a. A double-barreled or confusing question is in reality two questions asked at once that likely have different or contradictory answers
    - i. “How often do you have headaches in the morning and drink coffee to get rid of them?”
      1. These are two different questions and should be asked separately.
3. Avoid loaded or leading questions
  - a. A loaded question contains an assumption of the user.
    - i. Imagine asking “How often do you drink coffee?” without first asking if they drink coffee to begin with. If you were to ask me that question, I’d make a face and loudly exclaim “I dislike coffee and never drink the stuff!”
  - b. A leading question contains its own answer.
    - i. “How good was your coffee this morning?” already implies that the coffee was good.
    - ii. “How did you overcome the difficulty of using the coffee machine?” implies it was difficult to use it.

4. Avoid asking "why" directly, but feel free to use it as a probe.
  - a. Instead of asking "Why do you like coffee?" Consider alternatives such as:
    1. What do you like most about coffee?
      - a. Why do you like that the most?
    2. How would you feel if you couldn't have coffee?
      - a. Why would you feel that way?
    3. If you couldn't have it, what would you choose instead?
      - a. Why would you choose that?
5. Do ask open-ended questions
  - a. "Describe your perfect cup of coffee..."
6. Do try to start questions with "Tell me when/about a time/how..."
  - a. "Tell me about a time when a cup of coffee had an impact on your day"
  - b. "How do you feel if you aren't able to get coffee in the morning?"
7. Do paraphrase and probe with "You mentioned... Please tell me more about/elaborate on..."
  - a. "You mentioned your day was ruined when it started out with a horrible cup of coffee, can you tell me more about that?"
  - b. "You mentioned your days seem off now that you no longer leave the house and get your coffee on the way to work. Please tell me what you mean by that."
8. Silence is ok (think of it as a red light, pausing lets other traffic flow, it will eventually turn green)
9. Be neutral in all responses both verbal and non-verbal
10. Do not try to solutionize until you've asked all of your questions.\*

\*This means try to avoid asking specific questions about features of any existing or to be designed experiences until you're satisfied you've received all of the answers you need to your generative questions. It is ok, if there is time, to propose general approaches to things at the end of your interview to get a sense of whether or not you're going in the right direction or you're on the right page, but keep it short and to the point. Only ask the questions if they can be easily answered. Try not to hypothesize too much during the interview. Instead, let them hypothesize as much as they'd like to. Generative/discovery answers are about gaining a better understanding of the problem space and problem finding, not problem solving.

### Final thoughts

Our interviewees are the ones who should be doing the talking, not us. We want to set them up in the best possible way to guide them through their story and then listen intently as they talk so they know someone cares, because we do! We care about how they feel, what they think, what they do, and how their experiences shape their attitudes and opinions about the world around them. Empathy and consideration go a long way, but we also have to try to balance that with our neutral tone and responses. This is something that we get better at through doing, and this class is designed to give us two chances this semester to learn as much as we can.

We will have more interview tips next week!