



UNIVERSITY OF  
MICHIGAN

# Good Practices for Interview Protocol

---

## Understanding User Needs

Kentaro Toyama

Associate Professor, School of Information



© 2015 Kentaro Toyama and The Regents of the University of Michigan  
Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>



“Just one more thing...”

Detective Columbo  
(played by Peter Falk)

# Interviewing as Science and Art

## Preparation

- Interview participant background
- Topic background
- Interview protocol
- Overarching question

Focus for  
this video

## Improvisation

- Rapport with interview participant
- Attention to the unexpected
- Unscripted questions
- Focus on overarching question





## Good Questions

### Open-ended

- “Why did you...?”
- “How did you go about...?”
- “Can you tell me about...?”
- “Why do you think that is?”
- “How did you handle that situation?”

## Not So Good Questions

### Closed-ended

- “Do you like X?”
- “How many times a week do you...?”
- “What is your favorite...?”

Sometimes, closed-ended questions are appropriate, but they shouldn't dominate the protocol.

## Good Questions

### Specific, concrete

- “Tell me about the last time that you did...”
- “Can you think of a specific instance when...?”

## Not So Good Questions

### Abstract, generalized

- “What do you normally do when...?”
- “What is the typical way in which...?”

These aren't bad questions, but you want to be sure that you've asked for concrete details, also.

## Good Questions

### Non-leading, judgment-free

- “What option do you prefer?”
- “What do you think was the reason for that?”
- “How did you try to address the problem?”

## Not So Good Questions

### Leading, judgmental

- “So, you prefer X over Y?”
- “Was it because of a bad process that the task was difficult?”
- “Why didn’t you use feature Z?”



# Organization and Flow

**Cluster related questions together.**

**Within each cluster, arrange them in a meaningful order:**

- Chronological
- Narrative
- Broad to narrow, or narrow to broad
- Etc.

**Arrange clusters in a meaningful order.**

**Save any sensitive questions for the end.**



# Follow-Up Questions

**Under each core question, add follow-up questions.**

- Use bulleted lists.

**Follow-up question types:**

- Generic: “Why?” “How did that happen?” “Tell me more.”
- Prompts for specific issues: “Did you think about X?” “Or Y?”
- Repetition: “Could you tell me about another time when...?”
- Etc.

**Think through the order of these, as well.**

**Again, you will probably not ask all of the follow-up questions.**



# Final Thoughts

## Goals of protocol:

- Preparation
- Guide during interview

**Memorize the overall flow of the protocol.**

**Remember – you will *not* read protocol questions one after the other.**

**See module handout for more information.**