How to Structure a User Interview

When you conduct a user interview, considering the best way of ordering questions is nothing short of essential. While it may seem obvious how your way of beginning and proceeding in any interview will be pivotal in keeping on track towards your intended destination, remember that you're dealing with human participants, their individual natures (and idiosyncrasies), and their ways of expressing themselves. That's precisely why, here, we give you Ann Blandford's tips on what to ask in the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of a user interview.

Beginning:

In the beginning of the interview, you should ask opening questions to set people at ease and build rapport. You should *not* ask about sensitive topics. Instead, focus on setting the stage and bringing your interviewees on board so they're comfortable enough to be, and remain, open with you. What you do at this stage can include the following:

• Telling participants what topics will be covered

• Telling participants how their data will be used

• Asking innocuous questions such as what their role is in their organization

• Asking concrete questions that are easy to answer

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Middle:

In the middle of the interview, you're hitting high gear. Having established a direct channel with your interviewees (the users), you move on and ask the bulk of your questions, but maybe not in the order you had originally planned. Remember to:

- Keep the flow of the conversation as natural as possible, but cover the topics you want to cover.

- Pick up on what participants have said earlier and get full replies to questions they have only partially answered.

- Steer participants back on track if they go too far off topic.

- Show that you have been listening.

End:

At the end of the interview, you wrap up in a way that makes participants feel as though they have said what they wanted to say and that their answers are valuable. By this point, you will have managed to tie up any loose ends on matters that had not been clear before, and both you and they should be satisfied that the interview has brought all the issues out into the open. Things you should do include:

- Asking if there is anything participants would like to add.

- Telling your participants what you are going to do with their data and what the value is for them.

- Thanking them for taking the time to help with your research.

Above all, remember to conduct a pilot study *before* you start approaching real-life participants and tackling 'organic' interview settings. Also, always be sensitive to the fact that people are different and need different things!

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