

8 semi-structured interview

The semi-structured interview is the most common form of interviewing. In it, the interviewer has worked out a set of questions beforehand, but intends the interview to be conversational. To do so, the interviewer can change the order of the questions or the way they are worded. He or she can give explanations or leave out questions that may appear redundant. So, the main job is to get the interviewee to talk freely and openly while making sure you get the in-depth information on what you are researching.

To do so effectively, you must remember to:

- 1) **listen**, not talk yourself. It is easy to get involved and share your own experiences and views, but this may influence your interviewee to change what they are going to say. (They may use what you say to guess what you would like to hear, rather than what you need to hear).
- 2) **Make questions short, straightforward and clear**, otherwise the interviewee may only remember part of the question. E.g., avoid questions such as 'How do you feel about our current reading scheme compared to the one you had as a pupil?' (It is better to ask: 'What do you think of our reading scheme?' Then follow it up by: 'How does that compare to the one you had as a pupil?'). Avoid jargon. Avoid choice questions, such as 'Is it better to have a parents' evening or to send reports' as the interviewee may not like either. Avoid leading questions such as 'Why do you like phonics?' (perhaps they hate it).
- 3) **Remain neutral**. Do not say 'good' or 'oh dear' depending on whether you like the response or not. Instead use 'mmhmm', 'OK, so what you're saying is...' or 'Thank you, can I now ask you....?', etc.
- 4) **Enjoy the interview** (or look as if you do). Sit up, look interested, smile and keep good eye contact.
- 5) **Use probes and prompts** to get as much information as possible. Probes can be silence (while nodding encouragingly), 'mmhmm', 'Anything more?' or repeating what has been said. Prompts are short supplementary questions such as 'And what happened next?', 'Was that true when you were at school?', 'Does that just happen during the reading lesson?', 'What do you think personally?' etc.
- 6) **Take a full record of the interview**. The simplest would be to record the interview (but be prepared for the technology letting you down). Although note taking can be cumbersome, and slow down the interview, it allows the interviewee to (re)consider what has been said while you write and expand the answer. A good technique is also to check up after you have written the notes: 'What I have written down is... Have I noted that down OK, or do you want to change something?'

It is also important to structure the interview properly:

Step 1:

Introduce yourself, explain the purpose of the interview, ask for permission to record or take notes, and explain confidentiality, length of interview, etc.

Step 2:

'Warm up'. Ask some easy, non-threatening questions at the start to break the ice and make people feel comfortable.

Step 3:

Carry out the interview in a logical progression. Start with the easier, more general questions (if possible) and gradually move to more in-depth or 'risky' ones. (This way you will have gathered some information should the interviewee refuse to continue). Do not hesitate to return to earlier responses if a topic is missed or answered half-heartedly, once you feel the interviewee is warming to you.

Step 4:

'Cool off'. Some straight forward questions at the end to relax the interviewee.

Step 5:

Show appreciation and say goodbye. Remain alert to the 'half-way out the door' confession, once the recorder is switched off. Often, this is when the most meaningful information is given, and you may want to use it. It would only be fair to inform the interviewee of this, if you do.

Interviewing is a skill, but appearance is also important. Be pleasant and dress appropriately. Remember that the interviewer is in control of this 'conversation', by setting the questions, and that the interviewee will try to please. Saying as little as possible and encouraging the interviewee to say as much as possible is the key to getting in-depth information.

N.B. To counterbalance interviewee bias (i.e. the interviewee trying to say the 'correct' answer), researchers often use focus groups, where the dynamics of a group influence responses.

It is the quality that counts.

Further reading:

Powney, J. and Watts, M. (1987),
Interviewing in Educational Research. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul

Rubin, H.J. and Rubin, I.S. (1995),
Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data. Sage