the HUB
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Conducting Effective and Ethical Interviews

Interviews are a great way to gain insight into individuals and their communities, and they are very frequently used for research in several disciplines. Whether a simple homework assignment or an extensive project, an interview allows for direct communication between a researcher and a population.

Although much emphasis is often placed on the role of the interviewee, you may encounter situations that call for you to take the leading role in an interview setting. There are several factors that should be accounted for in order to conduct an interview as effectively and as ethically as possible.

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Contacting Interviewees

The process of contacting interviewees will change depending on any prior relationship you have established. A close friend or family member may be easily reached through a text, phone call, or conversation, and they will likely feel obligated to help you due to your personal history.

When contacting anyone you do not already know, you will likely have to rely on email, direct messages, or phone calls. When reaching out, be sure to include:
- your name
- your affiliation as a university student
- the purpose of your assignment
- an explanation as to why they would be a good interviewee
- your contact information

If you were referred to this person by someone else, it can be a good idea to mention the referee. It may also be helpful to include a list of dates and times when you will be available for an interview so your potential interviewee already has a schedule they may work with.

Informed Consent

Once you've located a potential interviewee, be sure to inform them about the purposes and the subject matter of the interview as you ask for their participation. Be sure to repeat this information immediately before the interview, as well. And, remind the interviewee that it is within their right to choose not to answer any questions or to end the interview whenever they wish. Remember that, as the interviewer, you hold a great deal of control in this setting. It is your responsibility to make sure that your interviewees feel comfortable and that they know it is their choice whether or not they participate. Even if you believe that your interview will not address any sensitive topics, your interviewee should be aware of their own agency.

If you must interview a minor, remember that they cannot give informed consent for research purposes. If you require their participation, obtain consent from a parent or legal guardian.

Preparing Questions

It is always helpful to have at least a few questions ready before the interview begins as you will have a stronger idea about what kinds of information you hope to gain. These questions will help you and your interviewee stay focused, as well.

Be sure to phrase your questions so they may not be answered with a "yes," a "no," or other simple response. These may be appropriate for obtaining small bits of information, but questions that begin with "how" or "why" can more easily encourage your interviewee to give more detailed responses. Compare the following questions:

Did you feel nervous on your first day of college?
- This may be answered with either a "yes" or a "no."
- This question assumes that the interviewee felt a certain way and it limits their responses.
- Some interviewees can easily elaborate even if they initially respond with a simple answer, but some may only answer the questions that you present.

How did you feel on your first day of college?
- This does not allow for a yes-or-no answer.
- Even if they respond with a one-word answer like "nervous," you can more easily encourage them to elaborate since they were given the chance to reflect and

consider the best way to answer. A follow-up question beginning with "why" will most likely be received more easily if the interviewee was given the chance to think for themselves.

Be prepared to go off-script during your interview. Having a **structured interview** in which you ask every participant the same questions may be useful for some assignments. But, asking your questions exactly as they are written may negatively affect the quality of your conversation because this may appear more unnatural. Be ready to rephrase them or integrate them into the conversation in a different way depending on the state of the interview. And, you may come up with new questions during the interview itself, so do your best to be adaptable. Using more loosely defined questions creates a **semi-structured interview**, and this style may encourage your participants to express themselves more freely.

Interviewing Etiquette and Effective Listening

It is important to communicate to your interviewee that you are listening to their responses. Do your best to maintain an appropriate level of eye contact. Other good strategies include periodically nodding, making affirmative sounds and comments like "yes" or "okay." Finally, if you need to ask them to elaborate on anything, it may be helpful to make clear references to information they have already given you. For example, rather than saying "Could you please say more?" it may be better to say "Could you please tell me more about your first boss and how they treated you?" The first question may leave the interviewee confused about what you would like to know, but the second is more specific and gives the interviewee an indicator that you listened to them.

All of these can be effective strategies, but their acceptability will vary depending on the interviewee. Making eye contact can show an interviewee you are interested in them and their responses, but maintaining persistent eye contact can also make interviewees uncomfortable. It will be up to you to strike an appropriate balance for these communication strategies.

Recording

When obtaining informed consent, be sure to ask the interviewee if it is acceptable to record their responses and whether certain recording methods are acceptable. Below are several recording techniques to consider, and there are pros and cons to each.

Audio/Video Recording
This is the most simple and reliable way to obtain accurate recordings of your participant's responses. Your devices are likely equipped with recording software and software for video calls have a recording feature as well. However, some participants may feel uncomfortable

having every statement recorded exactly as it is said, so be prepared with backup recording techniques and always ask for permission. And even though you may be recording the interview in a hands-off manner, it is still helpful to jot down simplified versions of statements alongside timecodes so you can refer back to key places in the interview.

Handwritten Notes

Your decision to write notes by hand will depend on your ability to write quickly and legibly. Some interviewees may think of handwritten notes as less obtrusive than typing notes. And, you and your interviewees may prefer this method because it prohibits many outside distractions. Finally, it is always a good idea to be ready to write because your devices may not have sufficient power for the entire interview.

Typed Notes

Much like handwritten notes, your decision to type notes will depend on your level of comfort with a device. But, with all devices, you must consider ease of typing, portability, power consumption, and level of obtrusiveness. A laptop or tablet will make typing easier, but it is less portable than a cell phone and it may also act as a barrier between you and your interviewee. Your phone may work due to its portability, but it may be difficult to type quickly and may instead be better suited as an audio recorder.

"Off the Record"

Your participant may wish to say something that they would prefer not to be included in your assignment. This is known as speaking "off the record," and you should withhold recording any statements during this time. Be sure to pause your recording software and/or stop writing or typing during such moments. When the participant has finished, remember to ask for their permission to resume recording.

Post-Interview Notes

However you decide to record notes while interviewing, it is always helpful to record your own thoughts soon after the conclusion of the interview. You may have noticed particular patterns with your interviewee's responses or potential connections to prior research or the responses of other interviewees, so it is best to record these while they are fresh in your memory.

Debriefing

Upon completing your interview, be sure to ask if your participant has any final thoughts they would like to share. They may have been waiting for an opportunity to share something, but felt that it was not an appropriate response for some of your questions. This is a great time for

an interviewee to elaborate on something related to the interview, so be sure to continue recording until you are absolutely sure the interviewee has said all they have wished to say.

Once you decide to officially end the interview, thank your interviewee and remind them that their participation was appreciated and that their responses will be helpful. Some interviewees may be curious about the results of your assignment, so be prepared to answer them if they ask you to share your work.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

If your class has a primary focus on the research process, you have likely discussed the role of the university IRB. Since interviews involve using human subjects, several ethical considerations arise. However, **if you must conduct interviews for the purposes of a class assignment and do not plan to publish or present your findings outside of the class, you do not need to worry about obtaining IRB approval**. If your assignment requires IRB approval for any reason, your instructor will certainly have walked you through the necessary steps. For more information about this process, please visit the following link.

https://www.scu.edu/provost/research/research-compliance-and-integrity/human-subjects/