



How to Conduct a Compelling Interview

Interviewing a family member, a neighbour or a friend is a wonderful way to discover their life's story. You can learn about any subject or person that interests you, just by asking thoughtful questions.

GETTING READY

The interviewer is a guide into the unknown—and, like a good guide, you come with tools, a map, and a plan.

Pack your tools

Make sure you have all your recording equipment ready. Do you rock it old-school with a pencil and paper, or will you just press record on your phone? Make sure your battery is charged and bring a back-up just in case.

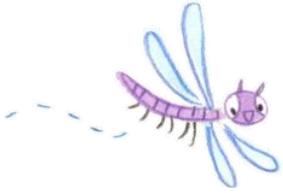
Make your map

If you are interviewing people to find out their stories, learn a little bit about them beforehand, if possible. Think ahead and try to plot out the possible path of an interview. Practice ways of explaining your project in a confident voice.

Create your plan

- Have a list of questions ready—memorized or recorded—so that you can have the most natural conversation possible.
- Ask permission to speak with them - ask for an appointment to meet at a safe distance- over the phone is often best.
- You could also ask to send a list of questions by email. If you know the person well, maybe you could do it through face to face technology like Facetime or Zoom.





DESIGNING GOOD QUESTIONS

There are different ways to organize your questions ahead of time- and different types of interviews.

Chronological interview

Starts at one point in time and follows an event or change in the order that events happened; from the very earliest to the most recent events. For example, asking your Grandmother about all the places she worked from her very first job until her most recent job.

Thematic interview

Is organized around selected issues or events.

Explore each one in turn, but not necessarily in order, as we would in a chronological interview. For example, ask your uncle about his favourite hobbies, his favourite food and his favourite music. These conversations don't have to follow a chronological order, because his first favourite type of music might not be the music he likes currently.

Types of Questions

There are also many styles of questions—as many as there are personalities of people. Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no.

Open-ended.

Short, simple, open-ended questions have many possible answers, and are a good backbone for an interview. Instead of asking, “*Did you have a hard childhood because of the economic downturn and not speaking the local language?*” ask, “*What was your childhood like?*” “*Tell me about the apartments your family lived in.*”

Specific.

Specific questions examine historical details and establish the facts.

For example, “*How many times did this happen exactly?*” “*When and where were you born?*”

Sensory.

Sensory questions bring an interview to life. “*What did the tornado sound like?*” “*How did the city smell?*” “*Was it hot or cold?*”

Meaning-seeking.

Questions that seek meaning are best asked after you and your subject have built some trust during the interview. They reveal feelings, long-term insights, and unique personal viewpoints.

For example: “*How did your feelings about Canada change when you were passed over for promotions?*” “*What did it mean to you to graduate from University?*”

Elaboration and clarification.

These little questions go a long way. “*Can you tell me more about that?*” and “*Is there anything else you would like to add?*” draws out more information. At the conclusion of an interview, ask a speaker to tell you anything you might have missed in your questions.

IN THE MOMENT: INTERVIEW DYNAMICS

Your behaviour is key to keeping the person you are interviewing at ease.

Make your approach polite and respectful.

The way people respond depends on how you approach them.



Listening is the key.

Give the interviewee a lot of cues that you are listening and you care about what they are saying. Maintaining constant eye contact, nodding, not interrupting, and offering some facial or verbal encouragement are great ways to listen actively.

Interviewing is a two-way street.

Sometimes it is appropriate to share some information about yourself in an interview. Remember that it's a conversation and people must feel that you care about what they say and will honour and respect their words and stories.

Don't be afraid of pauses and silences.

Resist the temptation to jump in. Let the person think. Often the best comments come after a short silence when the person you are interviewing feels the need to fill the void and add something better.

Accept emotion.

Sometimes an interview can bring up strong emotion. If an interviewee cries or gets emotional, there is usually nothing wrong—but offer them the opportunity to end the interview or to keep going—and offer to get them a tissue!

Maintain neutrality.

It is important to ask questions that do not reveal your opinion about a subject.

Use the small details to tell the big stories.

Look for the little things that surprise you. Here's an example: *Mrs. Jones is forty-five years old, a doctor, has a family and a dog. But even more interesting—and revealing—Mrs. Jones sets every single clock in her house five minutes fast, and she collects bus transfers from her workday commute and keeps them all in a shoebox in the closet.* You can learn a lot about people from a few unexpected details.



Take notes.

Remember specific details. Take notes on your impressions immediately after the interview, while it's still fresh in your mind. Send yourself a text, write a note, or make an audio recording.

Be genuinely curious.

One simple rule gets people to talk openly and honestly: Ask your own real questions about the world around you.

Express thanks.

Be sure to thank the interviewee for sharing his or her words and time. Let them know how helpful they have been. Let them know how you plan to use their interview. For example-a video for your family, a history or social studies project for school.

WRAPPING UP AND FOLLOWING THROUGH

Once you've finished the interview, there's a bit of business to take care of.

Obtain permission. If you are going to share the interview in any way on social media, or even privately among friends and family, make sure you have the permission from the person you interviewed.

Send a formal thank-you. Send the interviewee a note of thanks. An old-fashioned, hand-written card or a phone call goes a long way to showing how you appreciate their time. At the very least, send a formal email thanking them. Do not text your thanks. This is too informal a platform, especially if your subject is the age of your grandparents.

