

# 3.X Creating an Interview or Focus Group Guide

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# A strategy for writing the first draft of an interview guide



# Writing an interview or focus group guide

- First, pick what type of guide you are writing.
  - Check methodological handbook
  - Think about what type of information you will need.
- Outline what you are seeking to investigate
  - From background literature
  - Your own interpretation of the material and topic
- Approach may vary depending on methodology.
  - Their own stories, meanings, interpretations about a particular event?
    - Narrative, phenomenology
  - Responses to questions about different potential factors of influence.
    - Grounded theory, case study

# Balance

- Initial questions have to come from somewhere.

BUT

- You want to influence responses as little as possible.

SO

- Try to be as open-ended as possible, especially at the beginning.



# My process

1. Identify specific areas of interest
  1. From lit review, personal experience
2. Brainstorm potential themes of interest for each issue.
  - What might a participant talk about in relation to that issue?
  - What do you think might be relevant?
  - Some themes may become questions in their own right.
3. Write an open-ended question about the initial issue.
  - Note some of your themes as “probes” to keep in mind as interviewing, and ask if relevant.
4. When finished, check questions for redundancy, gaps in logic. Arrange in a logical order.

# Step 1: brainstorming key issues

Research question: “What challenges do people with diabetes face when trying to modify their diet”

Brainstorming key issues:

- How do they know what to change?
- What’s it like to try and implement those changes?
- What would make it harder?
- What helps?
- Are some situations easier/harder to adhere to diet?
- How do life circumstances impact the process?
- What happens over time, re: maintaining changes?

# Step 2: thinking of potential themes for each issue

Pick an issue: How do they know what to change?

Brainstorming potential themes:

- Info from health care providers
- Info from friends/family/personal contacts
- Researching? Looking online?
- What's it like to apply that information:
  - Food labels
  - Menus and meal planning
  - Restaurants, social occasions
- Feedback? Correcting misinformation? Any mechanisms for this?

# From Themes to Questions

- Think about what aspect of the theme you are interested in.
- Design broad questions that allow the interviewee to express a variety of thoughts.
- If conducting a focus group, design questions to get people talking.
  - Different viewpoints
  - Highlight opportunity for debate
  - Encourage comparison of experiences

# Step 3: Writing questions

1. How did you know what you were supposed to change about your diet?
  - Where did this information come from?
  - Was it understandable? Sufficient?
2. What's it like to try and use that information from [*use participant response*] when you are planning what to eat?
  - Does this change when you are eating food that you have less control over?
3. Now that you have been working on changing your diet for [*use participant response*], how are things different from when you first started?
  - Have you made any changes?
  - How did you know to make changes?

# Questions to avoid

- Questions which imply a particular correct response.
  - Don't you think that....
- Double-barreled questions
  - Do you respect your mother and your father?
- Questions which assume something you have not asked.
  - How many times a week do you use illegal drugs?

# Step 4: arranging in an order

- Develop a few questions for each issue.
  - Eliminate redundancy
  - Are there any gaps?
- Do you have enough/too many questions?
  - Hard to say how many is enough... depends on type.
  - Narr/Phenom: 3-5
  - GT/CS: 6-12

# Step 4 continued

- Look for duplication in questions
- Look for questions that might not be clear
- Check to make sure that questions invite all kinds of responses, don't direct towards a certain type of response.
- Think about how long the interview will be. Do you have enough questions? Too many?
- What questions should be grouped together? Could some questions act as a probe or a prompt?

# Arranging questions

- When arranging questions, start with easy, open questions to establish rapport and try to make everyone feel comfortable.
- If you have difficult questions, place them well into the interview.
- Wrap up with a summary question, and an invitation for the participant to add anything that you haven't asked about.

# Summary question

- Purpose is NOT to summarize whole interview
- Purpose is to focus them on the key aspect of interest, now that they have been thinking and talking about the broader topic for an hour.
- Example: “So, after our chat this afternoon, what do you think is the main challenge for people who are trying to change their diet after being diagnosed with diabetes”
- Or “If you were talking to someone who had just been diagnosed with diabetes, what’s the most important think you would tell them about what it’s like to change your diet”.

# My last question (after summary)

- “So, that’s all the questions that I had written down. Is there anything that I didn’t ask about that you think is important for me to know about your experience changing your diet for diabetes”
- Often some of the MOST IMPORTANT remarks come out in response to this.
- Sometimes they just say “nope, I think we’ve covered everything”

# What your interview guide will look like

- More/less information on your guide as you start to feel more comfortable.
1. Start with an explanation of the research.
  2. Lead with a couple of quick questions that are light and easy to answer.
  3. Main questions followed by relevant probes or prompts.
  4. Summary question to close.

# Explanation of research

- In my experience, helpful to focus the participants.
  - They want to provide useful information
- Helpful to write a loose “script” that uses accessible language to describe the main purpose of your research. Try not to sound too wooden!
- Helpful to include WHY you are doing the research and WHO might find it useful.

# Example of research explanation

- I'm doing a research project to examine the challenges that people with diabetes face when they try to modify their diets. We know that changing your diet can have a really positive impact on all aspects of your health, but we also know that it's not that easy to do. By talking with people who have been through this experience, I hope to understand the unique challenges they face. This information will be useful to doctors and nurses, so they understand the challenges that their patients face and can offer some specific advice and understanding when talking about diet changes.

# Icebreaker initial questions

- More like “chat” than actual interview questions, but important to establish a flow and rapport.
- When interviewing pregnant women, I would ask questions like:
  - How far along are you?
  - How’s it been going so far? Have you had much morning sickness?
  - Have you been thinking about names?
- I.e. questions that people are usually asked in social situations, not prying, just to get them talking. Try to be bright, cheerful, chatty in this part. Get them to WANT to talk to you.

# Probes/Prompts

- Ideas that you might not ask directly, but might wish to follow up on if mentioned by the participant.
- Reminders to you about the purpose of the question.
- Useful if you get a participant who gives brief responses.

# Example

- What's it like to try and stick to your diabetes diet during social occasions?
  - Different during holidays?
  - Temptations?
  - Adjustments at the occasion?
  - Planning ahead of the occasion?

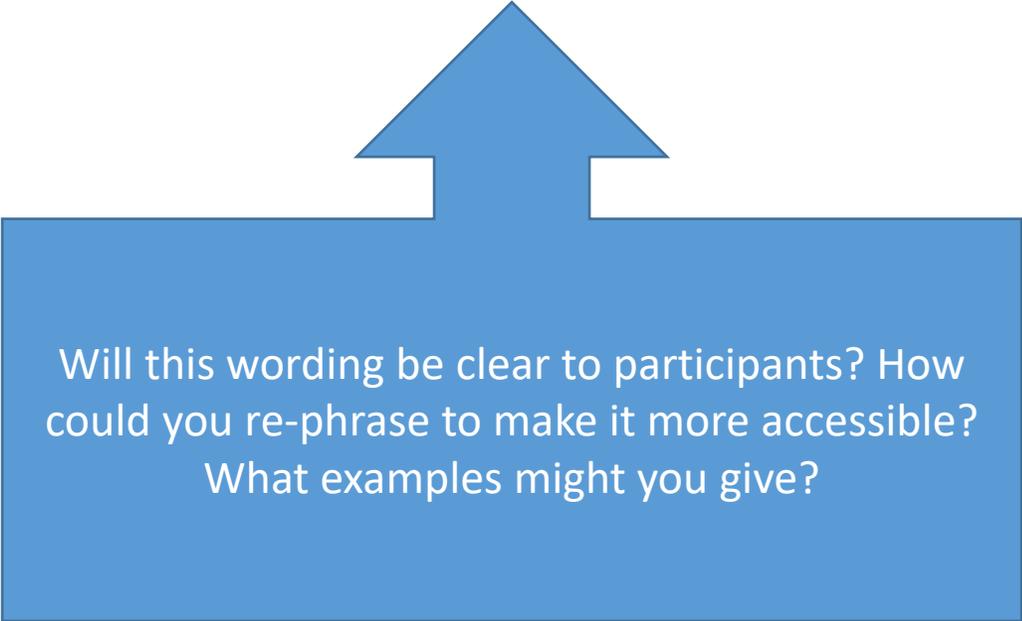


To help you keep the conversation going about this topic.

Reminds you what you think might be important about this topic.

# Example

- What's it like to try and stick to your diabetes diet during social occasions?



Will this wording be clear to participants? How could you re-phrase to make it more accessible?  
What examples might you give?

# Writing accessible questions

- Think about who your participants are:
  - Education levels
  - Life experiences
- Interview guide will look different depending on who your participants are.
- If your participants may have a wide range of education levels (e.g. common inclusion criteria is something like diabetes), good to think of some alternative phrasing and adjust your words so you are “speaking the same language” as your participant.

