

Interviews

Interviews involve asking direct questions of other people. The person you interview is referred to as your subject, or interviewee. The point of the interview is to obtain information from an expert in your field of research that you would not be able to obtain anywhere else. One of the benefits of interviewing for information is that often the information you receive will be the most current information available.

Finding people to interview

There are many options available for researchers to seek out appropriate interview subjects. The following are only a few of these options.

- Look at faculty listings on the websites of local colleges and universities. Most have links to email addresses.
- Find a local organization that does research or work in the field you are writing about, either on the web or through local phone listings or Chamber of Commerce information.
- Visit local or state government websites for specific contact information
- Visit informational “bulletin board” websites for potential contact information

Composing interview questions

You need to know your topic, and you should know something about your interviewee. Try to learn what you can, if possible, about his or her experience and opinions. You should look at two main types of questions for your interview: factual questions, which produce specific answers that do not invite opinion; and open-ended questions, which lead the subject to think out loud and give additional details. Avoid questions that would encourage vague or rambling answers (“What do you think of nuclear power?”), or yes/no answers (“Should the Columbia River be closed to Sturgeon fishing?”).

Planning an interview

- Determine your exact purpose and be sure it relates to your research question or hypothesis
- Set up the interview in advance. Try to specify how long you think the interview will take, and if you wish to tape-record the interview (if it is conducted in person), ask permission to do so.
- Prepare a written list of your questions beforehand to structure the interview.
- If possible, try out your questions on one or two people to determine how best to sequence them, how clear and precise they are, and how long the interview might take.
- Prepare a final, typed copy of your questions, leaving space for notes after each one.

Finally, some time not long after the interview (one week at the most), prepare a letter to your interviewee, either mailed or emailed, thanking him or her for their time. Offer a copy of your paper to them if they are interested.