

Step One**Design Your Data Collection Methods** — *Qualitative Methods*

The first step in an interviewing project is to write your evaluation questions. The process is the same as that described under quantitative methods. In fact, you may decide that you want to use both quantitative and qualitative methods to answer the same evaluation questions. For instance, if the evaluation question is

“Do participants use the online resources we taught after they have completed training?”

You may decide to include a quantitative “yes/no” question on a survey that is sent to all participants, but you may decide to interview ten or twelve participants to see *how* they used it.

Your next step is to design an interview guide: a list of questions that you plan to ask each interviewee. Interviewing may seem less structured than surveys, but preparing a good interview guide is essential to gathering good information. An interview guide includes all of the questions you plan to ask and ensures that you collect the information you need. Patton discusses different types of interview questions such as those presented in Table 8. [7]

Table 8: Types of Questions

Type of Question	Information Collected	Example
Experience/behavior	What did respondents do?	“The last time you needed health information, where did you go to get it?”
Sensory questions	What did respondents experience through their five senses? (This is a variation on the experience/behavior question but focuses on what they saw, heard, touched, smelled, or tasted.)	“How did your doctor act when you showed her the information you found at MedlinePlus?”
Opinion/Value questions	What do respondents think or believe to be important?	“What do you like best about MedlinePlus?”
Feeling questions	What were respondents’ emotional reactions?	“How did you feel when you could not find information about your child’s health condition?”
Knowledge questions	What factual information does the respondent know?	“What are the busiest times of day for the computer lab?”
Background/Demographic	What are the characteristics of your respondent?	“What do you do for a living?”

Collecting and Analyzing Evaluation Data

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The order of the questions also can influence the interview. You need to start with questions that will allow you to gain rapport with the interviewee. Patton includes the following tips for developing and ordering interview questions [7]:

- Start with noncontroversial experience or behavioral questions that are easy to answer, straightforward, and do not rely on much recall. Sometime interviewees can provide better opinions and feelings if participants first describe an actual experience.
- Questions about the present are easier to answer than questions about the past and future. If you plan to ask about the future or past, ask a “baseline” present question like “Where do you usually go when you need to find health care information?” Then you can ask “Have you gotten health information anywhere else?” followed by “Are there other sources of health information you know about that you might use in the future?”
- Knowledge and skill questions may be threatening when posed out-of-context. Try embedding them with experience questions. For instance, you might first ask “What training sessions have you taken to learn about online consumer health resources?” followed by “What are some things you learned in those sessions?”
- Use some demographic question like “How long have you worked in the medical center?” to establish rapport with the interviewee. You also may need to ask this type of background question to make sense of the rest of the interview. However, keep demographic questions to a minimum because they can be boring and they may be too personal to be asked early in the conversation.
- Avoid questions that can be answered with one word or phrase. Rather than asking “How effective was the training session?” which sounds a lot like a survey question,

ask “What did you learn at the training session?” or “How did the training session help you?”

- Try to ask about one idea per question. You might introduce a line of inquiry with multiple ideas in a statement like “Now I want to ask about what you like and dislike about PubMed.” But focus by asking “First, what do you like?”
- Be sure to use language that the interviewee understands. It is sometimes difficult to recognize jargon or acronyms, so you might want to pilot test your questions with someone outside of your field to make sure the language is understandable.
- Avoid starting questions with “why.” Why questions tend to be unfocused and you may not get the information you really want. Less focused questions are also more difficult for the interviewee to answer. Instead of asking “Why did you decide to become a hospital volunteer?” you might ask “What attracted you to becoming a volunteer at this hospital?” or “When you decided to become a volunteer, what made you choose to work in a hospital?”

As with a survey, it is a good idea to pilot your interview questions. You might pilot your guide with someone you are working with who is familiar with your interviewees. (This step is particularly important if your interviewees are from a culture that is different from your own.) Sometimes evaluators consider the first interview a pilot interview. Any information they gather on the first interview is still used, but they revisit the question guide and make modifications if necessary.

Finally, be sure your interview project is reviewed by the appropriate entities (i.e., IRBs). Interviews are so personal, they may not seem like research and you may forget they are subject to the same review procedures as surveys. So do not make this assumption, or you may face a delay in collecting your data.