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OPA EVALUATION TA

Interviewing Tip Sheet

What is an interview?

An interview is a way to collect data in which an individual shares knowledge, voice, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes about a specific topic or concept. Although interviews typically occur one on one, some might take place with a group of respondents who share a similar function or role in an organization, such as facilitators or case managers.

Unlike surveys, interviews allow for follow-up questions in real time, and, unlike focus groups, interviewees might feel more comfortable sharing sensitive information during a one-on-one interview. Group interviews (that is, a single interview with multiple participants) also differ from a focus group. With group interviews, the interviewer plays a prominent role by asking respondents questions that elicit facts and details, whereas in a focus group, a moderator guides discussion among sample members responding to a set of questions that focus on eliciting opinions and beliefs. For example, when trying to collect information from a program facilitator, you might want to use an interview if you are interested in understanding the curriculum used and the modules covered, whereas you might want to use a focus group if you are interested in understanding how the participants responded to the curriculum and what worked well.

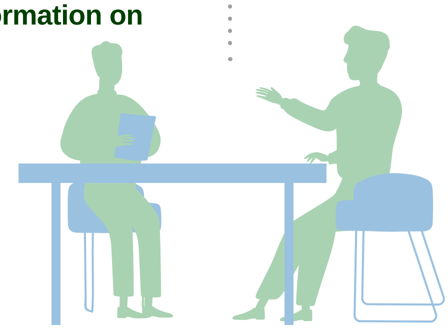
Interviews can help researchers learn nuanced details about a stakeholder's experience.

When *should* I conduct an interview?

- When you're looking to collect information from a **speci ic perspective on a speci ic topic or series of topics**
- When you want to capture the **lived experiences and lessons learned from people** and, specifically, focus on experiences with a program or set of practices
- When you're **looking to acquire information on personal or sensitive topics**

When *shouldn't* I conduct an interview?

- When you're looking to capture a broad range of views on a specific topic **over a short period of time**
- When you're looking to collect information from a **large number of people over a relatively short period of time**



FAQs

Who should conduct the interviews? The interview team can vary, with interviewers sometimes supported by a notetaker. One or several researchers can conduct the interview. If multiple researchers are involved, divide the question guide into sections so each interviewer asks some questions, and allow time for each interviewer to ask follow-up questions. Ideally, to prompt honest feedback from a participant engaged with a program, we suggest that the interviewer be independent of the program. The interviewer should be aware of the program but not directly tasked with implementing the program. Before an interview, an interviewer should be trained on interviewing techniques such as making sample members feel comfortable, asking questions in a neutral way, and probing for additional information.

Where should I hold an interview? An interview should take place in a quiet, comfortable, and professional space.

How long should the interview last? There is no recommended length for interviews - the length will depend on the information you are seeking to gather. In general, the length should not exceed one-and-a-half hours long.

How many people should I interview? You should conduct as many interviews as you need to gather rich data that answer your research questions. When you start hearing the same themes across multiple participants, then that is a good indicator that you can stop conducting additional interviews, even if you have not yet reached your original targeted number.

What do data from an interview look like? After obtaining permission from participants, interviews are usually recorded, allowing the interviewer to focus on the discussion and the notetaker (if more than one researcher is participating) to revise and double-check the notes after the discussion. Data from interviews include tape recordings, transcripts of those recordings, or notes from the interview.

Can an interview have more than one participant? Although interviews typically only have one participant, sometimes the participant will invite their colleagues, such as those who share a similar role, which is acceptable. But if you are tempted to have many people from different backgrounds participate in an interview, consider hosting a focus group instead.

How do I *prepare* for an interview?

STEP 1 **Develop a discussion guide with unbiased, open-ended questions related to your overall research question.** This type of guide, also known as a **protocol**, includes a list of questions and follow-up questions to cover during the interview. It should act as a guide to the conversation, however, not a script.

When creating your protocol, note which questions are the most important and underline key questions or phrases. Avoid leading questions, which are questions worded in a way that will influence participants' responses and that risk conveying your own value judgments and biases on participants. Form questions in a way that limits respondents from answering just yes or no, because you want to elicit detailed information.

Your protocol should also include an introduction in which the interviewer explains the purpose of the interview and research project, who will have access to the data collected from it, and whether it will be confidential. The protocol should communicate that the interview is voluntary and that respondents are not required to answer any of the questions.

STEP 2 **If required, obtain institutional review board approval before conducting interviews.** Institutional review boards oversee research to ensure people's rights are protected. Often, research funded by outside entities, such as the federal government, or research conducted with the goals of publishing findings must be reviewed by an institutional review board before going forward. See the OPA tip sheet for more information about IRB requirements. You should also check to see what other permissions or approvals you need. Some school districts require fingerprinting and basic criminal background checks.

STEP 3 **Recruit participants.** Recruitment can vary by setting. For example, it is often easy to recruit staff that participate in a program but more of a challenge to recruit partners or participants. Leverage the program site staff to help you recruit participants. Your participants will ideally provide you with a wide variety of perspectives related to your research topic.

STEP 4 **Tailor the discussion guide to each interviewee.** Add in the names of staff and program sites. If possible, research the individual and the individual's organization if you aren't familiar with them. Fill in any other information you already know and ask the interviewee to confirm it rather than take time reiterating what you know from other data sources. Print out a copy of the protocol with space for taking notes.

How do I *conduct* an interview?

STEP 1 **Introduce the interview, thank the participant for participating, and obtain informed consent (including permission to record) if applicable.** Provide an overview of the goal of the interview and the broader goals of the research project. Then, ask the participant if they have any questions before you begin. Assuming you receive consent, start recording the session.

STEP 2 **Facilitate the conversation by using the discussion guide to move the conversation along, but make sure to follow the respondent's lead, even if that means not asking questions in the order listed in the guide.** If you're running out of time, prioritize the most important questions. During the interview, take detailed or shorthand notes to jog your memory after the interview ends.

STEP 3 **Wrap up.** Ask whether the participant has anything to share he or she didn't have a chance to say before and whether the participant has any questions for you. Ask the participant if you can contact them with future questions or request to schedule an additional interview if needed. Share your contact information.

Additional tips for conducting interviews

Good interviewers will…

- ☐ **Test recording equipment before the interview.** Interviewers should ensure that they have backup batteries and that the device works before conducting the interview.
- ☐ **Be familiar with the discussion guide.** Interviewers should know the topics they want to cover so they can move from one topic to another easily. It's important to keep the interview on track and prioritize the most important questions identified when writing the protocol. If they are running out of time, interviewers should politely remind the interviewee of time constraints.
- ☐ **Use direct and indirect probes to keep the conversation flowing and to get the information they need.** Effective direct probes include "Can you give me an example of X?" or "Tell me more about that." Interviewers can also repeat or reword the question. Effective indirect probes include culturally appropriate body language and gestures, such as nodding in acknowledgement or using neutral expressions such as "uh huh" and "I see."
- ☐ **Remain neutral.** Interviewers should not share their personal opinions because this could sway the interviewee's answers. Remember, the focus of the interview should be on the respondent.
- ☐ **Only ask one question at a time.** Asking multiple questions at once might confuse or overwhelm the participant, and they will likely forget to answer one of the questions.
- ☐ **Be comfortable with silence.** Some participants require time to think through their answers. Interviewers should resist the temptation to rephrase the question or talk.
- ☐ **Paraphrase and summarize long, complex, or ambiguous comments throughout the discussion to confirm understanding.** Interviewers should verify acronyms and vague pronouns after the participant finishes a train of thought.

How do I *use and analyze* interview data?

STEP 1 **As soon as possible, save your data in a secure location and clean your data by ensuring your transcripts are clear and readable.** If you use transcription experts or online transcription service providers, ensure that the transcripts are error free by reading and editing it, if necessary. Cleaning the data is a great first step for your analysis.

STEP 2 **Revisit your discussion guide.** Spend time reflecting on what questions were effective and prompted clear information and which questions or topics you should modify for future interviews.

STEP 3 **Prepare data for coding and analysis.** When planning your analysis, identify your anticipated themes and develop a systematic way to organize the data collected during an interview (or multiple interviews). Anticipate the process by which you will organize your data by thinking about how the information collected fits into those broad analytical themes and the ways in which the information answers your research questions. Some researchers call this developing codes. Codes are labels or categories of information that you anticipate learning through the interviews. For example, if one of the research questions includes identifying challenges faced by facilitators during implementation, the code might be "challenge." You can apply one or more codes to a given response or set of responses.

STEP 4 **Systematically code your data using analytical tools such as NVivo or Excel or other such qualitative data tools.** Go through each interview transcript or summary and identify the information that relates to the codes.

STEP 5 **Analyze your data by looking for common themes or responses to questions.** Analyze your coded data by identifying what common themes emerge from specific questions in your discussion guide. As you examine specific codes, look for examples that illustrate what you see in the data and identify any deviations from patterns you notice. As you analyze your data, determine whether you have to adjust your discussion guide, approach to collecting data, or research questions.

STEP 6 **Synthesize your findings (if conducting multiple interviews).** Use your coded data to answer your research questions by describing variations in responses to each question and overarching patterns across your interviews. For example, by analyzing all the information associated with challenges, you can begin to combine and interpret that data by organizing it into categories of challenges.

STEP 7 **Use and share your findings in a way that suits your audience.** Use graphics, tables, or text to communicate your findings and conclusions.

Additional resources

Mack, N., Woodsong, C., Macqueen, K., Guest, G., & Namey, E. (2005). Module 3—in-depth interviews. In *Qualitative research methods: A data collector's field guide* (pp. 29–49). Family Health International.

Turner, D. W. (2010). Qualitative interview design: A practical guide for novice investigators. *The Qualitative Report, 15* (3), 754–760.

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Office of Population Affairs | https://www.hhs.gov/opa/
Email: opa@hhs.gov | Phone: (240) 453-2800
Twitter: @HHSPopAffairs