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Writing Interview Protocols and Conducting Interviews: Tips for Students New to the Field of Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Students new to doing qualitative research in the ethnographic and oral traditions, often have difficulty creating successful interview protocols. This article offers practical suggestions for students new to qualitative research for both writing interview protocol that elicit useful data and for conducting the interview. This piece was originally developed as a classroom tool and can be used by professors teaching qualitative research in conjunction with academic readings about qualitative interviewing.

Keywords

Qualitative Interviewing, Interviewing Tips, New Researchers, Students, Professors

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Writing Interview Protocols and Conducting Interviews: Tips for Students New to the Field of Qualitative Research

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Students new to doing qualitative research in the ethnographic and oral traditions, often have difficulty creating successful interview protocols. This article offers practical suggestions for students new to qualitative research for both writing interview protocol that elicit useful data and for conducting the interview. This piece was originally developed as a classroom tool and can be used by professors teaching qualitative research in conjunction with academic readings about qualitative interviewing. Keywords: Qualitative Interviewing, Interviewing Tips, New Researchers, Students, Professors

The field of qualitative research is broad and not only “crosscuts disciplines, fields, and subject matters” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 2), but also utilizes a myriad of means to collect data. Creswell (2007) asserts that while there are several kinds of data, all data falls into four basic categories, “observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials” (p. 129). Researchers may use many different techniques, but at the heart of qualitative research is the desire to expose the human part of a story. In her book, *The Art of Storytelling*, Nancy Mellon (1998) states, “Because there is a natural storytelling urge and ability in all human beings, even just a little nurturing of this impulse can bring about astonishing and delightful results” (p. 174). As qualitative researchers interested in the ethnographic and oral history traditions of the field, we collect people’s life stories in order to study various aspects of the human experience and the primary way we gather stories is by interviewing people. When we interview, we ask people to share their stories. Honing interview skills helps us nurture people through the storytelling process. Skilled interviewers can gain insight into lived experiences, learn the perspectives of individuals participating in a study, and discover the nuances in stories. Often people who lean toward qualitative research are interested in listening to stories within their own context, but helping graduate students learn to ask the right questions to elicit these stories can be difficult.

Every year, both of us teach at least one class in which we ask graduate students to research and write a qualitative piece. Most of the students in our classes have never completed such a project from beginning to end and one of the places that they often stumble is in collecting rich and relevant data through interviews. Fontana and Frey (2000) point out this difficulty by asserting, “Asking questions and getting answers is a much harder task than it may seem at first” (p. 645). Because of the difficulty our students often have, we advocate that first time qualitative researchers use interview protocols to assist them in collecting data. An interview protocol is more than a list of

interview questions; it also extends to the procedural level of interviewing and includes a script of what you will say before the interview, script for what you will say at the conclusion of the interview, prompts for the interviewer to collect informed consent, and prompts to remind the interviewer the information that she or he is interested in collecting. Interview protocols become not only a set of questions, but also a procedural guide for directing a new qualitative researcher through the interview process.

In our classes we start with having our students read assigned research articles on the interview process. These pieces are not transparent to the first-time researcher. Because of this issue, we developed a series of lessons to address the students' disconnect between reading the literature on qualitative interviewing and conducting an actual interview. First, we have our students turn in questions they create for their study. We, then, provide our students with suggestions for how to strengthen these questions. After the students have a good set of questions, we then ask them write down and script what they will say before the interview begins, and after the interview ends. During the scripting process we also help our students develop a consent form. Finally, we put all the pieces together to create an interview protocol. Eventually through guidance, the students' initial questions become a springboard for writing the interview protocol they will use in their study. The following advice is adapted from both lectures and our work with students as we guide them through both writing dynamic interview protocols and conducting interviews.

Writing Successful Interview Protocols

1. Pick a topic that is interesting to you.

We often have students who choose topics in which they are not interested. Sometimes students think one issue will be easier to research than another, professors prefer certain projects, or they are doing group work and get talked into something that does not interest them. Whatever the case, when you have a choice of a research topic, choose something that peaks your curiosity. When you are interested your project will be fun, invigorating, and will seem easy because you enjoy working on it. When you are not interested, your project will seem hard or time consuming and risks a lack quality because of your lack of interest. So, if you are interested in what people think about dirt and your professor approves the project, go for it. When we find the topics we love, it makes research fun.

2. Research should guide your questions.

Before even writing the first question, you should know what the research literature says about the people you are studying. In some cases, there will be lots of research; in others, you will find little to nothing and will have to read the research on similar populations. Using research to guide your questions means that you have done a thorough review of the literature and that you know what other scholars say about the people you are studying. Knowing the research leads to developing questions that are grounded in the literature, that differ from what previous research says, and that still need to be answered. It also helps you focus or narrow your questions in ways that will create

meaningful data. Let's say you are interested in millennial generation college students. If you consult the literature you will learn millennial students "are likely to appreciate clear expectations, explicit syllabi, and well-structured assignments" (Wilson, 2004, p. 65). Knowing this piece of information about the population might lead you to develop an interview protocol which asks millennial generation college students about what they think about the "rules" of the college classroom.

3. Use a script for the beginning and end of your interview.

Before beginning to interview develop a script to guide the process. There will be lots of important information that you will want to share with each of your participants, and without a script you are likely to forget something. In the beginning of the interview, the script should prompt you to share critical details about your study such as what you are studying and why you are studying it. It should remind you to explain the notion of informed consent and direct you to have the participant sign the statement of informed consent. The script should provide wording that will help you alleviate any concerns the participant might have about confidentiality. You may also want to use the script as your reminder for telling the interviewee a little about yourself in order to begin building rapport. At the end of the interview, going back to the script can help you remember to provide your contact information and to relay to the interviewee that there may be a subsequent contact if there is a need for you to clarify information, ask additional questions, or perform member checking or "soliciting feedback from one's respondents on the inquirer's findings" (Schwandt, 1997, p. 88).

4. Questions should be open ended.

We understand this piece of advice seems fairly obvious, but we continually have several students who turn in questions that are closed-ended. A closed-ended question can only result in one of two answers—yes or no. These types of questions will not allow the interviewee to offer you any additional information. The goal of qualitative research is to uncover as much about the participants and their situations as possible and yes or no questions stop the interviewee before getting to the "good stuff". While you could ask, "Are there things I would want to know about developing a good interview protocol? What?" A better way to ask that question is, "Tell me about the things I might want to know to create a successful interview protocol."

5. Start with the basics.

Ask your interviewee basic background data about her/himself (things like name, where they grew up, etc.) as a way of warming up your participant. You want to build trust between you and your interviewee as you collect important background data. You should look to the literature to help you decide what background data is important to collect. For instance, if you are doing a study about how African American women make decisions about college, you will want to consult college choice literature as you decide what background information you need to collect. If the literature says the type of high

school a student attended significantly impacts student college choice, you will want to ask about the student's high school.

6. *Begin with easy to answer questions and move towards ones that are more difficult or controversial.*

Arrange questions in order from those that are least difficult or contentious to those that are most difficult. The idea, again, is to slowly build confidence and trust with the interviewee. In other words, you would not want to start with a big, probing, "high stakes" question like, "Have you ever been date raped?" Chances are if you do, your interviewee will withdraw. If you are interested in learning something about this topic, you might instead begin with a question like, "Tell me about the ways that people have taken advantage of you in college."

7. *The phrase "tell me about..." is great way to start a question.*

The phrase "tell me about" is not only an invitation for the interviewee to tell you a story, but also it assumes that the interviewee will talk and it subtly commands the interviewee to begin talking. Also the phrase "tell me about" makes it almost impossible to create a question that is too complicated, too detailed, or too difficult to answer. It keeps the question general enough that the interviewee can take the question in several directions and leaves room for ideas, impressions, and concepts which you have not thought of to emerge from the data.

8. *Write big, expansive questions.*

Qualitative research is all about the materialization of unexpected data from your participants and writing big, expansive questions allows the participant to take your question in several directions. When you write big questions your participant will might say things that you would have never thought to ask and often those things become one of the most important parts of your study. Also, writing lots of small, detailed questions does not allow the interview to freely flow from your interviewee, but rather makes it a choppy back and forth between you and the participant. For instance, if you want to know several things about a participant's background it is better to say, "Tell me about your background" than, "What is your age? What is your race? Where did you go to high school?" By saying, "Tell me about your background" you allow the interviewee to talk uninterrupted. When they are finished you can prompt them to talk about anything they missed that you want to know.

9. *Use prompts.*

As a qualitative researcher conducting interviews, you should both trust your instincts and be ready for surprises. Creating probes or prompts for each question helps keep you on track. Prompts also help to remind you of your questions while at the same time allowing for unexpected data to emerge. To use prompts effectively, you must first design a broad question (as mentioned in tip # 8) that might take an interviewee in several

different directions. Directly under this question, you should design bullet points that remind you of areas that have emerged from the literature or things you think will enrich your data. Using the above example of, “Tell me the ways in which people have taken advantage of you in college.” You might list the following probes as bullets: academically, friendship-wise, sexually, etc. In essence, you ask the general question, let the interviewee talk in any direction, and then use your prompts to get at pre-planned specifics they did not mention.

10. *Be willing to make “on the spot” revisions to your interview protocol.*

Many times when you are conducting interviews a follow up question may pop into your mind. If a question occurs to you in the interview ask it. Sometimes the “ah-ha” question that makes a great project comes to you in the moment. You should learn to trust your instincts in interviews; yet, not let them lead you too far down a tangential path that is not useful to what you are studying. Being willing to make adjustments in the interview also allows for the design of the study to emerge as you conduct research. If you go off book from the interview protocol, you may find something interesting that you did not expect. You can add the new question to the remainder of your interviews if you find that the information you uncovered in your current interview is useful. Emergent design (Creswell, 2007) is one of the hallmarks of qualitative research and sticking to your interview protocol exactly does not allow for the design to emerge naturally as you conduct research.

11. *Don’t make the interview too long.*

Remember that you are asking people to both share their stories and their time (usually without compensation). Asking someone to devote more than an hour and half of their time can become problematic for several reasons. Pragmatically you are less likely to get people to agree to be interviewed, if you plan a long session. Also you should consider who you are interviewing. What if your subject is elderly or sick? They may tire easily. What if you are interviewing children? They may lose interest quickly. You might find that it is more appropriate to arrange two to three shorter interviews than conduct one longer one. Think about your participants and who they are as you design the length of your interview. It should be noted that six to ten well-written questions can easily take an hour to an hour and a half to get through.

12. *Practice with a friend.*

Do your questions make sense? Do other people understand what you are trying to ask? It is always a good idea to pilot test your questions with someone you know to make sure that your questions are clear. After doing so, find a couple of people that are close to the population you wish to study. If you are studying female, college bound, high seniors during their college choice process you could talk to female, high school juniors who plan on going to college to further pilot test your questions. Pilot testing your questions with close population, will allow you talk with someone who may provide

important insider information that can make your interview protocol work better without squandering the population you wish to interview.

13. *Make sure that you have set up a second shorter interview to help you clarify or ask any questions you missed after you have transcribed the interview.*

Once you read over the transcribed interview, you may not understand what was said or what your interviewee meant and a second shorter interview lets you clear up anything that you do not understand. It is important to remember that by design, the nature of qualitative research is emergent. If you are interviewing several people what happens if the third person says something you wish you had asked the first and second interviewee? A second and shorter interview also gives you the chance to ask early interviewees questions that may have arisen in later interviews. Finally, once you have interviews transcribed you can send the interviewee a copy of the transcript so that you can conduct a member check. At the time of the second interview you can also ask the participant if she or he agrees with any ideas you have surrounding the interpretation of what you are studying.

14. *If needed, clear your project with your school's Institutional Research Board (IRB).*

The IRB process is often referred to as “Human Subjects” by professors and researchers and is the office that clears any research done on human beings or human subjects. The purpose of this office is to protect people who serve as the subjects for research. Going through the IRB process gives both you and your institution assurance that you are not harming the people you study. The IRB process varies from institution to institution. For instance, some schools require IRB for all types of qualitative interviews; some exclude oral history from the IRB process. While most schools do not require students to clear projects that are not meant for publication, it is in your best interest to understand the IRB process at your school.

A good interview protocol is essential to getting the best information from the participants in your study; however, a good protocol does not ensure that you will have a successful interview. In our experiences we have learned that there are several things you can do to ensure the interview runs smoothly. In addition to making sure that the procedural part of doing an interview works, it is also imperative to try to make good connections with the people you interview. Making good connections means people share more of their story with you and as a result you get better data. If you do not make good connections, listen, or allow yourself to become distracted in an interview, you run the risk of not getting the real story and your research will be incomplete at best. Conducting good interviews is hard work and students who want to do qualitative research should be prepared to do the work of connecting to other people. The following advice is meant to help first qualitative researchers conduct successful interviews.

Tips for the Interview

1. *Start with your script.*

You developed the script so that you do not inadvertently neglect sharing important information with your interviewee. While you do not need to read the script word for word, it is important that you have it in front of you and you follow it carefully. Even if you are on your twentieth interview, you should follow the script. The information the script provides to the participant helps them understand their rights as a person being studied and it ensures that you conduct your research in an ethical manner.

2. *Collect consent.*

Collecting consent should be a part of your beginning script. Do not proceed with your interview without collecting it. Give your participant plenty of time to read through the form and ask as many questions about consent as she or he needs to ask. Your interviewee understanding that you will hold their confidence and that they may withdraw from the study at any time is an important aspect of building their trust in you. If they trust you, they will share their experiences with you. If your respondent does not wish to sign the consent form, do not conduct the interview and do not attempt to compel them to grant consent. Simply thank them for their time, leave them your information, the consent form, information about the study, and let them know if they change their mind, you would be happy to interview them at a later date.

3. *Use some type of recording device and only take brief notes so you can maintain eye contact with your interviewee.*

Nothing can ruin getting to know a person faster than being more interested in getting the notes right than looking the person you are talking to in the eye. It is important to note that by choosing to rely on a recording device rather than hand written notes, means that you should both make sure that your equipment is in working order and make sure you have back up plans, if the equipment fails. Do you have a set of fresh batteries or a plug with you? If you are using cassette tapes, do you have extra ones? Did you do a “testing 1-2-3” check to make sure the device is recording before you begin? Do you have a second recording device in the case that the first one fails?

4. *Arrange to interview your respondent in a quiet, semi-private place.*

Coffee shops and restaurants are convenient and it is usually easy to have a conversation, but these locales usually have too much background noise to produce a quality recording. If you cannot understand what is on your recording device later, it is not of use to you. Also, these types of locales can be highly distracting for both you and the respondent. Therefore it is important to choose a locale in which a quality recording can be made. Libraries are generally excellent spots to conduct interviews. They are usually easy to get to, have good parking, and are quiet, safe, and non-threatening. In

addition, libraries tend to have places you and your respondent can tuck into for conversations that require some privacy.

5. *Be sure that both you and the interviewee block off plenty of uninterrupted time for the interview.*

Blocking off time means no distractions. Clear your schedule, turn off your cell phones, and make sure to block more time than you will probably need. What happens if the respondent starts into a story that is the best part of the interview and you have scheduled yourself too tightly? No one should need to rush off to another meeting because you did a poor job of scheduling. It is your job as the interviewer to make sure that both the respondent understands you do not want distractions and she or he has a realistic expectation for how long the interview may last.

6. *Have genuine care, concern, and interest for the person you are interviewing.*

In our fast-paced, largely self-focused world people rarely listen openly and fully to others. When you as the interviewer are interested, your respondents can sense it and will respond by sharing more about themselves than you might have expected. So look your respondent in the eye, listen intently, and find out what is interesting about them. It may seem a bit magical when you realize how much good listening helps people open up and share their lives with you.

7. *Use basic counseling skills to help your interviewees feel heard.*

The counseling profession is constantly thinking about how to become better listeners who can help clients share their stories and many of the techniques they employ are quite useful to qualitative researchers as they work with their respondents. It is worth your time to read a basic book on counseling techniques so that you may learn how to become a good listener with whom people feel comfortable sharing their stories. Learning skills such as attending and reflection (Conte, 2009) coupled with understanding nonverbal behavior help people understand that you are not only listening, but you are also understanding what they say. When people feel heard and understood, they are more likely to share.

8. *Keep it focused.*

Sometimes a respondent strays too far from the question you asked. In some instances, this detour may prove fruitful as it may help you discover things that you did not think to ask. In other instances, it may become apparent that either your respondent misunderstood the question or she or he is on a non-useful tangent. Remember that you are in control of the interview and if your interviewee veers off too much, you can bring them back. The prompts you built into your interview protocol will help you keep the interview on-track; use them to make sure you get the information you need.

9. LISTEN! LISTEN! LISTEN!

Seriously, close your mouth and listen! It is important to remember that while you are getting to know your interviewee you should not let your experiences overtake theirs. While it is fine to share things about yourself to build trust and get the conversation going, you are working to understand someone else's life experiences. If you talk too much, you may miss the best part of the story, so work hard to listen to your respondent. Truly listening to another person is one of the hardest things to do. Most people are so busy composing what they will say next that they never fully listen. Close off that part of your mind that is thinking about how the interview is going, what you will have for lunch, and all of the things that need to get done this week—listen and you will be rewarded with many great stories.

10. End with your script.

Just as the beginning script contains important information that your respondent needs, so does your ending script. Do not skip letting people know how you will proceed from here and what they can expect after the interview. Again, you do not need to read this script word for word, but it is important to have it in front of you and to follow it carefully.

Conducting qualitative research can be exciting for both the seasoned researcher and the new researcher alike. When others open up their lives for us to investigate, it is a gift for both the speaker who is heard and for the listener who learns something from the investigation. As qualitative researchers who conduct interviews we are privileged to be able to do research by talking to others, and we hope that our tips help students new to the method conduct interviews that are interesting and lead to new understanding about the human condition. Researchers need people's stories for many reasons. They help us describe people, explain phenomena, and can lead to improvement in many fields of study. When we faithfully nurture other people's stories, not only our separate fields of study, but also the field of qualitative research can be enriched by what we learn.

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