

Writing Questions for Interviews and Focus Groups

COMM 428C

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The kinds of questions that make sense in focus group or interview research are completely different than the ones we use in surveys. Or the kinds we use when we want direct answers, like in journalism. In interviews and focus groups we want to start with very GENERAL questions, allowing participants to instruct us on a topic, from their perspective. (If a question can be answered with a simple “Yes” or “No,” it’s probably not a good question for qualitative research.) Types of questions and examples follow, based on an investigation of the kinds of communications students used to make decisions about which college they would attend.

Non-directive questions: Questions that allow participants to act as “teachers,” drawing on their widest possible experiences. There are eight basic types:

1. **Grand Tour question:** A question that asks your participant to play “tour guide,” explaining an activity, event, relationship or role. (Ex. So what’s it like to go through the college decision-making process in the 21st century?)
2. **Memorable-tour question:** A question that asks your participant to focus on one “standout” experience, or a turning point in their life. (Ex. Can you tell me about the moment you realized you were going to Penn State?)
3. **Timeline question:** A question that asks your participant to talk about the “steps” between two events in the participant’s life. (Ex. From the time you decided to go to PSU until the day you arrived on campus, what steps did you take to make sure you were ready to succeed in the PSU environment?)
4. **Baiting probe:** A follow-up question designed to have the participants further explore their emotional state. (I’ll bet you were pretty excited when you got that acceptance letter.)
5. **Example question:** A question that asks a participant to name a specific case in point for a general phenomenon. (Can you give me an example of a conversation you had with your parents that let you know they supported your decision to come to PSU?)
6. **Why question:** Sort of self-explanatory – a question that asks a participant to explain the rationale for some event even further, sometimes providing a supposition when the real reason is unknown. (Ex. Why do you think so many people find the college decision making process stressful?)

7. **Posing the ideal question:** A question that asks a participant to imagine a “perfect” version of some phenomenon, interaction or object. (Ex. What would the perfect college interview be like?)
8. **Projective question:** A question that asks a participant to explain relationships between objects, people, places and ideas that are ambiguous, in order to discover the emotions and motivations associated with those things. (Exs. If Harvard was an animal, what animal would it be? Finish this sentence: You know you picked the right college when I...)

Directive Questions: A question that clarifies information given in previous answers. There are six basic types:

1. **Structural question:** A question that asks a participant to categorize a phenomenon. (Ex. What are the different types of colleges students in your home town think about attending?)
2. **Compare-contrast question:** A question that asks a participant to draw distinctions between aspects of a phenomenon or topic. (Ex. What is the difference between attending a large, state affiliated college and attending a small, private college?)
3. **Emergent idea question:** A question that allows a participant to formulate or refine an idea that has come up in the course of an interview. (Ex. So I think what I’m hearing is that economics is really the least important reason for choosing a college. Is that right?)
4. **Devil’s advocate question:** A question in which the interviewer poses an alternative or hypothetical example to the participant, forcing them to think outside of their lived experience. (Let’s say, for the sake of argument, that you could have gotten into any undergraduate program you wanted – you’re the President’s daughter, you have perfect SATs, you’ve already won scholarships to study in the field you want. Do you think you would wind up at the same school?)
5. **Photo elicitation:** A question in which a visual prompt is used. (Ex. *student is handed a picture of the Nittany Lion with a bunch of grads in regalia next to it.* How does this picture make you feel?)
6. **Vignette:** A short story that allows the participant to imagine a role they could play. (Ex. Imagine you meet a student from your high school struggling with the decision of where to go to college. What advice do you give them?)

* Based on Lindlof and Taylor’s *Qualitative Communications Research Methods*