



Using Standard Phrases in Qualitative Interviews

What are the benefits of using qualitative interviews to collect data?

By using open-ended questions, qualitative interviews provide the opportunity for program participants to describe their experiences *in their own words* (Patton, 1987). By listening to their perspective, you can learn about important aspects about the participants' experience that you may not have known about before or thought to ask about on a quantitative survey. Important aspects may include the terminology that participants use to describe their experience as well as their knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors during the experience.

Why is it important for interviewers to be consistent and neutral when interacting with program participants during qualitative interviews?

Just as you want to reduce any sources of bias in a laboratory study, you want to reduce bias when conducting qualitative interviews as well. In other words, you want *all interviewers* to treat *all participants in the same manner* during the interview. Therefore, to reduce bias, all interviewers need to be **consistent** and **neutral** (Patton, 1987).

For instance, say you are interviewing participants in a nutrition program. If you did not treat all participants the same in the interview, your conclusions about participants' experiences may be undermined by any differences in how you treated participants in the interview.

Say you found that program participants who mentioned positive aspects of the program talked in more detail than participants who mentioned negative aspects. However, your finding may be undermined by the fact that you may have, even inadvertently, encouraged participants to talk more when they mentioned something positive by using reinforcing statements such as "I think you've mentioned a really good point." Likewise, you may have discouraged participants from talking more when they mentioned something negative by using statements such as "I'm disappointed to hear you didn't like that aspect of the program."

TO BE **CONSISTENT**, INTERVIEWERS SHOULD:

- Always read the instructions to each participant as stated.
- Ask every question as stated.
- Ask questions in the order as stated.
- Memorize and use standard phrases in response to a participant if a participant does not understand a question, or gives tangential or overly lengthy answers.

TO BE **NEUTRAL**, INTERVIEWERS SHOULD:

- Avoid agreeing or disagreeing with a participant.
- Avoid indicating that a participant's answer is 'right,' 'wrong,' 'good,' 'poor,' or 'interesting.'
- Avoid suggesting an answer or interpreting a question for a participant.
- Avoid giving their own opinions during the interview.
- Memorize and use standard phrases in response to a participant who is "chatty" or asks for the interviewer's opinion.

Reference

Patton, M.Q. (1987). Depth interviewing. In *How to use qualitative methods in evaluation* (pp. 108-143). Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

The reference citation for this Tipsheet is: Kiernan, M., Kiernan, N.E., & Goldberg, J. (2003). Using Standard Phrases in Qualitative Interviews. Tipsheet #69, University Park, PA: Penn State Cooperative Extension.

Available at: <http://www.extension.psu.edu/evaluation/pdf/TS69.pdf>

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Standard Phrases to Encourage or Clarify Responses

To encourage the participant to continue, use a neutral and 'minimal encourager'	<i>[Best option: a five-second silence]</i> "Uh-huh." "I see." "O.K."
To learn more about a participant's viewpoint	"Can you tell me more about that?" "Tell me more about that."
To clarify a muddled point	"I'm not sure I understand. Would you explain further?"
To clarify a vague point	"Would you give me an example of that?"

Standard Phrases to Limit Responses

To limit tangential or overly lengthy answers	"You've offered comments on some other topics. So that we can get through the questions we need to cover for the interview today, let's turn to the next question." <i>[Then ask the next question].</i>
To further limit tangential or lengthy answers	"_____ <i>[participant's name]</i> , could you focus just on your response to the question _____." <i>[Ask the question as previously stated].</i>
To end tangential or lengthy answers	"_____ <i>[participant's name]</i> , I need to stop you for a moment to remind you that we still have other questions to cover. Please focus only on your answer to the question _____." <i>[Ask the question as previously stated].</i>
To limit tangential questions	"According to the interview procedures, I need to ask everyone the same questions in the order they're presented. If there is time at the end of the interview, I can answer your question."
To limit responses that are more appropriately handled in another type of setting, e.g., a therapy session rather than a research interview	"You're sharing some feelings that may have arisen. But I need to follow the particular questions in order and length because this is a research interview." <i>[Then move to the next question].</i>

Standard Phrases for Maintaining Control During an Interview

If you are caught off guard by a participant's response or something goes unexpectedly awry, give yourself a little time to regroup	"Can you tell me more about that?" <i>[Then go onto the next question. Do not improvise during the interview].</i>
If a participant doesn't understand or know how to answer a question	"I'll repeat the question for you. The question was: _____." <i>[Then pause].</i>
If the participant still doesn't understand the question	"You can interpret the question however you'd like." <i>[Do not rephrase the question].</i>
If the participant mentions something during the interview that must be followed up according to the human subjects protocol (e.g., adverse event)	"Can you tell me more about that?" <i>[Then proceed to the next question. If necessary, return to the issue after the interview is finished].</i>
If the participant cannot decide between two answers to a question	"I'll repeat the question so that you can give the answer that best reflects your feelings." <i>[Then repeat the question].</i>
If the participant provides an irrelevant answer to a question	"That's a point, but that's not exactly what I asked." <i>[Then repeat the question].</i>
If the participant asks for interviewer's opinions or feelings	"We're interested in getting your opinion."
If the participant asks for reassurance or confirmation from interviewer regarding answers or asks whether other people feel similarly	"People have a variety of feelings about these issues. We're interested in getting your opinion. There are no right or wrong answers."
If a participant already or partially answered an upcoming question	"You mentioned this before, but I'd like to follow up with this question to see if you have anything to add." <i>[Then ask the question].</i>