

An interview is any situation where someone answers questions asked by someone else. It enables the collection of primary research data (that is, information and perspectives directly from people rather than from secondary sources like books, newspapers, and television reports). For a geographer, the interview is an important method of collecting information and data that can be used for analysis and problem solving.

Interviews, like most text formats, can range from very informal (e.g., asking a friend for information) to very formal (e.g., asking a witness in court to explain what she saw). You may need to adjust some of the following guidelines to suit the level of formality of your particular interview project, however, the basic procedure is similar for most interviews.

Suggestions for Students

Before the Interview

A successful interview depends to a great extent on the thoroughness of the preparation that went into it. The more prepared you are, the more comfortable your interviewee will feel, and the more you will be able to learn.

1. Confirm the availability of the person you want to interview. Contact the individual to make an appointment and let him or her know the purpose of your interview. Also be sure to ask for permission to audiotape the interview.
2. Conduct background research on your topic and on your interviewee. Think about why you want to interview this particular individual and what she or he can tell you about your topic.
3. Brainstorm a list of questions you might like to ask. Keep your list of questions relatively short and precise. Five or six carefully planned questions will result in a better interview than a long list of random questions. Read over the "Good Interview Questions" in the box below.

Good Interview Questions

The following kinds of questions will encourage your interviewee to talk freely and comfortably and provide the information you are looking for:

- Ask open-ended questions, ones that cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" answer.
- Ask questions that are clear and direct and as objective as possible. Try to not let the phrasing of your question lead your interviewee to answer in a particular way.
- Balance questions that ask for factual information with questions that ask for opinions or perspectives.
- Your opening questions should be easy to answer and clearly related to the purpose of the interview. You should try to put your interviewee at ease and show that you are interested in him or her, and demonstrate that you have done your research.
- Most importantly, ask questions to which you genuinely want to know the answers; that is, to get the information that you really want to get.

During the Interview

1. Arrive promptly for the interview appointment.
2. Remind your interviewee of the purpose of the interview and test your recording equipment. Check again for permission to record the interview.
3. In addition to recording the interview, take notes of details of the setting, the appearance, voice, and gestures of your guest.
4. Ask your questions, keeping in mind the following guidelines:
 - Ask brief questions one at a time. Resist making statements of your own.
 - Do not answer the question for the interviewee.
 - Be a good listener and remember to maintain eye contact and show attention to body language. Avoid saying "right" or "okay" after every response.
 - Give your guest time to think and respond fully before you move to the next question. Do not interrupt unless it is necessary due to time restrictions.
 - Rather than simply following your prepared questions, build new questions based on answers given. Ask for examples or ask how one comment connects to others made before.
 - Don't say you understand something unless you really do.
 - Don't be afraid to ask simple questions, or ask to repeat if necessary.
 - Before concluding the interview, ask if there was anything else that the interviewee might consider important and may wish to add.
 - Thank your interviewee very much for the time and thought given.

After the Interview

1. Send a thank-you note to the person interviewed.
2. Read over your notes and listen to your recording immediately while the interview is still fresh in your mind.
3. Date and label your notes and tapes for easy retrieval.
4. Reflect on the success of the interview, noting which techniques you used and which ones were successful or not successful.
5. Acknowledge the source of information in your research project.