

## Structuring the Interview

While each type of interview (survey, probing, employment, appraisal, persuasive, counseling, and health care) requires a somewhat different structure, certain principles and techniques are applicable to all. This chapter focuses on these principles and techniques and divides the interview into three major parts: (1) the opening, (2) the body, and (3) the closing.

### **The Opening**

⇒ initial appearance  
 ⇒ professional dress  
 ⇒ looking trustworthy.

The few seconds or minutes spent in the opening is often the most important period of the interview, for what you do and say sets the tone for the interview and often determines whether you will be able to get beyond Level 1 interactions. The tone may be serious or lighthearted, formal or informal, professional or nonprofessional, threatening or nonthreatening, relaxed or tense. Be sure the tone is the one *intended* and most *appropriate* for each encounter.

*imp* The opening's primary function is to motivate both parties to participate freely and communicate accurately. A poor opening may lead to a superficial interview, inaccurate information, or no interview at all. If dissatisfied with your initial approach, a person may say no, walk away, close the door, or hang up the phone.

### **The Two-Step Process**

*imp* A two-step process of establishing rapport and orienting the other party encourages participation. Situation, interviewer preference, and the relationship between interviewer and interviewee determine which step comes first, what is included in each step, and how content is communicated. Establishing rapport is a process of creating goodwill and trust between interviewer and interviewee, and it often begins with a self-introduction ("Good morning, I'm Melissa Johnson") or a greeting ("Good morning, Bob") accompanied by nonverbal actions such as a firm handshake, eye contact, a smile, a nod, and a pleasant, friendly voice.<sup>1</sup> The rapport stage may then proceed to personal inquiries ("What's new?" "How are things going?" "How have you been?")

"Door Step Technique"

... and introduce.



and on to small talk about the weather, sports, families, current events, and so on. You may flavor the personal inquiry and small talk with tasteful humor. Customs of the geographical area or the organization, relationship and status differences between the parties, formality of the occasion, and interview type and setting determine the appropriate verbal and nonverbal rapport building techniques in each interview. Be careful of overdoing this stage because you can turn off an employer, client, or respondent with too much sweet talk, particularly if you appear to be insincere.

Orientation, the second step in the opening, may explain the purpose, length and nature of the interview, the organization responsible, how the information will be used, and why this interviewee was selected. Rapport and orientation are often intermixed, but whether separate or not, they reduce "relational uncertainty" so that each party is aware of the degree of warmth or friendliness (affection) that will pervade the interview, how control will be shared, and how interested each is in taking part (inclusion). An inadequate

opening may mislead one or both parties and create problems during or following the interview. The rapport and orientation steps are illustrated in the following opening from a persuasive interview:

**Persuader:** Good evening, Mr. Warwick. I'm Jessie Addison from World Auto Insurance. I talked to your wife a few days ago.

**Persuadee:** Oh yes, she said you were coming over this evening. Come in and sit down.

**Persuader:** You have a very nice home in a lovely neighborhood. How long have you lived here?

**Persuadee:** About seven years. We enjoy the home and the area, and it's been a great place to raise a family.

**Persuader:** When I called your wife, she said you have two policies coming due, one on a 1985 Honda and the other on a 1987 Oldsmobile wagon.

**Persuadee:** Yes, that's correct.

**Persuader:** My main purpose this evening is to introduce you to the policies, benefits, services, and low prices of World Auto. What do you know about our company?

### ***Common Opening Techniques***

The following are common opening techniques. Each may serve as an entire opening, aid in rapport building, or initiate the orientation.<sup>2</sup>

1. ***Summarize the problem.*** This technique is useful when an interviewer is unaware of the problem, vaguely aware of it, or unaware of details. For example:

Since we installed the word processors nearly five years ago, there has been a steady increase in the number of errors in our records. The attitude of the staff seems to be that since errors can be corrected easily, they are no problem. But many of these errors are going undetected until our customers ask questions or complain about accounts. I would like to discuss some ways to solve this problem.

There are occasions when stating the purpose of the interview would make its achievement impossible. This is true, for example, in research interviews and in some survey interviews. You may need to withhold your purpose or disguise it to get honest, unguarded answers.

2. ***Explain how the problem was discovered.*** This technique explains how the interviewer discovered the problem and then usually summarizes it. Be honest and specific in revealing sources of information. For example:

Last evening I was reviewing our third-quarter audit and discovered that losses to shoplifting increased nearly 12 percent over the second quarter. I would like to get your reactions to some new security procedures I'm developing.

3. ***Mention an incentive or reward for taking part.*** This technique can be effective if the incentive is appealing to the respondent, a monetary reward, for example. Be careful of this technique because many

salespersons use a gift to motivate people to listen to sales pitches. For instance, if you begin an informational interview with this opening, you may never convince the interviewee that you are not a salesperson pretending to be a pollster. The following is an incentive opening.

Good evening. I'm Terry Keck from the Washington County Planning Commission. We are conducting a study of current zoning laws and how they are affecting older housing areas such as this one. We hope this study will result in zoning changes that will protect and enhance the value of older homes and neighborhoods.

4. **Request advice or assistance.** This is a common opening technique because assistance is often what an interviewer needs. The request may begin the orientation process, so be clear, precise, and sincere. For example:

Kathy, I'm preparing a market survey for Model X3, which was released to several stores two months ago. Would you respond to a series of questions I've worked up and tell me if any of them are unclear?

5. **Refer to the known position of the interviewee.** This opening technique refers to the respondent's position on an issue or problem. Be cautious in using it because a tactless reference to a known position may create antagonism or a defensive attitude. Here is a tactful opening:

Hi, Louise. I understand that you have some reservations about my proposal to expand the production facilities at the Webster plant and that you would prefer another location. I'd like to discuss my proposal and your reservations.

6. **Refer to the person who sent you to the interviewee.** Be sure the person did send you, and use this method only when you are fairly certain the interviewee knows and likes the person. It could be embarrassing or disastrous to discover after using a name that the interviewee dislikes or does not recall the person. Here is an example of this technique:

Professor Thompson? Professor Tudor in the history department said you might be able to give me some information on the archaeological diggings at Fort Ouiatenon.

7. **Refer to the organization you represent.** This opening refers to a group (Gallup, the *Times*, General Motors, University of Illinois) instead of a person. Mentioning the group represented may orient and motivate an interviewee to cooperate. For example:

Good afternoon. I'm from the Consumer Research Center at Eastern State University. We're conducting a study of automobile purchases during the past six months.

An interviewee's reaction to the name of an organization may be negative as well as positive, so lessen the potential impact by preparing for possible negative reactions. For example:

**Interviewer:** Hi, I'm Margie Kelley from the law firm of Kelley and Kelley.

**Interviewee:** Isn't that the outfit that tried to get that drunk driver off after he killed a mother and her three kids?

**Interviewer:** Yes, we represented Jo Adams because we felt she had the right to legal counsel and was more in need of treatment than punishment.

8. Request a specific amount of time. "Got a second?" is perhaps the most *overused* and *misused* opening technique. You cannot explain who you are or what you want in a second. State a realistic time and, by the end of it, either complete or begin to close the interview. If the interviewee has more time or wants to continue, the interviewee can say so. Here is an example of this technique:

John, do you have ten minutes to discuss a problem with me?

If you tell a person you need forty-five minutes, the person may say no, but if you do not reveal the time needed, the person may have to end the interview early because of another appointment. Either way, your purpose is not achieved. The best solution is to make an appointment for any interview that requires more than five or ten minutes.

9. Ask a question. Begin an interview with an open-ended question such as "What can I help you with?" "How may I be of assistance?" or "What types of computers are you most interested in?" Avoid closed questions such as "Can I help you?" or "Do you need assistance?" that a person can answer with a quick "No."<sup>3</sup> In order to enhance trust and cooperation, the open-ended question should be easy to answer and should not put the interviewee on the spot. Avoid questions such as "Do you want your children to have a good education?" which have a single, obvious answer and may be insulting to the interviewee. An open question may serve as a transition from the rapport-building and orientation functions of the opening to the informational, counseling, or persuasive functions of the body of the interview. Make these transition questions easy to answer and clearly relevant to your stated purpose.
10. Combination opening. The nine standard opening techniques are not the only ones available to an imaginative interviewer. As illustrated in these samples, you may combine two or more techniques:

**A:** Good morning. I'm George Williams from the telephone company, and I would like about five minutes of your time to get your opinions on the new billing system we initiated recently.

**B:** Hello. I'm George Williams from the telephone company. Your neighbor Cynthia McAlister said you might be willing to help with a study we are conducting to determine how we can improve the new billing system. Changes as a result of this study should make billings easier to understand and may even reduce charges.

### Quiz # 1—Interview Openings

How satisfactory are the following openings? Consider the interviewing situations and types, the techniques used, and what is omitted. How might each be improved? Do not *assume* that each opening is unsatisfactory.

1. This is a counseling interview taking place in a professor's office. The student has not made an appointment.

Professor Taylor, got a second? Are we going to do anything important in class on Friday?

2. This is a survey interview taking place at the front door of a home. The parties do not know one another.

Good evening. I would like to ask you some questions concerning your feelings about the recent teacher strike in Swiss County.

3. This is a journalistic interview taking place in the hallway near the Senate chamber between a reporter and a United States senator. The senator is heading toward a committee meeting.

Senator Smothers, would you comment on your committee's actions on short-term steps to relieve the balance of payments crisis?

4. This is an informational interview taking place in the office of a production line supervisor.

Hi! I've been sent to see you about a problem in my division; one I can't seem to handle.

5. This is a persuasive interview taking place between two business partners in an office.

I got a call last night, near midnight, from a person I won't name. She said you were thinking of altering your position against unionizing our shop. What's going on?

## The Body

### The Interview Guide

An interview guide is an outline of topics and subtopics to be covered. Guides help interviewers develop areas of inquiry (rather than random lists of questions), remember areas of information, record answers, recognize relevant and irrelevant answers, and determine which probing questions to ask. Since the interview guide is an outline, review the fundamentals of outlining so you can impose a clear, systematic structure on each interview.

## Structural Sequences

A topical sequence follows natural divisions of a topic. For example, an interview on road repair might be divided into three parts: budget, major projects, and equipment. An interview on a company budget might discuss research and development, production, marketing, and sales. Journalists frequently resort to single-word topic guides: what, when, where, who, how, and why.

A time sequence treats topics or parts of an interview in chronological order. For instance, an interview explaining a process might move from stage one to stage two to stage three. A recruiter probing into a student's educational background might proceed from junior high school to high school to college.

A space sequence arranges topics according to space divisions: left to right, precinct to precinct, top to bottom, east to west. A guide explaining the physical arrangement of a firm might begin by discussing the business office, then move to the printing area, and finally to the shipping room.

A cause-to-effect sequence deals with the causes and effects of an event, problem, or accident. An interviewer may prefer to describe an effect first (high unemployment, rising interest rates, and low production) and then move to causes.

A problem-solution sequence consists of a problem phase and a solution phase. For instance, a city engineer and a builder might begin an interview by discussing a zoning problem and then turn to how the problem can be settled.

Assume that you have decided to interview an experienced counselor for information to aid you in future interviews. First decide on the major areas of information you want, such as training, methods, experiences, and suggestions for the novice. Second, place possible subtopics under each major area, as in the following topical sequence guide:

- I. Training in interviewing
  - A. Courses in interviewing
    1. Formal
    2. Informal
  - B. Reading about interviewing
    1. Books
    2. Pamphlets
    3. Trade journals
  - C. Observing interviews
    1. Practice interviews
    2. Real interviews
- II. Experiences in interviewing
  - A. When
  - B. Where
  - C. Types
  - D. Frequency

### III. Methods used in interviewing

#### A. Preparation

#### B. Organization or structure

##### 1. Opening

##### 2. Body

##### 3. Closing

#### C. Questions

#### D. Special techniques

### IV. Suggestions for the beginner

Some areas (such as IV) may need no subtopics in order to assure free and open responses or to allow discovery of subtopics as the interview progresses. You may employ two or more sequences in an interview, such as a time sequence for major divisions and a topical or spatial sequence for subdivisions. Or the problem part of a problem-solution sequence may be developed from cause to effect.

### **Interview Schedules**

After completing an interview guide, decide if additional preinterview structuring is needed. The guide alone may be sufficient, or you may wish to turn all or part of it into questions. The outline of areas or questions you take to an interview is an interview *schedule*.

① A nonscheduled interview may be a detailed guide or merely a list of topics and subtopics. The nonscheduled interview is most useful when: the information area is extremely broad; interviewees and their information levels differ significantly; interviewees are reluctant or have poor memories; or the interviewer has little preparation time. The two *major advantages* of the nonscheduled interview involve the unlimited freedom to (1) probe into answers and (2) adapt to different situations and persons. The *major disadvantages* are that the nonscheduled interview requires a highly skilled interviewer, is difficult to replicate, provides no easy means of recording answers, presents problems in controlling the time factor, and allows interviewer bias to creep into unplanned questions.

② The moderately scheduled interview contains major questions with possible probing questions under each. Phrases in the interview guide become questions. The moderate schedule, like the nonscheduled interview, offers freedom to probe into answers and adapt to different interviewees and situations. In addition, it imposes a greater degree of structure on the interview, forces a higher level of preparation, aids in recording answers, and is easier to conduct and replicate. Since interviews tend to wander and become unstructured, listing questions makes it possible to keep the interview on track or return to the structure when desired. Journalists, broadcasters, medical personnel, recruiters, counselors, lawyers, and insurance investigators, to name a few, rely primarily on nonscheduled and moderately scheduled structures. A moderately scheduled interview would look like this:



1. What things, events, or happenings bother you the most these days?
  - a. What about natural disasters?
  - b. What about crime in the streets?
  - c. What about the economy?
2. What do you think economic conditions will be like four years from now?
  - a. What about economic conditions in this area?
  - b. What about economic conditions in this state?
  - c. What about economic conditions in the nation as a whole?
3. How do you feel about the president's handling of the drug problem?
  - a. How do you feel about mandatory drug testing of employees?
  - b. How do you feel about using the armed forces to fight drug smuggling?
4. How do you feel about government aid to localities stricken by natural disasters such as floods, tornados, and earthquakes?
  - a. What types of aid should the government give?
  - b. How should the amount of aid be determined?
  - c. Who should control the distribution of this aid?

③ A highly scheduled interview contains all the questions to be asked and the exact wording to be used with each interviewee, allowing no unplanned probing or deviation from the schedule. Questions are usually closed in nature so that respondents can give brief answers. Highly scheduled interviews are easy to replicate and conduct, and they take less time than either nonscheduled or moderately scheduled interviews. However, flexibility or adaptation are not possible, and probing questions, if any, must be planned into the schedule. Researchers and survey takers use highly scheduled interviews such as the following:

1. Which issue or problem facing America today bothers you the most?
  - a. What is the most important reason this issue bothers you the most?
  - b. When did this problem or issue begin to bother you the most?
2. Do you think economic conditions will be better or worse for you next year?
  - a. (If the answer is better): Why do you think economic conditions will be better for you next year?
  - b. (If the answer is worse): Why do you think economic conditions will be worse for you next year?
3. What three words would you use to describe the president's economic policies?
4. Which group of taxpayers do you think carries the heaviest tax burden?
5. Which group of taxpayers do you think carries the lightest tax burden?

⑥ The highly scheduled standardized interview is the most thoroughly planned and structured. All questions and answer options are stated in identical language to each interviewee who then picks an answer from those provided. Highly scheduled standardized interviews are the easiest to conduct, record, tabulate, and replicate, so that even novice interviewers can handle them. However, the breadth of information is restricted, and probing into answers, explaining questions, or adapting to different interviewees are not possible. Built-in bias may be worse than the accidental bias encountered in nonscheduled and moderately scheduled interviews. Respondents have no chance to explain, amplify, or qualify answers. Researchers and survey takers interested in precise information and replicability use highly scheduled standardized interviews such as the following:

1. Which one of the following issues or problems facing America today bothers you the most?

- World peace
- Taxation
- Inflation
- Unemployment
- Drugs
- Foreign competition

2. Do you think economic conditions will be better, worse, or about the same four years from now?

3. Do you think the president's war on drugs will be highly successful, successful, unsuccessful, highly unsuccessful?

4. In your estimation, which of these groups carries the most unfair tax burden?

- Farmers
- The wealthy
- Senior citizens
- The poor
- White collar workers
- Blue collar workers

5. In your estimation, which of these groups carries the smallest tax burden?

- Farmers
- The wealthy
- Senior citizens
- The poor
- White collar workers
- Blue collar workers

## The Closing

2. Closings are brief but important parts of interviews. Once you have asked or answered the last question or made the last point, it is tempting to take a deep sigh of relief. However, an abrupt closing may undo the rapport and trust established during the interview and make the other party feel like a discarded container—important only as long as the interviewer needs what's inside. Each interview forms or adds to the relationship between the parties and creates expectations. Thus, future interactions are enhanced by good closings and damaged by poor ones.

FOR → Say Thanks  
→ Say I will send u results  
→ Don't be happy

### Closing Techniques

The following are common closing techniques.<sup>6</sup>

1. Offer to answer questions. Be sincere in the desire to answer questions and give the interviewee adequate time to ask. Do not give a quick answer to one question and then end the interview.

Any questions?

Do you have any questions you would like to ask?

I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

2. Use clearinghouse questions. The clearinghouse question allows you to determine if you have covered all topics or answered all the interviewee's questions. It can be an effective closing if your request is perceived not as a formality or an attempt to be sociable but as an honest effort to ferret out questions, information, or areas of concern not discussed adequately. -

I think that takes care of everything I need. Can you think of anything I have missed?

Anything else before I leave?

Is there anything we have not discussed that you would like to bring up at this time?

3. Declaring the completion of the purpose or task. The four-letter word "well" probably brings more interviews to a close than any other phrase. When people hear it, they automatically assume the end is near and prepare for leave-taking.

Well, that's all the questions I have.

Okay, that should give me plenty of material for a good report.

Well then, with this one last signature, the contract is complete.

4. **Make personal inquiries.** Personal inquiries are pleasant ways to end interviews, but they must be sincere and show genuine interest in the interviewee. Interviewees judge sincerity by the way interviewers listen and react verbally and nonverbally.

When are you moving into your new home?  
Where are you going on your vacation?  
How's your daughter doing in law school?

5. **Signal that time is up.** This closing is most effective when a time limit has been announced or agreed upon in the opening. Be tactful in calling time, and try not to give the impression that you are moving the interviewee along an assembly line.

Well, that's all the time we have for today.  
Our time's up, and I have another appointment waiting.  
Wow, it's 3:30 already; our time went quickly today.

6. **Explain the reason for the close.** Tell why you must close the interview and be sure the justifications are real. If an interviewee thinks you are giving phony excuses, any future interactions will be strained.

I have another appointment waiting; perhaps we can. . . .  
I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to end our discussion because I have a class in a few minutes.  
I must leave now to get to the airport by five o'clock.

7. **Express appreciation or satisfaction.** A note of appreciation or satisfaction is a common closing because interviewers usually have received something—information, help, a sale, a story, and so on. Be sincere and avoid any verbal or nonverbal hint of sarcasm.

I've really enjoyed meeting you. Thanks much for your help.  
That's all the questions I have. Thank you for your time.  
I think we've accomplished a great deal today. I appreciate your willingness to come in early this morning.

8. **Exhibit concern.** Expressions of concern for the interviewee's health, welfare, or future are effective if they are sincere and not merely verbal habits. Be sure the note of concern is appropriate for your relationship with the interviewee.

Take care, and I will see you soon.  
Be sure to get in touch with me if you run into additional problems.  
I hope all goes well for you in your new position.



9. **Plan for the next meeting.** It is often appropriate to arrange the next interview or reveal what will happen next, including date, time, place, topic, content, or purpose.

Let's get together again on October 16 at 10:00 A.M. and see how things appear at that time.

Okay, when we meet on the tenth, we should be prepared to review the final draft of the contract.

We will notify you in about two weeks of the results of this interview and whether we would like you to come to Milwaukee for another one.

10. **Summarize the interview.** A summary is a common closing for informational, appraisal, counseling, and sales interviews. Summaries may repeat important information, stages, and agreements or verify accuracy and agreement.

It's agreed, then, that I will write up a preliminary report that includes design, labor, and materials cost for phase one of the office complex while you check the figures with your home office and contact me by Friday if there are any necessary changes?

### **Nonverbal Closing Actions**

Nonverbal actions may intentionally or unintentionally signal that the closing is commencing. Actions perceived as leave-taking signals include straightening up in your seat, leaning forward, standing up, moving away from the other party, uncrossing your legs, placing your hands on your knees as if preparing to rise, breaking eye contact, offering to shake hands, making various hand movements, smiling, and looking at the clock. Remember that any behavioral act may be interpreted in a meaningful way by the party observing the act. Unconscious movements such as glancing at a watch may cause an interviewer or interviewee to feel pressure to close an interview prematurely. Be constantly aware of what your words and actions are saying to the other party.

Interviewers usually combine several techniques into a complete closing, such as the following:

Well (glancing at a watch), I see our time is up. (leaning forward and smiling) I think it's been a good session (rising from the chair) and that we are close to an agreement. (shaking hands with the interviewee) I appreciate your meeting on such short notice. Take care of yourself, and I will see you at ten next Monday. (a waving hand motion)

Decide before or during each interview which combination of closing techniques is most suitable. Your role in the interview and perhaps your relationship with the interviewee may dictate some techniques, rule out others, and determine who will initiate the closing, and when.