INTERVIEWING

Semi-structured interviews for qualitative research: *writing the schedule, asking experiential questions, and listening well.*

A semi-structured interview is a conversation with a purpose. The researcher brings a short schedule of open questions and holds it lightly, so that the participant leads and the researcher follows, asking for more wherever the account matters. It is the main source of data for interpretative phenomenological analysis, reflexive thematic analysis and framework analysis, and this guide is for postgraduate students and researchers planning their first qualitative interviews.

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Ada, Ellis, Noor and Priya are fictional participants in QualBuddy's repair-workshop example; the schedule, the exchange with Noor and every extract here were written for the guides, and nothing is real research data. The advice summarises the methods literature listed at the end; your ethics committee's requirements come first.

BEFORE THE SCHEDULE

What the method asks of the interviewer

Kvale offered two pictures of the interviewer. One is a miner: knowledge lies buried in the participant like metal, and the interviewer brings it up undisturbed. The other is a traveller, who walks through unfamiliar country, talks with the people met on the way, and comes home with a story shaped by the route and the questions (Kvale, 1996; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The semi-

structured interview belongs with the traveller: what a participant says is made in the conversation, with you, and your questions and silences are part of the data.

Three habits follow. Curiosity: wanting to know what this was like for this person, and accepting that you cannot know in advance. Following: the participant decides where the account goes, and your next question comes from what they have just said, not from the schedule. A tolerance of silence: a pause is usually where a person finds the next thing to say, and Brinkmann and Kvale count silence among the interviewer's questions. The not-knowing stance in our IPA step-by-step guide applies here too.

An interview is not a conversation

A conversation between friends is shared: both choose the topics, both tell stories, nobody records it. In a research interview you choose the subject and ask the questions, the participant does most of the talking, and afterwards you decide what their words mean. Brinkmann and Kvale call this an asymmetry of power, and a warm tone does not remove it. It is why consent matters, why you ask rather than tell, and why your own stories stay out of the room.

An interview is not therapy

Both ask about experience and feeling, both use silence and reflection, and a research interview can feel like being properly listened to. But therapy is for the client's change, and a research interview is for knowledge. You do not treat, you do not interpret aloud, you do not open what cannot be closed in the time you have, and you end with the person settled. If someone finds the interview helpful, that is welcome and not the aim.

THE PLAN ON PAPER

Designing the interview schedule: a few open questions, held lightly

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022) suggest six to ten open questions, each with possible prompts, for an interview of 45 to 90 minutes. That is fewer than most first-time interviewers expect; twenty questions make a questionnaire read aloud. The schedule has three parts, which Galletta (2013) calls segments.

An easy opening

One or two questions anyone could answer about themselves and the topic, to settle the participant and set the pace.

The substantive questions

Four to seven, each about one experience, from the descriptive to the reflective; the harder ground later, and never last.

A closing

A question that lets the participant say what you did not ask, and one about how it has been to talk.

Writing each question

- **One idea per question.** If "and" joins two things, write two questions.
- **Experiential.** Ask about a particular time rather than for an opinion or an explanation: "Can you tell me about the first time you took something in?"
- **Open.** Not answerable with yes or no, and not containing its own answer.
- **In everyday words.** No theory and no jargon.
- **Prompts and probes beneath each question.** Prompts are smaller, more concrete questions for a participant who finds it hard to begin; probes ask for more of what has just been said. Rubin and Rubin (2012) call the same structure main questions, probes and follow-ups. Two or three prompts per question is enough.
- **From the descriptive to the reflective,** which Smith, Flowers and Larkin call funnelling.

A worked schedule for the repair-workshop study

Our fictional study asks how people negotiate a place for themselves in a community repair workshop, a monthly event where volunteers help people mend their own things; Ada, Ellis, Noor and Priya were interviewed. The schedule below was written for this guide for an interview of about an hour, and its second question opens Ada's exchange in the reflexive thematic analysis worked example.

QUESTION	KIND	PROMPTS, IF NEEDED
To start, can you tell me how you first came to hear about the workshop?	Opening.	Who told you? What did you expect?
Can you tell me about the first time you took something in?	Descriptive.	What did you take? What had you already tried?
Can you take me through what happened when you got there, from walking in?	Narrative.	Who did you speak to first? What happened with the thing?
Can you tell me about a moment at the workshop that has stayed with you?	Descriptive.	What was happening just before? What did it mean to you then?
Can you tell me about a time at the workshop that was harder, if there has been one?	Descriptive; the harder ground.	What happened? Did you go back the next month?
What do you do while you are there, apart from the repair?	Descriptive.	How did that start? What would it be like to go without it?
How does going now compare with that first time?	Comparative.	What is different about walking in? What is the same?
What does the workshop mean to you now?	Evaluative.	How would you describe it to a friend who has never been?
Is there anything about the workshop we have not talked about that you would like to say?	Closing.	Then: How has it been, talking about this?

Print it on one page and learn it well enough to leave it on the table; a question answered early is crossed off, not asked again.

ASKING

Kinds of question, and the ones to avoid

Spradley (1979) gave ethnographers three kinds of question, descriptive, structural and contrast, and Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022) extend the list for experiential interviewing. Knowing the kinds shows when a draft schedule asks only one, usually the evaluative.

KIND	WHAT IT ASKS FOR	EXAMPLE
Descriptive	An account of an experience or a thing.	Can you tell me about the first time you took something in?
Narrative	The sequence of events.	Can you take me through what happened when you got there, from walking in?
Structural	How something is organised.	What happens on a workshop afternoon, from setting up to packing away?
Contrast	The difference between two things named.	What is the difference between being shown and being left to have a go?
Evaluative	How they felt about something described.	How did you feel about the help you were given that first time?
Circular	How they imagine someone else sees it.	What do you think the volunteers make of the people who come in?
Comparative	One time against another.	How does going now compare with that first time?
Prompt or probe	More of what was just said.	Can you say more about that? What was that like, right then?

What to avoid, and the better version

THE PROBLEM	AS ASKED	A BETTER VERSION
Leading	I imagine it was intimidating, walking in for the first time?	What was it like, walking in for the first time?
Closed	Did you enjoy your first visit?	Can you tell me about your first visit?
Double-barrelled	What did you take, and how did the volunteers treat you?	What did you take? Then, later: What happened with it?
Abstract or theoretical	How has the workshop affected your sense of agency and belonging?	What does going to the workshop mean to you now?
“Why”, asking for an explanation	Why do you bring biscuits?	Can you tell me about the biscuits? How did that start?
Jargon	How would you describe the workshop’s model of peer support?	How would you describe the workshop to a friend who has never been?

“Why” asks for a justification, and people supply one even when they have none. “How did that start?” asks for the experience, and the reasons come with it if they are there.

THE LITERATURE

What the method guides say about interviewing

Smith, Flowers and Larkin: the participant as the experiential expert

For IPA the semi-structured, in-depth interview is the exemplary method: one person speaks at length, in their own terms, about an experience that matters to them. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022) treat the participant as the experiential expert, whose account the interviewer helps along rather than directs: the schedule is learnt and then held loosely, the questions are open, experiential and few, and the interviewer follows leads and goes back to moments. Our IPA step-by-step guide has their advice in a short table.

Braun and Clarke: interviews for thematic analysis

Braun and Clarke's *Successful qualitative research* (2013) gives interviews a chapter of their own, as the route to rich accounts of experiences, practices and understandings across a dataset, which is what reflexive thematic analysis needs. The guide is designed carefully and used flexibly: an easy opening, main questions in ordinary language, nothing leading, a closing question that hands the floor to the participant, and a pilot first. Telephone and online interviews are considered alongside face-to-face ones.

Kvale and Brinkmann: the craft of interviewing

InterViews (Kvale, 1996; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) treats interviewing as a craft, learnt by doing it and by studying how skilled interviewers work. The interview sits within seven stages, from thematising, deciding what you want to know and why, to reporting, so purpose comes before any question. Their kinds of question are introducing, follow-up, probing, specifying, direct, indirect, structuring and interpreting, with silence among them. Roulston (2010) adds the reflective turn: study your own interviews.

BEFORE THE FIRST PARTICIPANT

Piloting the schedule

Interview someone before you interview anyone who counts: a colleague, a friend who resembles your participants, or a first participant treated as a pilot if your ethics approval allows it. Record it, then listen to the whole recording with the schedule in front of you, and better still transcribe it; nothing teaches interviewing faster than reading your own questions written down. Listen for:

- **Questions that ran on,** carried their answer inside them, or joined two ideas with “and”.
- **A new question asked** when a prompt, or nothing, would have kept the account going.
- **Silences you filled,** and what the participant was about to say.
- **Questions answered before you asked them,** to merge or cut; questions that produced nothing, to rewrite.
- **The time,** and where the interview slowed.

Then cut and reorder: eight questions become six, and a prompt that worked becomes a question. Finally, write in your reflexive diary what you noticed about your own interviewing, not about the participant: the habit of finishing sentences, the question you were reluctant to ask. This is the diary’s first entry.

IN THE ROOM

The interview itself, from setting up to the field note

Setting up

Book a quiet, private room for longer than the interview. Put the chairs at an angle rather than face to face, and the recorder nearer the participant than you, tested that morning and again in the room. Have water, the information sheet, two consent forms, the debrief sheet, your schedule and the distress protocol to hand.

Consent reaffirmed, the recorder tested

Go through the information sheet again in a few sentences: what the interview is about, that it is recorded and transcribed, who hears the recording, and that they can pause, stop or withdraw until the date on the form. Our transcription guide covers what happens to the recording next. Say that the recorder is about to go on, turn it on, speak the date and the pseudonym, and check that it is recording.

The opening minutes, and silence

Ask the easy question and let the answer take as long as it takes. Your pace sets theirs: hurry, and the participant learns that short answers are wanted; listen fully, and they learn what kind of listening this is. When they stop, wait. The words after a silence are often the ones the interview was for.

Prompts

The prompts beneath each question are for you. Use one when the account has stopped rather than paused, and keep it short and in the participant's own words: "You said 'he went'." A new question from the schedule is not a prompt; it changes the subject.

Going back to a moment

The most useful move in an experiential interview is to bring a moment back into the room: "Can we go back to the moment he handed you the iron? What was that like, right then?" Accounts given at a distance become descriptions of experience one moment at a time.

Checking understanding

Offer your understanding as a question and expect to be corrected: “So it was the walking off that mattered. Have I understood that right?” The correction is often the best data in the interview; Alex’s “Not safer. Just… less of a surprise” in our IPA guide became an experiential statement.

Distress, and the distress protocol

Interviews about experiences that matter will sometimes bring tears, which are not harm; most people, asked, want to go on. Notice, slow down, and ask whether they would like a pause, a break or to stop; do not probe the distress, and do not rush past it. Then follow the protocol your ethics committee approved: what you say, when you stop, the support information on the debrief sheet, who you contact if someone may be at risk. Tell your supervisor the same day; your own feelings go in the diary.

Closing, and the field note

Ask the closing question, then how it has been to talk. Thank the participant and say what happens next: the transcript, the pseudonym, the withdrawal date. Turn the recorder off where they can see it; what is said at the door is not data unless you ask and they agree. Then, before anything else, write a page: how the participant seemed, where the interview came alive and where it stalled, what you would ask differently, what it stirred in you. It is the first entry of the analysis, and it fades within a day. Move the recording to approved storage that day and delete it from the recorder.

AT A DISTANCE

Online and telephone interviews: what changes

Video and telephone interviews widen who can take part; six things change.

WHAT CHANGES	IN THE ROOM	ONLINE OR BY TELEPHONE
Rapport	Built in the first minutes, with the whole person present.	A few minutes of ordinary talk before the first question; by telephone there is only the voice.
Silence	A pause can be seen as thinking.	A pause can look like a frozen connection. Say “take your time” once, and wait longer than feels natural.
Recording	A recorder on the table, under your control.	The platform’s recording goes to the company’s servers. A recorder beside the loudspeaker, or a recording made on your own computer, keeps it in your hands.
Consent for recording	On the form, reaffirmed aloud.	On the form, naming the platform and where the file is stored, and said aloud again before recording starts.
Where the file lands	On the recorder, then in approved storage.	In a downloads folder, a synchronised folder or the company’s cloud, sometimes with an automatic transcript. Find every copy; keep one in approved storage and delete the rest.
Privacy and interruptions	Your room, your door.	Their home: ask who else can hear, suggest headphones, and agree what happens if the connection drops.

DEPTH

Interviewing more than once, and why small samples are not a weakness

A second interview, a few weeks after the first, changes what is possible. You have read the first transcript and can go back to its moments with better questions, and the participant has had time to think. Some IPA studies interview each person twice; the design belongs in the ethics application and the information sheet from the start.

Small samples follow the same logic. Rubin and Rubin (2012) describe what a qualitative interview is for as depth, detail, vividness, nuance and richness, and none of those comes from number. Six rich interviews make a better study than twenty thin ones. The sampling section of our IPA overview gives rules of thumb by level of study; reflexive thematic analysis usually uses more interviews, and each still has to be good.

AN EXCHANGE, ANNOTATED

Ten turns with Noor: a prompt, a silence, a return and a check

Noor came to the workshop with a radio and now helps at the soldering bench. The exchange is fictional and follows the third question of the schedule.

INTERVIEWER Can you take me through what happened when you got there, from walking in?

NOOR I stood in the doorway for a bit. Tables, people bent over things, a smell of solder. Someone pointed me to the bench at the back. The man there took the back off the radio and showed me the joint that had gone. Then he showed me the iron, once. And then he went.

INTERVIEWER He went.

NOOR To the next table. He said, have a go, I'm just there. And I thought, you're joking. [laughs] I had a hot iron in my hand and a thing I didn't want to break.

INTERVIEWER [silence, about four seconds]

NOOR I did it, though. Three goes. He came back when it was done, said that's a good joint, and went off again. It still goes, the radio.

INTERVIEWER Can we go back to the moment he handed you the iron? What was that like, right then?

NOOR Right then? Panic. And something under it. Like being trusted with something before you've earned it. Nobody had ever handed me a tool and walked off.

INTERVIEWER So it was the walking off that mattered, as much as being shown. Have I understood that right?

NOOR Yes. Well. Both. If he'd walked off without showing me I'd have gone home. It was the showing and then the leaving. That's what I

> do now at the bench. I show them once, and I hand it over and stand back.
>
> Noor · fictional interview, written for this guide

- **The prompt.** “He went.” Two of Noor’s words, with a question in the voice and nothing added. The account carries on and becomes more specific.
- **The silence.** After the laugh, the interviewer says nothing for about four seconds. “I did it, though” is the turn the interview was for; a new question would have lost it.
- **The return.** “Can we go back to the moment he handed you the iron?” takes Noor to one moment and asks what it was like right then. The answer moves from events to experience.
- **The check.** An understanding offered as a question. Noor corrects it, “Both”, and in correcting it says what the study is about.
- **What the interviewer did not do.** Ask why, fill the silence, or say “trust” before Noor did.

KEEP THIS BESIDE YOUR SCHEDULE

The checklist

Before

- [ ] Ethics approval and distress protocol to hand
- [ ] Information sheet, consent forms, debrief sheet
- [ ] Recorder tested, spare power
- [ ] Schedule piloted and learnt

The schedule

- [ ] Six to ten open questions
- [ ] One idea per question, in everyday words
- [ ] Experiential: moments, not opinions
- [ ] Two or three prompts beneath each
- [ ] Descriptive first, reflective later

In the room

- [ ] Consent reaffirmed, recorder checked
- [ ] First question easy, pace slow
- [ ] Silence allowed; prompts, not new questions
- [ ] Back to the moment; check understanding
- [ ] Distress noticed, protocol followed
- [ ] Closing question, thanks, what happens next

Afterwards

- [ ] Field note written within the hour
- [ ] Recording moved to approved storage, deleted from the recorder
- [ ] Diary entry on your own interviewing
- [ ] Schedule revised if needed

QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

Common questions about semi-structured interviews

How long should an interview be?

Most in-depth interviews run between 45 and 90 minutes, and an hour is a sensible figure for the information sheet. Shorter suits some people and settings, and a participant who is tired or unwell decides when it ends.

Should I send the questions in advance?

Send the topics, and say in your ethics application that you will. Participants should know what they are agreeing to talk about, and some need time to think or to arrange support. Sending every question tends to produce prepared answers, which matters most in IPA, where the interest is in experience rather than considered positions.

Can I use an interview schedule from a published study?

Yes, if the authors published it, often in an appendix or supplementary file, and you cite it. Treat it as a draft: it was written for their question and their participants, and it still needs adapting and piloting. If it is presented as a copyrighted instrument, ask permission.

What if the participant goes off topic?

Follow for a while: what looks like a detour is often how the person makes sense of the experience, and the schedule is not a list to complete. If the account has moved far away, wait for a natural pause and bring it back: “Can I take you back to the first visit?”

Do I need a second interviewer?

No. One interviewer is the norm, and a second person changes the room. For your own safety, follow your institution’s lone-working policy, usually someone knowing where you are and a check-in call afterwards. A supervisor listening to a recording, with the participant’s consent, teaches more than a second person in the chair.

References

The traveller and the miner come from Kvale (1996) and Brinkmann and Kvale (2015); the ethnographic kinds of question from Spradley (1979).

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These references do not imply endorsement of QualBuddy. This guide is a starting point, not a substitute for the literature, your ethics committee or your supervisor's guidance.