



## Eliciting skills for Insight

The word 'eliciting' is more appropriate than 'questioning', because you can get respondents to talk without always asking questions. You will use some questions and you should be aware of the difference between open and closed ones.

### **Open Questions: Who? What? Why? When? Where? How?**

**Open questions** invite the respondent to describe an external or internal situation, and encourage people to talk.

*"Who has been most influential in your choice of a career?"*

*"How do you make up your mind when there are 6 packs that all look similar?"*

*"Where do you go when you need a break from work?"*

*"Why do you listen to news programmes?"*

*"What does the station have in terms of what you need?"*

WHY can be interrogative, so embed it – soften it by putting it into a sentence *"I wonder why..."*

Open questions can be main questions and follow-up questions. You can start a topic: *"When did you decide you needed a new car?"* And then follow up with questions about what happened, actions taken etc.

### **Closed Questions:**

Closed questions can elicit just a yes/no answer, although in practice some people will give an open answer. They usually begin with the words **'Is', 'Are', 'Do', 'Did?' 'Has?' 'Was'**

They usually elicit information & establish facts. They are useful.

*"Is there are regular commute?"*

*"Did you always want to be a teacher?"*

*"Are you ready to do something new?"*

*"Was it a snowy Christmas?"*

They retain control with the questioner, so they can also close people down by not giving them a chance to elaborate. You will find yourself using them more if you are in a rush. You need both open and closed questions in interviewing and to be aware of which type you are using.

One danger of closed questions is that they easily become **leading** - because the desired answer is implied in the question:

*"Do you think you'd shop there more often if the prices were lower?"*

*"Are you concerned about the all the empty shops on the High Street?"*

*"Were you happy with the information the financial advisor gave you?"*

*"Do long forms on a website put you off signing up?"*

*"Was it a mid-life crisis that made you leave your job?"*

## **Probes and Prompts**

The interview is less like an interrogation if you use **probes**, which can also provide a more indirect form of questioning, as well as asking for more information.

*"Tell me more about...."*

*"Can you elaborate.....?"*

*"I wonder what....."*

*"And?"*

*"Would you explain more...?"*

*"Can you give me an example?"*

*"What else is there...?"*

*"Can you describe that for me?"*

*"What makes you say that?"*

*"What specifically interests you"?*

Be aware that there is a difference between *'what else?'* which implies there is something else, and *'Anything else?'* which implies there might not be.

**Prompts** can also help respondents remember and say more:

*"You said you had considered Citroen and Peugeot – what about Ford, Vauxhall, Fiat, Mini – any of those brands?"*

## Paraphrasing, Echoing and Reflecting

This is where the interview becomes more subtle. To **paraphrase**, repeat in your own words what the person has been saying. It makes the respondents feel understood and encourages them to talk more.

*"You said a couple of times you don't want to be late. It sounds like it's important for you to be on time?"*

*"You're saying...."*

*"In other words..."*

*"What I'm hearing is..."*

*"The picture I'm getting is..."*

You can also **echo** back the respondent's words with a questioning tone of voice, (not too often or you begin to sound like a parrot). Echoing is useful when people use words that are quite strong or unusual in relation to the situation:

R: *"If you are **faffing** around with your ticket..."*

I: *"Faffing?"*

R: *"I am **addicted** to Krispy Kreme doughnuts"*

I: *"Addicted?"*

R: *"That outfit was **hideous!**"*

I: *"Hideous?"*

**Reflecting** concentrates on the feelings within a statement, and depends on empathic understanding. Empathy is feeling with the other person, *as if* you were the other person. Being able to reflect *feelings* involves viewing the world from the respondent's frame of reference; what his thoughts, feelings and behaviours mean to him. A reflection is an interpretation of the respondent's emotional state and it is important to offer it back to them as a question, so they can confirm or deny it.

*"So having your ticket ready is about being organized, but is it also perhaps about not getting in the way of other commuters?"*

*"I'm picking up some disappointment in your voice. Is that how you are feeling?"*

*"You sounded as if you felt quite relieved to finally get what you needed?"*

## Challenging and clarifying

People are quite likely to contradict themselves as they explore their feelings and attitudes about a subject. When this happens, challenge gently by owning the confusion yourself.

*"I'm confused; earlier you said you had no interest, but now you seem to be saying you would consider one?"*

Interviewers can spend a lot of time **clarifying**.

*'When you say.....what do you mean by....?'*

It may be necessary to clarify the usage of certain words, or to analyse entire concepts.

*'So what specifically would 'good service' mean to you?'*

Another way to do this would be to ask for examples. It's important to clarify when you have received slightly conflicting information:

*"On the one hand, you are watching the clock before you leave, but on the other, you prefer to walk slowly on your way there?"*

## **Summarising**

This can focus, prompt, close the conversation on a particular theme, unstick a conversation, provide a platform to view the way ahead, help the respondent to see another perspective. It helps the researcher remember too, and to move onto another topic. You can ask the respondent if they agree with your summary. Summaries allow the interviewer to check they understand correctly and also make the respondent feel listened to and understood.

## **Deep Dives**

Instead of asking a series of direct questions, use probes to get more detail on the information you already have got, e.g.,

*"Can you tell me more about that?"*

*"If I could get inside your head....."*

*"What kind of (feeling/ experience) ....was it?"*

*"Is it like anything else you have come across before?"*

*"How important is that to you?"*

*"What were your feelings when that happened?"*

## **Other questioning strategies**

Significance                    *"How important to you is ....?"*

Hypothetical                 *"If you could....."*

Ideal situation                *"In a perfect world....."*

Devil's advocate            *"To put the opposite view for a moment..."*

Provocative                    *"I've heard people say..."*

Compare/contrast	<i>"Which would you group together and why?"</i>
Specifics	<i>"What do you see, hear and feel when you are happy?"</i>
Examples	<i>"Can you give me an example of...?"</i>
Narratives	<i>"Tell me the story of the day you ..."</i>
What's missing	<i>"I notice you haven't mentioned..."</i>
Summary questions	<i>"Taking all the factors into account..."</i>

Notice that with Devil's Advocate, you move out of your neutral interviewer mode, but it's OK because you say you are going to do it.

**Narrative questions** are particularly useful at the start of an interview. They signal that you want to hear a story and participants will talk more and give more details that if you are being very specific.

*"Tell me about getting to the station....."*

*"What was the story behind that choice?"*

*"How did you come to be in that situation?"*

### **Laddering into higher levels**

The question "why is that important to you?" is particularly powerful when used two or three times in sequence.

R: I have got to have a least a small heel when I buy shoes.

I: *Why is that important to you?*

R: Because I am not very tall and it helps me look people in the eye.

I: *And why is that important to you?*

R: Because I feel more confident and people don't patronise me.

This question enables you to quickly move from attributes to benefits. It is the basis of a formal, individual technique called [Laddering](#), but can be used in a depth or a group context.

### **Repeat receipts**

These are all the things interviewers say to show they are listening. These include variations on the classic "Uhhh" which is neutral. Others are: "sure" "yes" "OK", which commonly mean "I'm listening" during an interview, especially when accompanied by nodding.

Some interviewers will say: “*That’s great*” “*wonderful*” “*really interesting*” and so on. These also act as rewards and encouragements, so they have to be used with conscious awareness. Random usage will encourage respondents to stray from the topic. You may end up ‘rewarding’ comments and behaviours that are not useful in the interview situation. If you say, ‘*that’s interesting*’, sound as if you mean it,

**Paralinguistics** are the aspects of spoken communication that do not involve words. These may add emphasis or shades of meaning to what people say. Gestures, facial expressions, tone and pitch of voice are all examples of paralinguistic features.

[Watch this short video and see how many interviewing mistakes you can spot.](#)

## Listening skills

Think of active listening as: ‘***Listening to the music as well as the words***’.

Listening is a form of selective translation. It is selective because the interviewer has to choose to listen in the first place, and may listen to only parts of what the respondent is saying. Many blocks to listening can get in the way. The listener may hear mainly what he or she wants to hear – a very good reason for listening to tapes or reading transcripts afterwards. The listener puts the meaning into his or her own frame of reference, sometimes unconsciously substituting concepts with slightly different meanings.

It is hard to listen when the significance and meaning of the words is not clear. Technical words or regional sayings need to be clarified and understood at the start.

A degree of respect for the speaker is required to listen well. Other blocks to listening include:

- Making comparisons or even identifying with the respondent,
- Labelling,
- Rehearsing the next question,
- Filtering out ‘boring’ bits,
- Offering advice,
- Joking off or sparring,
- Correcting or advising the respondent,
- Worrying about being liked

All these blocks happen when the interviewer’s own thoughts and concerns intrude. That is part of the reason why focusing outward on the respondent is so helpful.

## Emergent interviewing – the key to insight

Most of the time the interviewer has a good sense of what questions to ask next, but sometimes you have to stop, listen, and make up questions based on what the respondent is saying.

This means you cannot put down all the questions in advance.

This is called emergent interviewing and it is a very important skill.



It's an integration of eliciting and listening that allows you to stay in the world of the respondent. That increases rapport and empathy, brings new insights and makes the research more robust. It allows the respondent to shape the research according to their own worldview and helps challenge any incorrect assumptions held by the researcher.

1. You are listening carefully to the respondent – noting what might be significant, emotional, what lies beyond the words.
2. You frame a question to explore what you have been hearing
3. You listen closely again to the answer
4. You frame another question to explore that.

It can be described as a virtuous circle, although it is more of a spiral as it progresses your understanding. You don't have to do it all the time, but at critical points it's fantastically useful. Notice that it will not be in the topic guide.