

Rapid Guide to Individual Interviews

Individual interviews are used in the majority of baseline and endline surveys, needs assessments, evaluations and similar studies. They usually involve an interviewer talking with a respondent for 30 minutes to an hour. Individual interviews allow you to gain a deeper understanding of people's knowledge, practices, experiences, emotions, beliefs, opinions and ideas. The two most commonly used types of individual interviews are structured standardised interviews and semi-structured interviews.

Structured Standardised Interview

A structured interview, following a set of pre-defined questions, is usually used as the basis for quantitative surveys. Respondents' answers are recorded in the questionnaire form (often using pre-defined answer options) and usually analysed quantitatively (i.e. producing mainly numbers and percentages). The structured interviews deny the interviewer the opportunity to add or drop questions, change their sequence or to alter their wording. Such an approach allows us to easily analyse the different answers of a large number of respondents and is commonly used to collect baseline and endline data.

Semi-Structured Interview

With a semi-structured interview, the format is entirely different. The semi-structures interview is a qualitative method of inquiry that combines a pre-determined set of open questions with the opportunity for the interviewer to explore particular themes or responses in greater detail. It does not limit the recording of respondents' answers to a set of pre-defined options. They are particularly useful for assessing respondents' opinions, suggestions and experiences. Their format allows the respondents to discuss and raise issues that you might not have considered. Semi-structured interviews (conducted prior to the survey) can also help you with formulating and refining the questions which you include in your structured interviews.

PREPARING FOR INTERVIEWS

Initial Preparations

- Describe the survey methodology. Take advantage of IndiKit's Rapid [Guide to Describing Survey Methodology](#).
- For structured interviews, prepare questionnaire (take advantage of the short and well-written guide [How to Write Awesome Survey Questions](#)). For semi-structured interviews, prepare interview guide - a list of main questions (topics) for the interview, including guidance for additional "probing questions" that help the interviewer to explore the topics in a greater detail.
- If your survey includes semi-structured interviews, choose the respondents carefully as collecting and especially analysing qualitative information can be time consuming.
- Hire the interviewers (and other staff, such as supervisors and note-takers, if required). As much as possible, select those who know how to make the respondents feel comfortable, ask questions in a neutral manner, listen well, know when and how to probe for more details and do not suggest any answers.

Training Enumerators

- Provide the training in a language everyone understands, using simple words and clear examples. If you doubt whether people understand a certain part of the training, ask them to explain it to you or their colleagues.
- Ensure that the training covers all topics included in the [QIV Checklist for Individual Interviews](#).
- Pay sufficient attention to explaining the sampling methodology, including what should interviewers do when the intended respondent is not available or refuses to participate.
- Explain all questions (including their meaning) in detail. Beware of the demand effect: you might not want to explain the motivation behind each question as it can influence the results through interviewers' behaviour.
- Allocate about 40% of the training's time for letting the trainees to practice being interviewers and respondents. One of the best exercises is having two interviewers to role play an interview while the others observe the process and provide their comments after. Consider using the [QIVC Checklist for Individual Interviews](#).
- Make required improvements based on the observations and provided feedback.

Pre-Testing

- Pre-test the questionnaire (and any other tools you use) with randomly selected 5-10 respondents who have similar characteristics as the surveys' target population (i.e. not, for example, your colleagues). Include people from different age groups, genders and socio-economic backgrounds.
- Identify questions which people find hard to understand or which result in confusing or unrealistic answers. Investigate the main reasons and make required changes (including re-training the interviewers).
- While pre-testing is often done after you train the interviewers, you might consider conducting a rapid pre-test before the training, so that the questionnaire used during the training includes as few mistakes as possible. After the training, interviewers can then conduct a brief pre-testing only, each of them interviewing 2-3 respondents and providing you with their final feedback and suggestions for improvements.
- Do not include the filled questionnaires from the pre-testing in your data analysis.

CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS

Timing: Consider carefully the respondents' daily schedule, work habits and seasonal activities.

Language: Always use the language the respondent is most comfortable with, including using local names for time, measurements, customs and socio-economic characteristics. If possible, avoid using an interpreter.

Atmosphere: It might be helpful if the interviewer plays down the fact that s/he wishes to conduct a "formal" interview. Respondents are likely to feel more at ease if they perceive the meeting more as a conversation rather than an "interrogation". The interviewers should also make the respondents feel important, clearly showing that they are particularly interested in her/his opinions because s/he is the person who knows something important.

Introduction: The introduction to an interview is crucial. A good introduction can effectively gain the respondent's trust and willingness to provide truthful answers, but a poor introduction can result in a refusal to cooperate or in biased responses. Ensure that the interviewers explain in simple words why they want to talk to the respondents, how the information will be used and why the survey is important (help them to do so by including a brief description of the background and purpose of the survey in the initial part of the questionnaire). It should also be clarified that whatever information the respondent provides will not result in (a lack of) any personal benefits.

Length of Interview: The interviewers should inform the respondents about the expected length of the interview (be realistic). It should last less than 40 minutes as longer interviews can make respondents tired and less interested in providing accurate answers.

Confidentiality: The interviewers should assure the respondents that neither they nor their organization will share the personal information (in other than an aggregated form) with any other people or institutions.

Consent: Ensure that after the interviewers introduce the survey to the respondents, they ask them for their consent to being interviewed. No respondent should be under any pressure to participate. If a respondent refuses to participate, the interviewer should thank them for their time and visit the next respondent (following the guidance described in the survey methodology).

Interview Recording: Since it is not easy to lead an interview and at the same record all the provided answers, it is recommended to work in pairs where one person asks question and the second records the answers (especially if you have many open-ended questions). These roles can be assigned during the training, depending on what each trainee does best. In some cases, an alternative option is to use voice recorders (provided that the respondent agrees); however, re-writing the recorded information is usually very time-consuming.

Closing the Interview: After all relevant topics have been covered (and the interviewer verified that no question was forgotten) or the respondent's time exhausted, the interview should be brought to an end. The respondent should be thanked for her/his time and given the appropriate customary farewell.

SOURCES OF ERROR AND BIAS

A question present in all survey work is *"How much can we trust the information people tell us?"*. Respondents' answers and interviewers' behaviour is influenced by a range of different factors which can negatively affect the quality of the collected data. The following text provides you with the most common types of errors and biases and provides you with practical tips for their mitigation.

Bias Induced by the Respondent

Self-Report Bias: People might provide incorrect answers because they expect some benefits; say what they think you want to hear; want to be polite; are afraid of the implications; or feel uncomfortable. A special type of self-report bias is **"social desirability bias"** when people often report inaccurately on sensitive topics in order to present themselves in the best possible light.

→ Train your interviewers in using the following **principles of sensitive interviewing**:

- ✓ *being friendly* – if people feel at ease, they might be less afraid to provide truthful information
- ✓ *explaining the importance of correct answers* – explain to people why it is so important that the information we receive is correct
- ✓ *setting the social norm* – if relevant, tell the respondent that other people reported both positive and negative information and it will be great if the respondent is **as honest as other people were**
- ✓ *using forced-choice answer options* where people have to select one of the pre-defined answer options without having the possibility to provide a neutral answer or saying "I do not know"
- ✓ *clarifying expectations* – explain that the answer which the respondent provides will not result in (a lack of) any kind of material or other support (if this is true)
- ✓ *assuring confidentiality* – assure the respondents that their answers will not be shared with anyone else
- ✓ *using indirect questions* (for example, *"If I asked the health facility how many times you came for a prenatal visit, what would they tell me?"*)
- ✓ *cross-checking answers* with other family members
- ✓ *verifying the answers* by using more types of (largely indirect) questions
- ✓ *trying to avoid asking directly about sensitive questions* (for example, people are often reluctant to say their true income)

Recall Error: People sometimes provide incorrect answers simply because they do not remember exact information (for example, *"How many of your chickens died in the past year?"* or *"How much money did you spend in the last months?"*).

→ Minimize the recall error by having a more reasonable recall period; dividing the question into several sub-questions (for example, *"How much money did you spend last week for food?"*, *"How much money did you spend last week for transport?"*, etc.); asking in a way that helps the respondents to remember their past actions; and acknowledging that data of this type are usually rather under- than over-reported.

Telescoping: By contrast, people tend to over-report the large purchases that they make in a given time period. If we ask a respondent whether he has purchased a mobile phone within the last 12 months, and he did so 13 months ago, he might remember the purchase but not its exact date. He will then incorrectly report that he purchased a mobile phone "within the past 12 months".

→ Minimize the error by using significant reference points, such as "since last Eid holiday" instead of the rather vague time frame of "within the past 12 months".

Prestige Effect: While people usually under-report their income and assets (due to their expectations, fears or reluctance to show wealth), in some cases they tend to over-report in order to avoid embarrassments caused by admitting poverty, poor consumption or certain social problems.

→ Assure people of their answers' confidentiality, tell them that other respondents provided honest answers (setting a social norm), and explain why it is important that truthful answers are provided.

Bias Induced by Interviewer

Your survey's data can also be compromised by the interviewers' behaviour. The most common examples are:

Surveyor Effect: The person asking the questions has a direct effect on the way they are answered.

- The first way of preventing against this effect is to invest sufficient time in training interviewers, focusing on ensuring that they ask the questions in the recommended and uniform way.
- The second measure is to monitor the interviewers' performance by using [QIV Checklists for Individual Interviews](#). Use these only after you do the [brief video training](#) on their use and trained the data collectors on the points the checklists monitor.
- Furthermore, randomize which data collectors conduct the interviews with whom, so that any negative effects are distributed among different respondents (for example, avoid letting one person to interview people in the treatment group only and another person in the control group only).

Desire to Help the Respondent: The interviewer may become too sympathetic to the problems and conditions of the respondent which might affect the conduct of the interview and the results gained.

- Explain to all respondents (including by using different examples), the important of gaining truthful data. Show them how biased answers can harm the people whom you aim to help.

Failure to Follow Instructions: It is often tempting for the interviewer to change the questions' wording. This can result in different respondents understanding the question differently and providing answers which are not comparable (as everyone had something else in mind). Particular problems may arise if the respondent does not understand the question as stated and the interviewer tries to simplify the question as the altered wording may have a different meaning.

- Pay maximum attention to pre-testing your questionnaire, so that you limit the situations where people do not understand (or misunderstand) the questions interviewers ask.
- Emphasize, during the training of interviewers, the importance of not altering the question's wording. The first step should always be to clearly repeat the original question.
- Allocate a sufficient number of supervisors monitoring interviewers' performance by using [QIV Checklists for Individual Interviews](#) and providing them with the required feedback and suggestions for improvement.

Reactions to Responses: When respondents give an answer, the interviewers sometimes show their emotional response, such as surprise, disbelief or disapproval. Such a reaction can easily bias the respondents' subsequent answers.

- Stress and practice during the training that the interviewer must always react in a neutral way, avoiding any confirmative or negative expressions.
- Monitor and improve the interviewers' performance by using [QIV Checklists for Individual Interviews](#).

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RESOURCES USED FOR PREPARING THIS GUIDE:

- PIN (2014) Data Collection Manual
- Tools4Dev (2014) [How to Do Great Semi-Structured Interviews](#)
- Tools4Dev (2014) [How to Pre-Test and Pilot a Survey Questionnaire](#)
- FAO, [Personal Interviews](#)
- Evaluation Toolbox, [Semi-Structured Interviews](#)