

# Interviews

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Alongside surveys, interviews are one of the most common methods of evaluating museum experiences and exhibitions. Interviewing people gives you the opportunity to dig deeper into responses than you can with a questionnaire, to find out motivations and probe the interviewees answers. You can get rich feedback and will often get more emotional responses, stories, or memories. Interviews can be used at any evaluation stage of your exhibition, project, or programme. You might use interviews to find out what your target audience thinks about a topic before you start the research for an exhibition (front end evaluation), or you could use them with staff or participants through the life of a project, or as a summative evaluation method to determine audience ideas once a display is open. Interviewing people is a skill, you might need to develop your listening abilities to become a good interviewer. Interviews can be carried out with just one person, or you could choose to interview a group of people; they can happen in person, or online. As with most evaluation, interviews works best when they are part of a variety of methods you are using to find out about your activity. Interviews can be helpful when you have already got some evaluation information, but you want to find out more about people's opinions, feelings, or knowledge.

### How to do it

- Decide what you want to find out

Plan your evaluation carefully so that you have clear aims and objectives. This will help guide the rest of your preparation and make your data collection stronger and more focussed.

- Who will you interview? How many interviews do you need?

Will you be interviewing everyone who took part in an event or project? Or a sample? If you are taking a sample, do you want them to be representative of the whole group? Sometimes you will need to use 'snowball sampling', where you ask one person to recommend other people to be interviewed. There are lots of different sampling methods, chose the one that works best for your project and fits with your evaluation plan that you wrote in the previous step. Consider whether you should be paying your interviewees for their time, don't take them for granted. Your budget may also influence the number of people you can interview.

- Plan your interviews

You might want to write out a detailed list of the interview questions, or you could decide on more open themes to discuss. Sometimes you will want to have more of a conversational style, where the interviewee also leads discussions. At this point in your planning, work out what style of interview you are interested in doing. If you are writing an interview schedule, try not to ask leading questions, keep them neutral and easy to understand. Don't ask more questions than you need, have a reason to ask each one.

- Pilot your questions and recording method

If you have written interview questions, test them out to ensure they are clear and are giving you the information that you hope for. Piloting will help you to check that other people understand the questions in the way you intend. It will also give you an idea of how long the interview might take and whether you can trim some of the questions. You will probably want to record the answers that

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the interviewee is giving you. You could use your phone, although be mindful of the ethics of having information on personal devices. Digital audio recorders might be a better investment. Some websites offer both recording and transcription, usually with a limited free version. Use the time that you are piloting your questions as an opportunity to check any recording system you intend to use so that you are familiar with it and confident it gives you the results you need. Try to pilot your interviews in the same location that you will do them in, so that you know that audio can be picked up clearly by the system you are using.

- Recruit your interviewees

Follow the sampling strategy you decided on if you are using one. Be honest with people when you recruit them, tell them what they are getting involved in and why you are doing it. This is good practise, but also helps to build that relationship of trust. Let people know the practical information: where do they need to be and when? Send out information sheets so that participants know what will happen to their personal information and data.

- Prepare any physical prompts

You could use images, museum objects or documents as props or prompts in the interviews. For some audiences these will help you to open up the conversation. Prepare anything you are going to use and store them somewhere easy to access. If the interviews will take place off-site, don't try to take too much.



*Figure 1: interviews do not have to be intimidating to be useful*

- Prepare the location

Where will you carry out the interviews? You might not have a choice about this, but you could select a venue that is relevant to the topic you are interviewing people about, or somewhere where you will not be interrupted or distracted. You could interview people online, if you do this then send out links in plenty of time and be in the meeting room ready to welcome the interviewee. If possible, use the online platform that they prefer and feel comfortable using. See the 'Ethics, safety and security' section below for some important things to consider for interview locations.

- Carry out the interviews

Explain the format of the interview, how long it will take, whether what they say is anonymous and confidential, how to get in touch with you after the interview and what you will do with the information they provide. You should give this information in a format that works for the participant, which will probably be in writing. When you begin, you will need to establish rapport with your interviewee, but don't go over the top. Don't mislead the person or promise something that you are not going to follow up. Do let them know how they can contact you after the interview has finished. Ask your questions one at a time and wait for the interviewee to respond. Don't be afraid of leaving silence, especially if you are interviewing someone online. You might need to direct

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a conversation back to your topics, but remember that your interviewee is the expert, they might be heading to a really important point that you have not considered.

You might find it helpful to take your own notes during the interview, even if you are recording the audio. You could jot down topics you want to return to, areas that need clarification or things that you don't understand, and then return to these at a moment that doesn't interrupt the flow of the speaker. Check that your recording system (and the back-up) are working every now and then during the interview. Do keep nodding and don't let the notetaking make it look like you are not listening. You want your interviewee to feel comfortable and confident that you are interested in what they are saying.

- Create a transcript and back everything up

Once your interview is finished, you need to create a transcript. Some online recording websites will provide an AI-generated transcript, but you will need to check that this is accurate. If you are not using automatic transcription, allow plenty of time to write this from your recordings. Name the files carefully so that you can find things easily. If you write your interview up very soon after it has happened, you could add things that you observed or noted down that were not captured in the recording, for example any nonverbal behaviour that might be significant: when they leaned forward, stood up, facial expressions etc.



Figure 2: an interview taking place in Borneo in the 1960s or 1970s. MAA collections DG.102008.PAO

### How to analyse the data

As with many qualitative evaluation techniques with free text responses, interviews can result in a lot of long form text. Your evaluation should have clear aims, so that you know what data you are collecting and why; this will help you to analyse your data. The results can still be difficult to interpret, and you can have hours of work to transcribe and analyse, so leave plenty of time to do this. You will need to familiarise yourself with what people have said, and then you could look for repeating patterns or themes. If you are speaking to several people on the same topic, look for changes between people and see if you understand what is happening. Check the conclusions you

draw from interviews against the results from the other evaluation techniques you are using.

Resource in the 'Further reading' section below have more information on analysing your interview data.

### Ethics, safety, and security

Your organisation or venue may require you to submit an ethics application in advance. Even if they don't, spend some time thinking about all the ethical implications of your interviews. If you are interviewing children, young people, or vulnerable adults, you should think carefully about the ethics of this. For all interviews, only collect relevant personal data and have a clear strategy on what you will do with it. Prepare an information sheet for the interviewee that states what will

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happen to their personal data and the interview, how the interview is being recorded, how those recordings will be stored and for how long, and who will be able to access them. You could conduct interviews in the museum space, or they could be off-site. Another person should always know where the interviewer is, when they will return, and they should have a check in at the end of the interview. When you are interviewing, stay aware of your surroundings and always keep your personal safety in mind. You need to find the balance between conducting the interview somewhere that is private enough for the interviewee to feel comfortable and can speak freely but is also safe for everyone. If the participant will be able to see quotes or the transcript before you publish, tell them, but don't make promises that you will not be able to keep. If you have guaranteed anonymity, the quotes you publish should be truly anonymous, participants should not be identifiable with a quick internet search with the details you give.

## Cautions and caveats

Be aware that some of your questions might provoke strong emotions or difficult feelings in the interviewee. This can happen even if you don't think your questions are supposed to provoke emotional responses. Piloting your questions before your data collection interviews will certainly help, but you might still be surprised at the direction an interview can take. Plan how you will help your interviewee if they do get emotional. How will you support and keep safe both interviewees and the interviewer? Are there any support networks that you can direct people to?

## Further reading and other resources

This resource has only scratched the surface of interviews for evaluation. A couple of non-museum publications that you might find helpful are:

- Steinar Kvale *Doing interviews*, Sage Publications, 2007.

An academic look at qualitative research interviews, this publication covers the process from ethics, how to carry out the interview, transcription, analysing and reporting. Useful if you are thinking about publishing the results of your interviews.

- Annette Lareau, *Listening to People*, University of Chicago Press, 2021.

A very practical guide to interviewing and observing people, with chapters on writing your notes, analysing the data, and writing up. The text is broken up with suggestions, lists of dos and don'ts and quotes from Annette's work. An easy read that will help you to think through the process and make you a better interviewer.

Museum examples:

- Louise Archer, Emily Dawson, Amy Seakins and Billy Wong, 'Disorientating, fun or meaningful? Disadvantaged families' experiences of a science museum visit.' *Cultural Studies of Science Education*. Vol 11:4, 2016, pp. 917-939.

A paper which combines interviews and visitor observation with 10 parents and 10 children from an inner-city school in London who visited the Science Museum. They spoke to the group both before and after their visit and observed them on their visit. There is quite a lot of theory in this paper, but the voices of the participants create a strong argument.

- Jennifer Bergevin, 'Narrative of Transformation: Stories of impact from activist museums', in *Museum Activism*, edited by Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell, Routledge, 2019, pp 348-358.

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In this book chapter, the author discusses a longitudinal study where they interviewed museum visitors in the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool and the Center for Civil and Human Rights in the United States. The interviews happened immediately after their visit, with a follow up six months later. The author was interested in whether their time in the museum had inspired or changed the visitors, and whether that was something that affected their actions later. There are lots of long quotes from individuals to support the arguments.

- Sue M. Davies, 'The co-production of temporary museum exhibitions', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 25:3, 2010, pp. 305-321.

Here the interviews are carried out with museum staff rather than visitors. Sue was interested in the development of temporary exhibitions, so alongside visiting them, she interviewed the people that produced them in 20 museums. This paper is a contrast to the others here, as it does not use supportive participant quotes, but the argument has been created from the interview data.