

# Key Terms in Qualitative Interviewing

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**Structured interview:** An interview that follows a specific, set structure in terms of the number of questions, their wording, and their order. When conducting structured interviews, the researcher seeks to follow the same protocol for each interviewee.

**Semi-structured interview:** An interview that combines a standard structure and some standard questions with room for unscripted questions, such as probes, follow-up questions, and additional, unscripted questions. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer may follow the pre-defined order and wording of questions, or may alter them if needed to better obtain the information that she/he is seeking.

**Unstructured interview:** An interview that does not have standard, pre-determined questions. Unstructured interviews often start with a broad, open-ended initial question, but then leave the interviewer free to explore the topic with the interviewee through whichever additional questions will best elicit the desired information.

**Interview protocol:** The written guide that an interviewer follows when conducting an interview. This guide contains the topics that will be explored in the interview and, depending on whether the interview is structured, semi-structured, or unstructured, it contains either the exact questions that will be asked and their order (in structured interviews), or a list of possible questions to be asked, which might be modified when actually conducting the interview (in the case of semi-structured interviews). Interview protocols also usually contain key information on the informed consent process which will be shared with the interviewee, as well as prompts for other information the interviewer wants to be sure to share or solicit during the interview.

**Informed consent process:** A process used to inform research participants, such as interviewees, of the purpose of the research, their rights as research participants, and any potential risks they might run by participating. This process is “designed to ensure study subjects understand what they are being asked to do and that they are voluntarily agreeing to do it.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> MIT Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects (COUHES), “Informed Consent,” available here: <https://couhes.mit.edu/informed-consent>



**Close-ended question:** A question that can be answered with a one-word (or very brief) answer; often these are “yes/no” questions or questions asking for a specific piece of information, such as a number or location; for example:

- Q: How old are you? A: 18 years old.
- Q: Are you currently in school? (A: yes or no).
- Q: What is the distance to the nearest police station? A: 2 kilometers.

**Open-ended question:** A question which requires a description or longer, free-form explanation as an answer. These questions are open to a much wider range of responses than close-ended questions, for which we usually can anticipate the possible set of responses. The following are example of open-ended questions:

- How would you describe your relationship with your supervisor?
- What was it like growing up in such a multi-cultural city?
- What are some of your earliest memories of school?



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