



Asking Open-Ended Questions and Probing the Answers

Asking Open-Ended Questions

1. Use open-ended questions

- What did you think of the program?
- How did you feel about the conference?
- Where do you get new information?
- What do you like best about the proposed program?

Be cautious of phrases such as “how satisfied” or “to what extent.”

2. Avoid dichotomous questions

These are questions that can be answered with a yes or no.

3. Focus the questions

Sequence from general to specific.

4. Ask uncued questions first, cued questions second.

Uncued: What is needed?

Cued: Here is a list. Are there additional needs?

Use of cued questions may unnecessarily limit your interviewee’s range of answers.

5. You may want to ask the respondent to “rank” their answers.

“You have identified the following as strengths of your community”
(strengths named). “Of these, which is the greatest strength?”

Probing Open-Ended Questions¹

A probe is used to encourage conversation without influencing the answer. Two kinds of probes are used for open ended questions. One is probing for clarity. The second is probing for either clarity or for additional information.

1. **Probing for clarity.** Because open ended questions tend to be very general (what do you think, why do you feel that way, etc.) respondents tend to answer in a general way, and to use general adjectives to describe situations and opinions. Thus, probing for clarity is often a matter of asking for a more specific response, or an explanation of a term.

¹This section is adapted from “Introduction to Interviewing: University of Illinois Survey Research Laboratory mimeograph”. 1982.

- For example:** Why did you choose this place to live?
- a. I like the water (which water?)
 - b. I like the location (why?)
 - c. I like the size (of what?)
 - d. It's convenient (to what? for whom?)

The best probes for clarity are the ones which tell the respondent exactly what you need to know, or what you want him/her to do:

- For example:** What do you mean _____
Could you be more specific about _____
Could you tell me a little more about _____

2. **Probing for completeness (additional information).** Once a clear answer has been obtained, the interviewer should probe for additional responses to the question. The best way to do this is to repeat the substance of the question as part of a request for further information.

- For example:** What else do you like
What other reason did you have

Note that "Is there anything else?" is considered a leading probe because it can easily be answered by a "No". It may also tend to make the respondent feel as though he/she is not really expected to provide further information because it could give the impression that the interviewer is interested in concluding the response.

Each additional response should be probed for clarity as necessary. Only when a clear response has been obtained should the interviewer probe for additional responses. It is important to note that these are two very different kinds of probing.

The interviewer should continue probing for additional responses until the respondent indicates that he/she has nothing else to say on the subject.

3. **Some Kinds of Probes:** Uses pauses and probes.
- Five second pause
 - Would you explain further
 - Would you give me an example
 - I don't understand