# CONTENTS

How to Use This Book iv  
Frequently Asked Questions vi  
Foreword xiii  
Introduction xv  

## CHAPTER 1

**The Importance of Interviewing in Design** 1  
User Insight in the Design Process 3  
When to Use Interviewing 7  
To Interview Well, One Must Study 9  
The Impact of Interviewing 10  
Summary 11  

## CHAPTER 2

**A Framework for Interviewing** 13  
Check Your Worldview at the Door 14  
The Brain Dump 15  
Make the Interview About the Interview 17  
Embrace How Other People See the World 17  
Go Where the People Are 17  
Be Ready to Ask Questions for Which You Think You Know the Answer 18  
Nip Distractions in the Bud 19  
Building Rapport 20  
Be Selective About Social Graces 21  
Be Selective When Talking About Yourself 21  
Work Toward the Tipping Point 24  
Acknowledge That the Interview Is... Something Unusual 24  
Listening 24  
Listen by Asking Questions 25  
Be Aware of Your Body Language 25  
Summary 27
CHAPTER 3

Getting Ready to Conduct Your Interviews 29
Establishing Your Objectives 30
Finding Participants (aka Recruiting) 36
Creating the Field Guide 39
  Introduction and Participant Background 41
  The Main Body 41
  Projection/Dream Questions 42
  Wrap Up 42
  Shot List 42
Scheduling Interviews 44
  Travel 44
Participant Releases and
  Non-Disclosure Agreements 45
Incentives 46
Summary 49

CHAPTER 4

More Than Just Asking Questions 51
Showing and Telling 52
Bring the Tools 55
  Mapping 55
Reactions to Concepts 56
Concept Formats 58
Reactions to Other Stuff 61
Homework 63
Summary 65
CHAPTER 5
**Key Stages of the Interview**

But Wait! Before You Head Out:
- Roles for the Field Team
- A Guide to Participating in Fieldwork
- Everyone Stays Engaged

Once You Get On-Site
- Crossing the Threshold
- Restating Objectives
- Kick-Off Question
- Accept the Awkwardness
- The Tipping Point
- Reflection and Projection
- The Soft Close

Summary

CHAPTER 6
**How to Ask Questions**

Silence Defeats Awkwardness
Managing the Flow
- Version 1
- Version 2
Getting to Even More of the Answer
- A Palette of Question Types
Managing the Ebb and Flow of the Interview
Embracing Your Participant’s Worldview
- Use Their Language
- Assume Your Participant Makes Sense
Don’t Make Your Questions Pass/Fail
Don’t Presume They Accept Your Worldview
Don’t Enter Lecture Mode
Finding Participants (aka Recruiting)

Finding participants is a crucial part of preparing for fieldwork, yet some teams treat it very casually, relying on friends and family (an approach that is sometimes justified with the “guerilla” rhetoric) or even worse, grabbing barely-screened participants on the street or in a store (this is known as an “intercept”). On the other hand, some UX teams (such as those at Intuit and Salesforce.com) have a full-time staff member whose key responsibility is to manage recruiting.

The first step (sometimes this takes place early on, as you are scoping a project) is to identify the key characteristics for your sample. For example:

- Six active users of blogging software (WordPress, LiveJournal, Blogger, or MovableType) in Chicago, Lisbon, and Tel Aviv
  - Two have been blogging for two years or more
  - Two have been using their current platform for less than a year
  - All between ages of 25 and 55
- Two active blog readers with more than 100 feed subscriptions

A few things to note in this example:

- We’re looking at several parts of a transaction (in this case, blog writers and blog readers); even if we are designing only one part of the experience, we can gain a deeper understanding by looking at it from multiple points of view.
- We have a mix of the specific (the list of blogging platforms) and the descriptive. (We don’t know yet what makes someone an “active” blogger or reader.)
- Criteria are based more on behavior (“active,” “more than 100”) than attitude (“dramatic storytellers”).

As with the research goals, these criteria should be shared with the project team and iterated so that all parties are on the same page. Also, aligning on these criteria can require “group therapy” (see Julie’s “Group Therapy” sidebar). When teams ask themselves who their customers are (or could be), this question surfaces any number of disconnects: hypotheses masquerading as facts, aspirations, and mass hallucinations. You should resolve those issues as tactfully as possible.

For example, in a study that focused on online shopping for athletic apparel, we spent four weeks (of what was supposed to be a six-week project) actively negotiating, among an ever-increasing set of stakeholders, the basic archetypes of customers to look at. It was daunting, but essential for having any
success further down the road. We were not able to change the underlying cultural issues that were causing this issue (nor were we trying to), but we were able to use our expertise in planning and executing these sorts of studies to help resolve the deadlock. Although these four weeks were exhausting and frustrating, we did get the team unstuck and moving forward on the research itself.

NOTE RECRUITING IS DATA

Recruiting draws heavily on the project management skill set, but keep your researcher’s eye open for surprises. If it’s very challenging to find the people that you expect (or are expected) to do research with, that’s data. In one project, the fact that I couldn’t find anyone with a luxurious yet functional “smart home” implementation revealed a great deal about how that client was conceiving of the market.¹

From the criteria, I produced a document called a screener (see Figure 3.4). This is much like a survey that is used to qualify potential participants. It includes a mix of question types (including yes/no, multiple choice, and open-ended), and uses responses to direct the flow through the set of questions.

Once you have a finalized screener, you have to find participants. There are many approaches, depending on whom you are trying to find. Some organizations have existing customer lists they can pull from (especially for consumers). Others firms may go to their sales staff or other well-connected people for introductions. For consumer research, I almost always use an external market research recruiting agency. They will use our screener and either their own database or customer lists provided by our clients.

This is a time-consuming process; it always takes a week or more to align on the recruiting criteria and the finalized screener (on one project, it took us about four weeks!); a specialized recruiting agency will need about two weeks to recruit participants.

For more on recruiting, check out Chapter 3 of Bolt/Tulathimutte’s book called Remote Research. Although their context is different (they are recruiting, well, remote participants, and we’re recruiting face-to-face participants), the general principles certainly apply here.

¹ For more on the power of surprises throughout the research process, check out “What to Expect When You’re Not Expecting It” by Steve Portigal & Julie Norvaisas, Interactions March + April 2011 at http://rfid.me/QYGI18.
2. Do you own a portable MP3 player that you use regularly?

   Yes          DISMISS
   No

2a. If yes, how long have you owned a portable MP3 player?
   Less than 3 months          DISMISS
   Between 3 months and 1 year
   More than 1 year

2b. If yes, how many hours per week do you estimate you use your portable MP3 player?
   IF < 5 THEN DISMISS

3. Do you listen to music on a computer?

   Yes          DISMISS
   No

   3a. If yes, how often?
       Daily
       Weekly
       Every other week          DISMISS
       Monthly                   DISMISS
       Less than once per month  DISMISS

4. Do you regularly listen to music on any other devices?

   Yes (describe______________________)
   No

5. How many music CDs do you own? These can be CDs that were purchased or received as gifts. Do not count tracks or albums burned onto CDs.
   IF < 60 THEN DISMISS

6. Approximately how many CDs would you estimate you have ripped? (Ripping is the process of copying the audio data from a CD to hard disk)
   IF < 20 THEN DISMISS

7. What retail stores do you typically go to when making music CD purchases? Select all that apply.

   Circuit City
   Best Buy
   Good Guys
   Wal-Mart

Portugal Consulting: Sample Screener

FIGURE 3.4
One page from a screener.²

² See the complete document at http://rfid.me/VGHiqm.
WORKING WITH A RECRUITING AGENCY

For participant recruiting, I typically use full-service market research agencies that have their own focus group facilities. (Although you won’t be using those facilities in these studies, their presence is a good indicator.) My best experiences are with agencies that I can work with closely through the process. At the outset, they give the screener a close reading, identify missing elements, and verify what isn’t clear. As the recruiting process proceeds, they give daily updates (even when they haven’t found anyone), and they point out any criteria that are commonly eliminating otherwise good participants, in case we want to make an adjustment.

Great recruiters will establish an initial rapport with your participants and help them feel comfortable and enthusiastic about the process. They will also support you in creating a comfortable schedule, allowing for driving time and rush-hour traffic. Costs for recruiting will vary, based on the complexity and the difficulty of the assignment, but for U.S. consumers, you can expect to pay the recruiter between $150 and $225 each. Note that this is their fee for finding and scheduling the participant and is separate from the incentive you pay to the participant (more on that later).

Creating the Field Guide

The field guide (sometimes called an interview guide or more formally, a protocol) is a document that details what will happen in the interview (see Figure 3.5). Creating this detailed plan is an essential preparatory step. The interviews themselves never happen as you imagine, but having a detailed plan prepares you to be flexible. It also creates alignment among the team (as do other planning tools). In situations where you have multiple teams of people out in the field, this alignment is essential.

To prepare your field guide, start with your research goals and the other inputs. This is the step where you translate “questions we want answers to” to “questions we will ask.” Of course, the guide also covers activities, tasks, logistics, and more.

The general flow of most interview guides is:

- Introduction and participant background
- The main body
- Projection/dream questions
- Wrap up
Reading Ahead Interview Guide

Introduction
1. We'd like to talk with you today about reading. We have lots of questions to ask you, and we're interested in hearing your stories and experiences.

Overview
2. Can you tell us a little about yourself—what you do, hobbies, etc.? 
3. Can you tell me about a recent book you've read? Your favorite all-time book? 
4. Why do you read?
5. What is your current reading like?  
   [Probe for different types of reading, locations, motivations, etc.]
6. Is your current reading typical for you? How so/how is it different?
7. Do you call yourself a 'reader'? What does that mean to you?  
   [Look for their categories: could be frequency, importance, etc.]
   If you were telling a new acquaintance about yourself, would you talk about reading? What else would you say about yourself?

Exploring Specifics (locations, subject matter, motivations, etc.)
8. You mentioned (follow up on specifics from overview). Is this always the same, or does it change? Why do you do it this way?
9. Have there been any special circumstances where you've done it differently?  
   Why? How was that?
10. Has anything about the way you do this changed over time? How? Why?

Environment
11. What makes a good reading environment for you? What are the elements? What makes an environment not good?

FIGURE 3.5
One page from a field guide.3

3 A complete example is at http://rfld.me/QBeotb.
Be sure to assign durations to the different sections and subsections. Again, you aren’t necessarily going to stick to the exact duration in the actual interview, but it helps you see if you’ve got enough time to cover everything you are expecting to cover. I prefer to write most questions as I might ask them (“Is there a single word that captures the thing you most like about wine?”), rather than as abstracted topics (“A single word that represents what they like about wine?”). As I’m writing the field guide, I’m leading a mock interview in my head. Using more detailed, thought-out questions helps me put together a more realistic plan.

**Introduction and Participant Background**

In the introduction, you’ll spend just a few minutes getting the interview under way, handling some logistics, and setting expectations. This section of the interview guide might contain the following (italicized text indicates instructions to the interviewer):

- *Give out release form and get signature*
- *Turn on video camera*
- *Confirm timing: 90 minutes*
- *Explain who we are and why we are doing this*
- *There are no wrong answers; this is information that helps us direct our work*
- *Tell us about your family. Who lives in this house? How long have you lived here?*

The discussion of participant background serves as an icebreaker and also provides some context for later in the interview.

**The Main Body**

As the name suggests, this is the bulk of the interview guide (and the interview). You should create subsections for each of the areas you want to explore (such as configuration, learning about features, downloading new playlists). The main body should also include the exercises and activities that you plan to use (such as mapping, card sorting, demonstrations, and reactions to prototypes or other stimuli).

For a study seeking feedback about a prototype home entertainment device, our main body topics were:

- *Revisit concepts*  
- *Map your technology*
- *Context of use*  
- *Concept discussion*
Be deliberate in how you sequence these sections. You can start with the general and then dive into specifics; you can start with present day and move backward; you can start with a previous time and move toward the current state. There’s no universal rule here, so much depends on your topic and how you are mentally picturing the inquiry. Remember the participant may take things in a different direction, so don’t sweat too much over this. It’s easy to revise the overall flow once you’ve completed a couple of the interviews.

**Projection/Dream Questions**

Near the end of the interview is a great opportunity to ask more audacious questions. Because you’ve spent all this time with your participants, talking through a topic in detail, they’ve become engaged with you. You’ve earned their permission to ask them to go even farther beyond the familiar. Two questions that work really well here are:

- If we came back in five years to have this conversation again, what would be different?
- If you could build your ideal experience, what would it be like?

**Wrap Up**

A typical interview guide concludes with some basic questions and instructions:

- Did we miss anything? Is there anything you want to tell us?
- Is there anything you want to ask us?
- *Thank then and give the incentive.*

**Shot List**

As an appendix to the field guide, list the photos you want to capture (see Figure 3.6), such as the following:

- Head shot of participant
- Participant and key piece of equipment
- Close-up of key piece of equipment
- Establishing shots, interior (cubicle or living room) and exterior
- Two-shot of interviewer and participant
FIGURE 3.6
A visual shot list created by researchers at LinkedIn.

As with the other preparation tools, share the field guide with your team. The typical audience for the field guide tends to be broader than for the more tactical tools like a screener. I also try to help the people reviewing it understand what the field guide is (and what it isn’t) so that they can effectively help it evolve. I’ve used the following in an explanatory email:

Remember, this is not a script. It reads very linearly, but it’s really just a tool to prepare to be flexible. Questions don’t get asked in the order they’re written here, or using this exact language (so it doesn’t need to be proofread). If you could look at it with an eye toward calling out anything that we haven’t covered—e.g., “We need to ask about how they deal with time zones”—or any larger topic areas that are missing, or anything that seems wildly off base, that would be the most helpful.
Scheduling Interviews

If you are interviewing professionals about their work, you may need to run your interviews during (or just before/after) their work hours. If you are interviewing consumers, you may have to conduct interviews in the evening or on weekends. In the latter case, it can be helpful to set that expectation early on with colleagues who will be participating. Remind them that you’re trying to embrace the participant’s worldview, and they can begin that process by adapting their schedule and availability to the participant’s lifestyle, not the opposite.

When scheduling your fieldwork days, don’t be too ambitious. Although focus group and usability moderators tend to set up camp in a facility and run sessions back to back for a full day or more, I think that’s generally a terrible idea and especially when doing fieldwork. Quality work doesn’t come from being rushed, exhausted, harried, or overwhelmed. Interviewing is hard work. You need time between sessions to reflect on what you learned, adjust your approach for the next interview, get to the next interview location, find food, and find a bathroom. Although this becomes more dramatic when you are driving around a metropolitan area interviewing people in their homes, it’s still true, even when moving around a corporate facility during a site visit.

Leave time in between your interviews. Don’t pack too many into a day. Depending on the constraints (Are you on-site? Are you on the road? How long are the interviews?), two interviews a day is reasonable. The schedule is at least partly informed by participant availability, so you may end up with an early morning interview, several hours of free time, and then an evening interview on one day, and then two back-to-back interviews the next day. That’s fine. Just don’t try to do several days in a row with too many interviews.

Travel

The same sanity clause applies to travel situations: if you’re travelling locally, try to schedule your interviews so they are close together geographically. If you’re working with recruiters, they should take care of this. If you’re travelling on a plane, allow time for your plane to be late before your first interview, and avoid having an interview that will run into your head-to-the-airport window, because that will destroy your ability to be present in the interview. Even better, keep travel days and interview days separate. If you are travelling internationally, leave yourself at least a day to adjust to the time zone differences, and to soak up the local culture, before you dive into fieldwork.
Participant Releases and Non-Disclosure Agreements

A release is a good idea. A release is a document that you have your interviewee sign. It clarifies the rights that the interviewee and the interviewer (and their organization) have. The text of the release may address a number of issues:

- **Consent:** Being in the study is voluntary, and the participant can stop at any time.
- **Incentive:** The amount of money that will be given, and that the exchange of money doesn’t mean that the participant is an employee.
- **Model release:** Images and video will be used without giving the participant any rights of approval.
- **Non-disclosure:** The participant is obligated not to reveal anything about concepts he may see.

Although there are ethical reasons to use a release, it’s really a legal document. If your organization has a legal department, they will likely want to create this document for you. You should work with them to strike the right balance between legally efficacious terminology and regular-folks lingo.

In situations where you are not revealing any concepts of artifacts that might be considered confidential, you may want to streamline the release by eliminating the non-disclosure agreement (or NDA).

**NOTE** RELEASE ME

This is the point in the book where I was going to include a best-in-class example of a release. In the time I spent writing this book, I corresponded with researchers at many different corporations and consultancies. Plenty of them are saddled with a legalese-intense release. For those who had managed to wrangle something more palatable to their participants, I was not able to get access to those documents for inclusion here. My colleagues were all very helpful, but when it came down to it, they couldn’t get permission to share their release forms.

Now think about this—it’s a document that is given out to members of the public (research participants). As I stated earlier in this chapter, even the recruiting process gives you data, especially when it doesn’t turn out as you expected. To me, this highlights the (appropriate, necessary) risk aversion
that characterizes a corporate legal department. While sharing best practices or being identified as a thought leader may be appealing to a researcher at a leading corporation, that has less importance than even the remote possibility of legal exposure. For you, as you craft a release that satisfies the needs of these different audiences, be aware of where values intersect and where they don’t. Good luck!

If you work for an agency conducting this research on behalf of a client, the release may be an agreement between your organization and the participant, enabling you to keep the study “blind” (which means the participant does not know the name of the sponsoring organization), which is usually preferable. However, if you work for an agency and your client is asking for non-disclosure, you will probably want to use the client’s NDA and have that particular aspect of the agreement be between the participant and the client directly.

**Incentives**

The right incentive amount depends on where you are doing research and what you are asking of the participant. If you are using a recruiting agency, they can advise you on a recommended incentive. Think of the incentive not as compensation but as an enthusiastically demonstrative thank you. In professional situations (interviewing people at their workplace), a monetary incentive given directly to the participant may not be appropriate. It may be prohibited by the participant’s employer, it may be unethical or at least awkward if your participant is a customer, and if you are interviewing individuals within a group (say an emergency room) on an ad hoc basis, it may be less clear who to incentivize and at what proportion. In those cases, look for alternatives.

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**NOTE  BE CREATIVE ABOUT INCENTIVES**

You want a simple and direct way to demonstrate your enthusiasm and appreciation. When interviewing credit-default swap traders in London’s financial district, my client escort would stop en route at a Starbucks and load up with Venti drinks and baked goods. Even though we had scheduled appointments, our appearance on the trading floor was a small celebration. We’ve brought pizza into hospitals when interviewing respiratory techs and made charitable donations on behalf of PR firms.