



# **A Checklist For Developing Semi-Structured Interview Questions.**

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**STRATEGIC PLANET**



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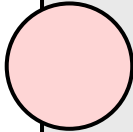
## Introduction

Semi-structured interviewing is a process that can be used across a variety of domains. This particular check-list has been designed for individuals embarking on some form of research (market, customer, health, UX [or User Experience], etc). That said, the framework can easily be adapted to suit a variety of needs. The framework has been split into x sections, the most important factor to have in place before embarking on any type of semi-structured interviewing is to have your objectives in place.

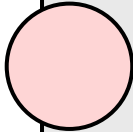


## Initiation Phase.

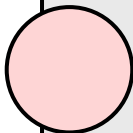
The initiation phase is paramount in any piece of research. It usually takes place at least 6 - 8 weeks before the actual research begins. This is because the documents you produce will need reviewing by your research establishment's ethics committee. If you require external ethics approval this could extend the time frame to 12 to 16 weeks.



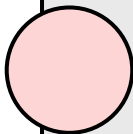
**Step 1:** Have an overall objective (or mission or research question) in place. This will help you with the framing of your questions.



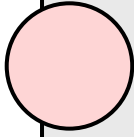
**Step 2:** Decide on your sample frame and have a clear process on how you will contact/engage these individuals..



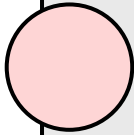
**Step 3:** Prepare a "Participant Information" sheet. This will be given to the participant before the interview and will inform them on a range of factors associated with the research including their rights. It will also be required for ethics approval.



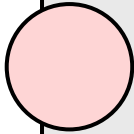
**Step 4:** Prepare an "Informed Consent" form. The participant will sign two copies, they will keep one and the other will be given back to you for your records. They are signing to say that they have understood the participant information sheet and that they are happy to continue with the research.



**Step 5:** Develop your semi-structured questions.



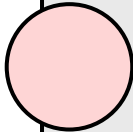
**Step 6:** Design and develop your medium for making the initial contact with the participant (i.e., your letter or advert etc).



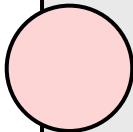
**Step 7:** Gain ethics approval. All research establishments will have an ethics approval process. In most cases, this approval process will require, as a minimum, the participant information sheet, the Informed Consent Form, the list of semi-structured questions and the overview of how initial contact will be made (i.e., your letter or advert etc).

## Question design: Theoretical.

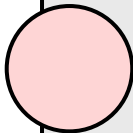
Use this checklist if you wish to develop your questions on an existing theory or model. One of your research aims or objectives should have a reference to the theory or concept being used. As an example: “*This study will examine A using X’s Theory*”.



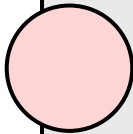
**Step 1:** Identify the theoretical framework you will use to base your semi-structured questions on. This should be linked to your research objective.



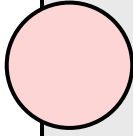
**Step 2:** Develop at least one question for each element of the theoretical framework. Are you clear how these questions address the overall objective of the research?



**Step 3:** Have (as a back-up) likely ‘follow-on’ questions you may use to supplement the original question. Experience researchers should not need this as the whole point of semi-structured questioning is that it needs to be fluid.



**Step 4:** Calculate the time it will take to complete the semi-structured interviewing process: your answer will be expressed as a range. A ‘rule of thumb’ of thumb framework is 1 to 3 minutes per question (this will include the follow-on questions and answers to each semi-structured question).



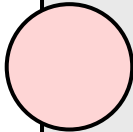
**Step 5:** Test the questions in a trial to remove any ambiguous elements of the process (note: this is not a pilot study, it is a process that provides a fresh perspective on what you are hoping to achieve).



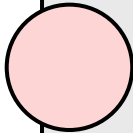


## Question design: Classic Thematic approach (or a Constructivist Grounded Theory Approach).

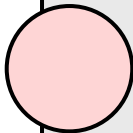
Use this checklist if you are familiar with the subject. Your question design will be driven by your knowledge and experience. This is known as a constructivist approach, some may argue that there will be a researcher's bias to the study, but this is part of the constructivist approach and you should state that you have adopted a constructivist paradigm. If you do not want this bias associated with your research then please select one of the other checklists.



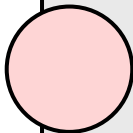
**Step 1:** Set your research objective (or primary research aim/question). A series of sub-objectives or questions could help with the development of the semi-structured list of questions: each of these questions must be linked to the primary and secondary research aims/objectives.



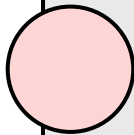
**Step 2** Think of a set of categories for each research question, you can do this by yourself or by brainstorming the issues with your colleagues. You made end up with a too many categories, so you will need to prioritise and cut back so that the interview process lasts within your given timeframe.



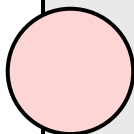
**Step 3:** Develop a series of questions to address each category (note, these categories should not become the primary codes and/or themes for the study).



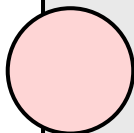
**Step 4:** Design (as a back-up) likely 'follow-on' questions you may use to supplement the original question. Experience researchers should not need this as the whole point of semi-structured questioning is that it needs to be fluid.



**Step 5:** Calculate the time it will take to complete the semi-structured interviewing process: your answer will be expressed as a range. A 'rule of thumb' of thumb framework is 1 to 3 minutes per question (this will include the follow-on questions and answers to each semi-structured question).



**Step 6:** Test the questions in a trial to remove any ambiguous elements of the process (note: this is aspect should not be considered a pilot study, it is a process that provides a fresh perspective on what you are hoping to achieve).

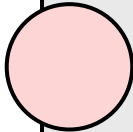


**Step 7:** Each semi-structured question should address at least one of the research aims and objectives.

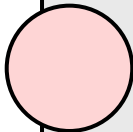


## 5 Question design: A Grounded Theory approach (Not constructivist).

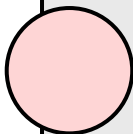
This style of questioning is used when you do not wish to introduce any form of research bias, i.e., you do not want to use any of your own knowledge or experience to influence the study.



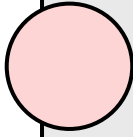
**Step 1:** This designed process focuses on the classical grounded theory approach, where the researcher does not know the subject. It eliminates all preconceived ideas.



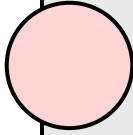
**Step 2:** Set your research objective (or primary research aim/question).



**Step 3:** Developing a set of questions using the classic grounded theory approach. Here you will know nothing (or assume that you know nothing, don't let your perceptions could the issues) about the subject in question. Use the 'What/How and Why' approach, getting the participant to explain every step of their journey from the beginning to end. If it relates to a product or service, the journey could start from the drivers that make them want the said product or service, the purchasing of the product or service, the unpacking of the product or service, the use of the product or service etc. If it relates to a feeling or experience you could ask, what are the drivers that make them feel the way they do, what makes it worse or better, what happens to you during the episodes, how does it end, what happens after the episode. Again, these questions should be qualified with questions like "why might this be the case".



**Step 4:** This type of approach creates a complete map of the journey (which could include alternative routes). It should also identify all the touch points: the key individuals or factors that the participant engages with along the way. Draw, this map.



**Step 5:** Beware: this type of questioning process is difficult to plan because it is unclear how many questions you will need to ask. It may be prudent to book in 1 to 1.5 hour slots and arrange to have several follow up sessions (it could take three or more meetings before the whole picture is painted).



## Points to Note.

Qualitative research is not 'black or white', it sits within a domain that has many facets. Scholars and researchers will have a varying array of positions in terms of their perceptions on how such research should be carried out. With that in mind, the options I have given you i.e., the theoretical, the classic thematic approach (or a constructivist grounded theory approach) and the grounded theory approach (not constructivist) are there just as a guide for you to adapt.

## About the Author.

Dr Alan Shaw is a senior lecturer in Digital Marketing at Leeds Beckett University, a director at Strategic Planet and a Trustee at X-PERT Health. He is a fellow of the Higher Education Academy and has over 25 years' experience as a practitioner.

Alan's main research interests are in Social Marketing, Social Media Marketing, Social Network Analysis and Social Listening. Much of his research focuses on the health sector because of his experience of working within epilepsy, diabetes, Crohn's disease, inborn metabolic disorders and wound management sectors. Alan has been involved in patient advocacy groups and helped the Expert Patients Programme transition from being part of the NHS to becoming a community interest company (CIC) then a charity. He is also a Trustee at XPERT Health, a national charity supporting diabetics through structured education and a director of Strategic Planet Ltd, a boutique digital marketing agency.





