

Tips for Designing Questions for Stakeholder Conversations



Extension
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



In this brief guide, you will learn some features of good questions, and you'll learn how to create a solid question guide for your stakeholders in six steps.

Designing good questions will go a long way in your stakeholder conversations. Better questions lead to better conversations—and better conversations lead to better information. Having good information, in turn, makes it much easier to analyze and utilize your conversation. That's why it is important to make ample time for generating questions.

Before you start generating questions, you'll need a research question. Your research question should explain why you want to talk to stakeholders in the first place. For example: "What are some ways in which we can rejuvenate our partnerships in Green Lake County?" Your research question is your roadmap: When you design questions, you'll always keep this bigger question in mind. This will help you to ensure that you have a conversation with stakeholders that is focused and purposeful.

Five steps for designing questions

1 Brainstorming

Minimum 15 minutes

Brainstorm for at least 15 minutes. Ideally, do this with a partner. Write down every question you come up with. At this stage, there are no silly, inappropriate questions! **Do not** review or discuss questions. If you have a modification, or something to add, formulate it as a question. **Do not** discuss what kind of questions one should ask. Instead, formulate a question, and share it. It's okay if there is silence. Keep thinking, there are always more questions!

2 Sort questions by topic

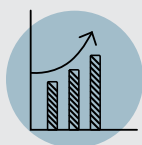
15 minutes

Write down the topics each question could cover. What might a person say as an answer to this question? Which topics might this person cover in their answer? Now arrange the questions by main topics that you are interested in.

3 Review your questions

15 minutes

Are there questions that are more open and more closed? Are there questions that cover more topics than others? Are there duplicates? Are there problematic questions? How could questions be improved?



EVALUATION
Quick Tips

For additional Quick Tips in this series visit
fyi.extension.wisc.edu/programdevelopment.



4 Identify “top” questions and build the guide

15 minutes

Now identify your top questions. Choose 1 to 3 questions as your main questions. These should be “big” questions that potentially cover a lot of the topics you care about. For each of these topics, add a probing question. You’ll only use that one if your stakeholder did not discuss the topic by themselves. It’s also a good idea to add some Extenders (table 1) to the conversation guide. Extenders give your interviewees the opportunity to say more about a particular topic or idea. Most people ask too many questions. Try to not ask more than 3 main questions, and not more than 15 total questions in an interview/conversation that takes one hour.

5 Get feedback

Minimum 15 minutes

Now test the guide you have. For example, do a quick mock-conversation with a colleague. This will make you more familiar with your question guide, and help you identify questions that “don’t work”.

TABLE 1. Example questions, topics, and conversation extenders.

Main question	Expected topics	Probing questions	Extenders
I’m really interested in learning about your organization. Can you tell me a bit about your work as an organization?	Organizational history Issues faced Opportunities expected	Can you tell me a bit more about your recent history as an organization? Can you describe some issues you’ve faced as an organization? Can you describe what opportunities you see in a collaboration?	What else comes to mind? Can you tell me more about this?

Things to do, things to avoid

Avoid “Why”

- **AVOID:** Why do you do “X”?
- **PREFER:** I’m really interested in learning about your organization. Can you tell me a bit about your work as an organization?

Brief questions are better than long, cascading questions. Ask for one thing at the time.

- **AVOID:** Can you please describe some issues around caretaker support, drug awareness and local support for these topics?
- **PREFER:** Can you tell me about some current issues you’re facing?

Interview questions are typically spoken. They should be designed in spoken language.

- **AVOID:** Planning processes can be one of the core issues of an organization struggling with resource allocation. In your own words, please provide examples regarding this issue.
- **PREFER:** Can you describe a couple of issues you’re facing when it comes to planning?

Try to elicit narrations and descriptions

- **AVOID:** What are main factors for volunteer buy-in?
- **PREFER:** How are volunteers engaged in your program?

Try to point your questions at experiences, or concrete issues (instead of hypotheticals)

- **AVOID:** What would parents tell me if they were here today?
- **PREFER:** Can you share with me some conversations with parents that you have had?

Prefer conceptually open questions over suggestive questions

- **AVOID:** Obviously we all want to eat healthy, and that includes eating less meat. Do you think we could collaborate to get this message out?
- **PREFER:** Can you tell me about your organization’s goals regarding healthy food?

Example script

Introduction

- Try to build a positive relationship with your conversation partner. Small talk is a good option for this. Offer that you are open to answering their questions, too.
- Introduction of self and purpose, including how information will be used.
- Describing whether this is confidential or not.
- How were they identified? Why is it important that they participate? Express gratitude for their time.

Core questions

See table 2 for example core questions for conversations related to needs assessment.

Closing

- Is there anything important that did not come up in our conversation today?
- Are there any existing resources, data reports and such, you think would be critical for me to review, or other people to talk to?
- Thank you for your time.
- Remind them how you’ll use the information.

Taking notes

- Take notes during your conversation. If you print your question guide, you can take notes in the guide itself, for example in the “Expected topics” column.
- Once you’re out of the conversation, immediately sit down for 30 minutes and flesh out your notes. Plan ahead so you can immediately do this. Even after 2 hours you’ll forget many details.
 - » Take notes in full sentences; do not use bullet lists. The bullet lists won’t make sense to you later when you review the information.
 - » Write your notes so that someone can understand them who has not been at the conversation.

TABLE 2. Example core questions for conversations.

Main question	Expected topics	Probing questions	Extenders
Please tell me a bit about your organization.	Mission of the organization What major needs/issues do they address? Major needs in the county	Can you tell me a bit about your mission? Can you describe how you address some major needs connected to your mission?	What else comes to mind? Can you tell me more about this?
What major needs do you see in this county?	Current issues Emerging issues How they are (not) addressed	Are there any current issues that you could describe for me? Are there any emergent issues that you’re observing? Can you describe how your organization currently tackles these issues?	Could you explain a little bit more about these needs? Is there anything else that comes to mind?

Adapted from

Schmieder, Christian (2015) *Interview Question Generation & Qualitative Data Analysis Software: A Modularized Curriculum*. <http://squaremethodology.com/blog/2015/6/7/interview-question-generation-qualitative-data-analysis-software-a-modularized-curriculum>. This adaptation is licensed under Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



Extension
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

© 2021 by the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System doing business as the University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension. All rights reserved.

An EEO/AA employer, University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming, including Title VI, Title IX, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act requirements.