

## Forming and Asking Interview Questions

There are different types of interview questions that can be used in different ways. Here are a few (from James Spradley [1979] *The Ethnographic Interview*):

### Descriptive Questions

- **Grand Tour Questions:** Questions that lay out an in-depth descriptive sequence explaining a series of events, describing a group of people, telling how to engage in an activity, use an object, or run through the events of a time period.
  - “Could you describe the kinds of things that you do to prepare for worship at your church?”
  - “Can you tell me about your experience playing in the worship band?”
  - “Could you walk me through what happens in a typical choir rehearsal?”

Grand tour questions are verbal descriptions of the significant features of a cultural scene; they encourage informants to open up and ramble on about their experiences. Typical grand tour questions ask for a description of how things usually are and ask informants to generalize and talk about a pattern of events, for example: “Can you describe a typical song set during your church’s Sunday morning worship?”

#### 1. Specific grand tour questions

- Ask for a recent day or the most recent series of events, for example: “Can you describe what happened during the rehearsal on Wednesday, from the moment you got there to the time that you left?”

#### 2. Guided grand tour questions

- Ask for an actual tour, for example: “Can you show me around the worship space?”

#### 3. Task-related grand tour questions

- Ask an informant to perform a simple task that aids in description, for example: “Can you draw me a map of where the vocalists stand when they sing during congregational worship?”

### Example questions

These questions are for focusing an informant on a specific case. They take a generality identified by an informant and ask for a specific example. For example, in response to a grand tour question, an informant might say, “Sometimes when we’re singing, some of the choir members will get caught up in the Spirit.” So you might ask, “Can you describe to me an example of getting caught up in the Spirit?” This kind of question is very useful in almost any interview and often encourages informants to tell you actual stories of events that were important to them.

## Experience questions

These questions ask for particular experiences that people have had while in a particular setting.

- “You’ve probably had some interesting experiences during worship at the youth conference last week. Can you remember any of them?”

These can be so general that they are hard to answer. They tend to elicit unusual experiences, rather than typical ones. Use them after grand tour and mini-tour questions.

## Native language questions

These questions are designed to explore an unfamiliar term after an informant uses it.

- “When would you use the phrase ‘getting the spirit’?”
- “What kind of songs does your church consider ‘traditional’?”

## Probes

A probe is a way to stimulate an informant to produce more information without injecting yourself so much into the interaction that you only get a reflection of yourself in the response.

- **The Silent Probe.** After an informant tells you a story, you can use the silent probe by waiting quietly for them to continue talking. Often, they will pause briefly, and when you say nothing, go on to explain some aspect of the story in more detail. Though it sounds obvious, this is the hardest probe to learn because it takes confidence to do and it can become awkward. It is easier to do if you are relaxed and aware that through your body language, you are being attentive and focused on your informant (for example, if you are maintaining eye contact through the initial silence).
- **The Echo Probe.** This probe consists of repeating back something your subject has said to you. In psychology and counseling, this is called “reflection.” There, it is used to show another person that you are really listening and that you understand what they’re saying. It has a similar use here, and it also gives your subject a chance to identify and correct any misunderstandings.
  - “So you are saying that after you rehearse next Sunday’s songs, the worship leader takes you through a series of improvisations over chord changes?”
- **The “Uh-Huh” Probe.** When an informant has paused after a story, say, “uh-huh,” and wait for her to go on. Very simple and very effective; most people use it all the time without thinking about it.