

Creating Effective Interview Questions: The Dos and Don'ts

Adapted from Rick Ayers'
Studs Terkel's Working: A Teaching Guide (2001)

Always keep in mind that there are two main things to consider when creating effective interview questions:

- There has to be something you know about the person you are interviewing – this is called the **BACKGROUND**
- There has to be something you want to know or learn more about – this is the **ANGLE** of your interview

Background – information specific to the interview subject that will help to personalize your questions. This requires some prior knowledge of the subject, often gained through research.

Angle – the approach or focus of the interview. This is what you hope to discover more about.

So now that we're ready to create questions, here are some "rules" to follow:

DO ASK

1. Level 1 questions:
"getting to know you" questions; easy and safe to answer; ice breakers
2. Level 2 questions:
these questions make up the main part of the interview; they are more specific to the person you're interviewing and get at your angle (what you want to find out)

* Level 1 and 2 questions are the ones you create ahead of time.
3. Open questions:
invite longer, detailed responses (such as, "How did you feel about your first job?")
4. DO make sure that you are asking questions that get to your theme/what you want to know/find out
5. DO ask some questions that use background information so that they are specific to your interviewee

DON'T ASK

1. Level 3 questions:
too personal or off-limits
2. Closed questions:
yes/no or short answer (such as, "Did you like your first job?")

SOME TIPS FOR CREATING EFFECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. Begin with Level 1 questions to build a relationship with your interview subject and to make him/her comfortable.
2. Move to Level 2 questions – the main part of your interview. You will be using your background and angle to help create these questions.

THE FOLLOW-UP QUESTION

Follow-up questions are the heart of an interview. An interviewer will think a lot about questions they want to ask in an interview and will have a clear idea of their angle, but they never just read through a list of questions when they conduct an interview.

As interviewers, we listen and ask follow up questions with an idea of where we want the interview to go. A follow up question builds upon something that your subject has said in order to dig deeper into his or her story.

Most importantly, follow up questions show that you are **ACTIVELY** listening. They help to build trust between you and the person you are interviewing, and they help you to get richer, more detailed stories. As you are conducting your interview, remember to listen for those places where you want to know more. If there is a great story that you feel could come out or if you want more details, ask follow up questions.

Some effective follow-up questions are:

Why?

Can you describe that?

Can you tell me more about...?

Can you tell me a story about...?

How did that happen?

And then what happened?

How did that make you feel?

What did it smell/sound/look/feel like?

SOMEQUICK REMINDERS

1. During your interview, always listen carefully to your interviewee's answers. Don't be so concerned with your next question that you miss what is being said.
2. Sometimes the best questions are the ones that come into your head as you are listening to your interviewee speak.