



A Topos Manual for Cognitive Elicitations

This manual builds on the introductory document, *The Topos Approach to Interviewing*.

THE COGNITIVE APPROACH

The analysis of elicitations data, based on principles of cognitive anthropology and linguistics – yields insights not available from standard interview, polling, or focus group techniques. It does not look for statements of opinion, but for patterns of thought that may even be unconscious. It does not look for familiarity with issues in the news, but for more default reasoning patterns, that are likely to be stable and durable. Some of the clues to these important patterns come from topics that are *omitted*, moments of *inconsistency* where one understanding clashes with another, and the *metaphors* people use to talk about a subject. We look at differences between *rhetorical mode* – in which people define themselves in opposition to other groups and perspectives – and *reasonable mode* – in which they reflect their own experiences, think for themselves, and are more open to new information. Put briefly, this analysis focuses on *how* people think rather than *what* they think.

The Elicitations Methodology

“Cognitive Elicitations” are one-on-one, semi-structured, recorded interviews, conducted according to methods adapted from psychological anthropology. The goal of this methodology is to approximate a natural conversation while also encouraging the subject to reason about a topic from a wide variety of perspectives, including some that are unexpected and deliberately challenging. One of the key goals of the conversations is to encourage subjects to think aloud about the issue, rather than reproducing opinions they have stated or heard before.

Equipment

Elicitations are always taped for later close analysis. It is *extremely important* to familiarize yourself with your taping equipment. Do a thorough sound check well before the actual interviews (preferably days before, so that replacement equipment can be purchased). Schedule some time to practice so that working with it is second nature. If you are interviewing outdoors or in noisy settings, we require use of a lavalier / lapel mic. Have spare batteries and spare memory cards on hand as needed.

If you are interviewing by phone the Project Manager can help you with questions about how to record conversations.

After each interview double-check that the conversation was recorded in good quality.

For more on videotaping we have a separate manual, *Guidelines for Shooting Video*.

The Interview Protocol

Familiarize yourself with the protocol. Although you should have the questions in front of you for reference, most of the interview should feel like a natural conversation, with you as an interested party. As much as possible, it should not feel like you are reading from a list of questions. Most protocol questions are designed to fit into such a conversation.

The Research Lead should give you instructions about how closely to follow the written protocol, but usually it is meant to serve as a guide for a conversation rather than a script to be read. An order is suggested, but that can change in the flow of conversation. Often, many of the questions will be answered without you having to pose them at all. Underlined questions are ones that we'd like to make sure you ask in every interview. (Questions in parentheses) are suggested follow-ups and probes to use as needed, though you should ask follow up questions regardless of whether the protocol includes them or not. [Text in brackets] are additional instructions for the interviewer. Wording and phrasing can be adjusted to your own voice and the flow of conversation, but you should clarify with your Research Lead whether there are parts of the protocol that should be said verbatim.

Explanations and Reassurance

Most elicitation subjects will have been recruited by Topos, but sometimes they'll have common doubts and questions that you can address.

For example, the idea of sitting down with a researcher to talk for an hour can be intimidating, especially if the subject doesn't feel particularly knowledgeable about the topic at hand. In such cases it can be important to reassure them that we don't expect them to be an expert, but are interested in what "regular people" think about a topic.

"It's not about your level of knowledge - we're interested in opinions, gut reactions, etc. We'll definitely be discussing some things you know a lot about and others you know very little about."

"It's an informal discussion, not really an interview."

Some people want to know more about what this is about. Some suggested responses to common questions:

Who do you work for?

"I work for Topos Partnership – we do research into public opinion. The client is a non-profit that works on things like public policies and wants to understand what people are thinking – what they think should be done – shouldn't be done and so on."

Why do you need to film / tape me?

“The video / recording is for research purposes, and to show people who work on this issue what people have to say. It’s not for TV. You won’t get famous this way.”

(If they inquire further, your Research Lead should have given you specific language.)

Do you have to videotape me?

“It’s better if we videotape, but we don’t have to. I can audiotape it. I’ll just point the camera away, and that way we get a record of what you have to say.”

(You can still attach a mic if they are willing. And consider asking again to videotape once better rapport has been established.)

As long as I don’t end up on Youtube!

If they insist they don’t want their image made public, “put on the internet”, or otherwise express serious concern about this, please include a note to this effect. We can make sure video from the interview is only used internally with the client.

The Interview

Refer to the *Topos Approach to Interviewing* for the basic guidelines of a Topos interview.

- Probing/following-up is an extremely important part of the process. Some suggested probes will be included in the protocol (in parentheses). We want to hear *why* they have the opinions they do. Usually the protocol itself should reflect this. Don’t be afraid to follow up on something they said that seems to be leading to something interesting. If you come up with a new question that seems productive, please share it with us asap, so that we can disseminate it to other interviewers.
- Wait to ask the follow-up probes. The follow-up questions should not be asked until it’s clear they are needed.
- The questions should seem conversational and like they are coming from *you*. Strictly avoid comments like, “They want to know what you think about . . .” or “The next question has to do with . . .”
- Do not paraphrase their words back at them, or put words in their mouth, even if they seem to be struggling to articulate something.
- Good to occasionally not understand what they’re explaining. This encourages them to rephrase, clarify, e.g. “What do you mean by that?”
- Good sometimes to gently disagree or offer a counter argument: “. . . but what about the idea that . . .?”. This encourages them to justify a bit.
- Sometimes a protocol question will be answered naturally in the flow of the conversation before you ask it. Use your judgment as to whether there is still room for exploration or just to move on to other questions.
- Jump around in the protocol as the conversation offers natural segues to the various questions. Most interviewers find it helpful to have the protocol printed out to enable checking off questions, as well as space to make notes about provocative ideas or statements to refer back to.

- If a subject complains that a question is vague or ambiguous, just ask them to answer as best they can.
- If you see you are running over time, you can mention that, and ask them if they want to continue or whether you have to wrap up. People are often willing to talk longer, but as a rule of thumb you should not run more than 15 minutes over time.
- At the conclusion, thank them very much for their participation and input.

Between Interviews

Immediately take 10 minutes or so to write down your thoughts, observations, context and so on. Note the things that struck you about the conversation – or any observations that might be important for us interpreting their words.

Include feedback on the research instrument. If you find certain questions or comments elicit particularly interesting and rich talk (or others do not), let us know as we adapt this protocol. Your real-time experience of what is working and not working in the protocol is important feedback for us, and we often make adjustments from one day to the next.

Follow the Research Lead's instructions for submitting those notes.

Double check the sound quality of both yourself and the subject. Make any adjustments necessary for the next interview.

Inform the project manager that a recording is available for transcription and analysis.

If required, update the demographic spreadsheet where we record the daily output including demographic and other information on the people spoken with.

Additional Expectations

Other specific expectations may be outlined in your "Researcher Agreement," or conveyed to you by the Research Lead or Project Manager.

We expect you to familiarize yourself with the research materials and training manuals and follow their instructions. Please reach out to the Research Lead or Project Manager whenever you have questions or concerns.

Finally, we expect you to conduct yourself in a careful and professional manner, and to not do anything that reflects poorly on Topos or our clients.