



Facilitating a Topos Small Group Conversation

This is a guide to conducting small group conversations in the style of a Topos researcher. Each project will have its own unique set of goals and challenges, but the techniques and orientations sketched below can serve as a useful guide for just about any Topos interviewing project.

ACTIVE LISTENING

01 Bring your curiosity and express it

As a facilitator you are an extension of our curiosity and the curiosity of the sponsors of the research. You should bring that curiosity yourself to the conversation. (For this reason it is important that you know and understand the topics and goals of the research!) You should express curiosity with words, tone of voice – and if conducting in person - gestures, eye contact, and so on. Your ability to convey to the speaker that you are listening with attention and interest is key to good interviewing.

02 Use prompts and follow-up questions

Small groups vary a great deal in terms of how much time is allotted for exploration (which you should clarify with the research lead), but it is always important to get the participants to follow through on their thinking, to be specific, to explain clearly, etc. Sometimes the session protocol will suggest follow-ups to use after the participant has responded, such as “why/why not?” or suggest that you probe, but ultimately it is your responsibility to get people to articulate and explain their thinking.

03 Don't try to paraphrase what they said

Interviewers are often tempted to re-phrase a subject's statement back to them to show they've been listening or to confirm if that's what they meant, but you should never do this, since this can inadvertently impose the facilitator's own interpretation. Instead, ask them to rephrase or clarify, asking, “What do you mean by that?” If you want to refer back to something they said, keep it simple and/or in their own words, e.g. “Earlier you said you didn't mind paying taxes. Could you say more about that?”

APPROXIMATING A CONVERSATION

04 Be personable, friendly, and build rapport:

You should be comfortable speaking to strangers and know how to engage people in conversation. Bring those skills to the listening session. But never build rapport by agreeing with or approving of their opinions. You should be a neutral, curious, and interested listener.)

05 Don't recite a survey

As much as possible the questions should sound like they are coming from you rather than from a list in front of you. In some cases, you can jump around in the protocol as the flow of the conversation creates openings for natural segues from one topic to another. Don't remind people that this is a survey with comments like, "The next question is," or "They want to know if . . ." When the protocol includes paragraphs or "texts" to be read verbatim, just relax and read them in a natural voice at a comfortable pace (slow enough so that people can hear and understand).

06 Internalize the questions

In order to conduct the interview in your own voice, it is very helpful to familiarize yourself with the goals of the project as well as the various questions that we have laid out to help us get the sorts of conversations we need. Take the time and effort to get to know the research protocol thoroughly. This also helps you when someone's answer begins to anticipate another question on the protocol, so you might wish to jump to it next to keep the ideas and conversation flowing.

MANAGING THE INTERVIEW

07 Get a response from everyone and mix up the order

In the typical protocol, we'll want each person to offer a response to each question or prompt. In some cases you will pose a question to each person in turn, being sure to mix up the order you address each respondent as you go. In more free-flowing conversations, you'll want to prompt those who don't speak up. It can be helpful to use scratch paper to help "check off" each respondent. Addressing people by their first names – or having them mention their name each time they speak up – is also important so we can distinguish between each subject in the transcript.

08 Maneuver the conversation onto our terrain

One of your responsibilities as a facilitator is to guide the conversation onto the terrain that we are exploring. The protocol and your follow-up questions should help you keep these semi-structured interviews on track. A certain amount of digression is useful, because we want to leave room for people to make unexpected connections and observations about related issues. But too much digression and you are unlikely to get through the whole interview protocol. Interrupt or assert yourself to move on to the next participant when people go too far off topic or keep repeating the same point.

09 Manage your time

Pay close attention to your progress with an eye on the time limit. Some groups are talkative, while others are succinct. Take stock after 15 minutes to gauge whether you seem to have ample time or whether you will have to forgo some probes and follow-up questions. Take stock at intervals. It can be helpful to break the protocol down into “chunks” each of which might roughly take a certain amount of time. Underlined questions are the most important and should be asked in every session.

IMPROVING THE PROCESS

10 Reflect after each interview

Take time to evaluate whether the listening sessions are getting the data that we are looking for. Are there things you could change that would improve our odds of getting what we need? Do you have questions or concerns that came up that you may need to discuss with the research team?

11 Improve the protocol

Our research protocols are living documents, which evolve with feedback from researchers. You should tell us which questions elicit good, relevant conversation and which don't, and share your ideas and suggestions for adapting and improving the research protocol as we gain more experience fielding it.

12 Share your insights and analysis

It's never too early to start writing about potential patterns you notice in the data. Schedule 10-12 minutes after the interview to write down and share observations, initial hypotheses, surprising responses. The project manager will have set up a specified place on Asana for this. These are all welcome input from facilitators, which help us guide the overall arc of our research projects.

These 12 points are meant to serve as initial guideposts for becoming a facilitator for Topos-style small group listening sessions. Putting all of this into practice and getting the details right is a learning process, and the research team is the best resource for necessary help and feedback.