



## **The Topos Approach to Interviewing**

This is a guide to conducting interviews as 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 an interviewer you are an extension of our curiosity and the curiosity of our clients. You should bring that curiosity yourself to the interview. (For this reason it is important that you know and understand the goals of the research!) You should express curiosity with words, gestures, eye contact, tone of voice and so on. Your ability to convey to the speaker that you are listening with attention and interest is key to a good interview.

#### **02 Use prompts and follow-up questions extensively**

Get the subjects to follow through on their thinking, to be specific, to explain clearly, etc. Sometimes the interview protocol will suggest follow-ups, such as “why/why not?” or ask you to probe, but ultimately it is your responsibility to get people to articulate and explain. For example, it’s good to occasionally not understand what they’re saying so they’ll rephrase or clarify, asking, “What do you mean by that?” Or gently disagree by offering a counter argument: “But what about the idea that . . . ?” This encourages them to justify a bit.

#### **03 You don’t have to convince**

We will sometimes be testing messages or gambits on issues where we want to change people’s thinking, but don’t feel like you have to persuade the person you are speaking with. At the interview stage you are bouncing these ideas and arguments off people to see how they react. You are listening.

## **APPROXIMATING A CONVERSATION**

### **04 Be personable, friendly, and build rapport:**

You should know how to engage people in conversation. Bring those skills to the interview. (Though sharing your own thoughts and opinions should be kept to a minimum.)

### **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. Jump around in the protocol as the flow of the conversation creates openings for natural segues from one topic to another. Don't flag the fact that this is a survey with comments like, "The next question is," or "They want to know if . . ."

### **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.

## **MAINTAINING CONTROL**

### **07 Maneuver the conversation onto our terrain**

One of your responsibilities as an interviewer 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.

### **08 Allow (the right amount) of digression**

We want to leave room for people to make unexpected connections and observations about related issues. For this reason, a certain amount of digression is useful. Too much digression, however, and we are not getting the data we need. Feel free to interrupt or assert yourself, when people go off on tangents, especially when they seem like well-practiced rants or litanies.

### **09 Get the most out of group interactions**

Any time you interview more than one person at a time you have to pay special attention to the social dynamics. In a small group call with a dominating personality this might mean ordering questions so others can express themselves first. In ethnography it might mean subtly encouraging conversation between co-workers to observe how ideas work in social interaction.

## **IMPROVING THE PROCESS**

### **I 0 Reflect after each interview**

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

### **I 1 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.

### **I 2 Share your insights and analysis**

It's never too early to start thinking about potential patterns you notice in the data. Write down and share observations, initial hypotheses, surprising responses. These are all welcome input from interviewers, which help us guide the overall arc of our research projects.

These 12 points are meant to serve as initial guideposts for becoming a Topos interviewer. Putting all of this into practice and getting the details right is a learning process, and your Research Lead is the best resource for the necessary help and feedback.