

Tips & Tools #3: Conducting Interviews



- **Start with a non-threatening, open-ended question** to build rapport and get the respondent talking. Then place more difficult or sensitive questions at the end of the interview.
- **Use probes to stimulate discussion and obtain more information. Common probes include:**
 - “Please tell me more about that.”
 - “I’m not sure I understand. Could you explain that again [or in more detail]?”
 - “What would be an example of that?”
 - “If I were your client [boss, staff, the Governor, etc.], how would you describe that to me?”
 - “Is there anything else [on that topic] that you would like to add?”
- **Stay silent to give the respondent time to think.** When a respondent doesn’t start answering right away, don’t immediately start talking again. Silence (an expectant pause) can also be used as a sort of probe to indicate that more information is expected.
- **Practice active listening.** Active listening occurs when the listener provides feedback (verbal and/or nonverbal) to the respondent.
- **Overcome barriers to active listening:**
 - Suppress disruptive habits (finger drumming, change jingling).
 - Don’t begin reading documents provided by the interviewee.
 - Be aware of your biases and how they might be filtering the respondent’s message.
 - Don’t jump to conclusions; hear out the respondent.
 - Don’t interrupt or debate.
 - Don’t assume that you understand what the respondent meant; request clarification, especially of key words or ideas.
 - Don’t monopolize the conversation.
 - Turn off your cell phone.
- **Use verbal active listening techniques:**
 - Make reassuring sounds, such as “uh huh,” “I see,” “that’s interesting,” etc.
 - Probe the respondent’s initial responses in order to expand or clarify the information given.
 - On key points, restate in your own words what the respondent has just said.
 - Summarize the main points of the discussion.
- **Use non-verbal active listening techniques:**
 - Maintain eye contact and sit up straight.
 - Use occasional affirmative nods to show understanding and interest (but don’t let this become a habit lest it start to seem like you are approving, not just affirming the responses).
 - Take notes as appropriate to show that information is relevant and important.

For more Tips & Tools and other resources, go to our website: <http://programeval.ucdavis.edu>