



Ontario Centre of Excellence  
for Child and Youth  
Mental Health

*Bringing People and Knowledge Together to Strengthen Care.*

# Method Mini-Toolkit

Learning

Collaboration

Leadership



[Qualitative Interviewing: >>](#)

An Overview



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## Introduction

# What is a qualitative interview?

## ➤ A qualitative interview –

- is a one-on-one, guided conversation used to gather in-depth information about someone's feelings, thoughts and experiences related to a specific subject.
- provides in-depth information from selected individuals (the goal is not to talk to the whole population or get a representative sample).
- is a way for the respondent to share information in her/his own words.
- can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured.

## CONTENT

- ▶ [What is a qualitative interview?](#)
- ▶ [When would I use this method?](#)
- ▶ [Where do I start?](#)
- ▶ [Developing an interview guide](#)
- ▶ [How do I conduct an interview?](#)
- ▶ [Helpful tips](#)
- ▶ [How to analyze the data?](#)
- ▶ [Some strengths](#)
- ▶ [Some limitations](#)
- ▶ [For more information](#)

## ➤ [Other available Mini-Toolkits](#)

### About the Centre

As a leader for child and youth mental health in Ontario, we build connections, share knowledge and draw upon our expertise to enhance the skills of front-line service providers. We passionately promote and share the benefits of both organizational learning and evidence-informed practice. Together with our partners we are working to strengthen Ontario's mental health programs and services for all children, youth families and caregivers.



**Helpful tips****More information****Other Mini-Toolkits****Structured interview** (also called “standardized interview”)

## Description

- All questions are clearly outlined in the interview guide.
- Probes (statements that encourage a participant to follow up on a particular theme) and related questions are included.
- The same set of questions is asked of all interviewees and the questions are posed in the same order to everyone.
- Questions are open-ended and results are analyzed qualitatively.

## Advantages

- Useful when you have a number of different people conducting interviews.
- Helpful when the interviewer has little prior experience.
- Can allow for comparisons across different time points if the participant is being interviewed more than once.
- Useful when you know the specific type of information you are looking for.

## Limitations

- Since the interviewer uses a script, this type of interview does not allow her/him to follow-up on potentially interesting themes.
- This type of interview does not allow the interviewer the flexibility to follow the natural flow of conversation.

**Semi-structured interview**

## Description

- Interviews are conducted using a guide that outlines certain important questions or topics, but there is flexibility around question wording, probes and potential follow-up questions.
- Questions are open-ended.
- The order of questions can change based on the flow of the conversation, but the same major points are covered in each interview.

## Advantages

- The interviewer can shape the conversation according to the interviewee’s responses.
- This type of interview is more flexible and allows for more exploration than a structured interview, yet still keeps the conversation focused.

## Limitations

- This type of interview requires a relatively experienced interviewer that is able to “think on her/his feet” to ensure that major points are covered during the conversation.

**CONTENT**

- ▶ [What is a qualitative interview?](#)
- ▶ [When would I use this method?](#)
- ▶ [Where do I start?](#)
- ▶ [Developing an interview guide](#)
- ▶ [How do I conduct an interview?](#)
- ▶ [Helpful tips](#)
- ▶ [How to analyze the data?](#)
- ▶ [Some strengths](#)
- ▶ [Some limitations](#)
- ▶ [For more information](#)

➔ [Other available Mini-Toolkits](#)

**About the Centre**

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### Unstructured interview

#### Description

- These are also called “informal conversational interviews” and are completely unscripted.
- While the interviewer has certain topics in mind to cover, none of the questions are determined in advance and responses are open-ended.

#### Advantages

- The interviewer can be responsive to specific contexts and change/adapt questions accordingly.

#### Limitations

- This type of interview requires a relatively experienced interviewer that is able to “think on her/his feet” to ensure that major points are covered during the conversation
- Each interview can yield different types of information, which can make it challenging to look for themes across participants.

### CONTENT

- ▶ [What is a qualitative interview?](#)
- ▶ [When would I use this method?](#)
- ▶ [Where do I start?](#)
- ▶ [Developing an interview guide](#)
- ▶ [How do I conduct an interview?](#)
- ▶ [Helpful tips](#)
- ▶ [How to analyze the data?](#)
- ▶ [Some strengths](#)
- ▶ [Some limitations](#)
- ▶ [For more information](#)

➔ [Other available Mini-Toolkits](#)

## When would I use this method?

- To collect in-depth, qualitative information on a particular topic that cannot be gathered through observation alone.
- To gain in-depth information from “key informants” – people who are important to your evaluation either because of their position, subject knowledge, or program experiences (e.g., staff, program participants, other stakeholders).
- To explore an area about which little is known, or limited prior research has been done.
- To identify variables, outcomes and/or processes that may be of interest in a broader, quantitative study.
- To complement or corroborate findings obtained through other methods (e.g., surveys, case studies).

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Mental Health

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# Where do I start?

- Begin by reviewing the literature on a particular topic to help you narrow your focus and identify key questions you would like to explore.
- Brainstorm (with a team) a number of issues/questions you'd like to discuss with potential participants.
- Select about four to six questions you think would be most useful in helping you meet the overall goals of your evaluation project.
- Decide what kind of interview you want to conduct (structured, semi-structured or unstructured) so that you can develop your interview guide.
- Identify potential interviewees/respondents.
- Specify the group in which potential participants are members. Recruit participants by using an advertisement/poster inviting them to take part in your project, or by word of mouth. As a general guideline, aim for somewhere between eight to 10 interviews for an average evaluation project.

## CONTENT

- ▶ [What is a qualitative interview?](#)
- ▶ [When would I use this method?](#)
- ▶ [Where do I start?](#)
- ▶ [Developing an interview guide](#)
- ▶ [How do I conduct an interview?](#)
- ▶ [Helpful tips](#)
- ▶ [How to analyze the data?](#)
- ▶ [Some strengths](#)
- ▶ [Some limitations](#)
- ▶ [For more information](#)

---

 [Other available Mini-Toolkits](#)

---

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# Developing a qualitative interview guide

- If you choose to conduct semi-structured or structured interviews, use the findings from the literature review along with discussions with team members to develop a number of general questions you would like to pose to potential participants.
- For a structured interview, you can also work with the team to develop the specific questions and associated probes or follow-up questions. (See the “Dos” and “Don’ts” section for some guidelines about developing questions).
- If you choose to conduct unstructured interviews, your interview guide should outline the purpose of the research, the main goal(s) of the interview and key issues to discuss throughout the interview.
- Begin with more general questions to get people comfortable and to build rapport. Examples include “How did you first become involved with the program?” or “When did you first join the group?”
- There is no “right” length to a qualitative interview. The length is determined by the goals of the interview and the participant you are speaking with. While you will want to ensure that you obtain enough appropriate information, it is important to keep in mind that the longer the interview, the longer it takes to prepare, conduct, and analyze. As well, remember to consider the participants’ time and other commitments.

## CONTENT

- ▶ [What is a qualitative interview?](#)
- ▶ [When would I use this method?](#)
- ▶ [Where do I start?](#)
- ▶ [Developing an interview guide](#)
- ▶ [How do I conduct an interview?](#)
- ▶ [Helpful tips](#)
- ▶ [How to analyze the data?](#)
- ▶ [Some strengths](#)
- ▶ [Some limitations](#)
- ▶ [For more information](#)

---

[➔ Other available Mini-Toolkits](#)

---

### About the Centre

As a leader for child and youth mental health in Ontario, we build connections, share knowledge and draw upon our expertise to enhance the skills of front-line service providers. We passionately promote and share the benefits of both organizational learning and evidence-informed practice. Together with our partners we are working to strengthen Ontario’s mental health programs and services for all children, youth families and caregivers.



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# How do I conduct a qualitative interview?

## PREPARING for the interview:

- When scheduling the interview, let participants know approximately how long the interview will take. You may choose to send them the questions ahead of time so that they will know what to expect. Be aware that this may result in more scripted, less spontaneous responses.
- Consider participants' needs in relation to transportation, child care, scheduling and wheelchair accessibility. This will help to ensure attendance at the interview.
- Consider offering an honorarium (or incentive) to cover participants' time and travel-related costs.
- Make sure you have a sense of who the participant is and what perspective s/he will represent. This can help you to be prepared, and can also help you to anticipate which questions may be challenging or less relevant.
- Familiarize yourself with the interview guide and the overall goals of the project. This way you can be flexible and rephrase or ask questions in a different order depending on the flow of the conversation (if you are using a semi-structured or unstructured guide). This will also help you to better use probes and follow-up questions to elicit additional information. If you are not the one conducting the interviews, arrange for time to train interviewers.

## CONTENT

- ▶ [What is a qualitative interview?](#)
- ▶ [When would I use this method?](#)
- ▶ [Where do I start?](#)
- ▶ [Developing an interview guide](#)
- ▶ [How do I conduct an interview?](#)
- ▶ [Helpful tips](#)
- ▶ [How to analyze the data?](#)
- ▶ [Some strengths](#)
- ▶ [Some limitations](#)
- ▶ [For more information](#)

---

[➔ Other available Mini-Toolkits](#)

---

### About the Centre

As a leader for child and youth mental health in Ontario, we build connections, share knowledge and draw upon our expertise to enhance the skills of front-line service providers. We passionately promote and share the benefits of both organizational learning and evidence-informed practice. Together with our partners we are working to strengthen Ontario's mental health programs and services for all children, youth families and caregivers.



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- The setting in which the interview takes place is important. Make sure the room is easy to get to, comfortable (not too hot, not too cool) and free from distractions. It is more common for the interviewer to travel to meet the participant than vice-versa. If a face-to-face meeting is not possible, the interview can be conducted by telephone, however this method does not allow you to observe non-verbal cues (e.g., body language can tell you whether the person is feeling comfortable with certain questions or not).
- Before beginning the interview, explain its purpose and the goals of the broader research. As well, discuss the processes you have in place to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of her/his responses. If the participant agrees to take part, obtain her/his written consent at this time. If s/he declines, thank the participant for her/his time and provide your contact information, should s/he change her/his mind at a later date.
- When conducting research with young people under the age of 16, the written consent of their parent/guardian (or in the absence of either, the organization) must be obtained prior to conducting any evaluation or research-related activities. It may be helpful to prepare a script to help you go through this information consistently with each participant.

**CONTENT**

- ▶ [What is a qualitative interview?](#)
- ▶ [When would I use this method?](#)
- ▶ [Where do I start?](#)
- ▶ [Developing an interview guide](#)
- ▶ [How do I conduct an interview?](#)
- ▶ [Helpful tips](#)
- ▶ [How to analyze the data?](#)
- ▶ [Some strengths](#)
- ▶ [Some limitations](#)
- ▶ [For more information](#)

➔ [Other available Mini-Toolkits](#)

**About the Centre**

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- If you are conducting a structured interview, it is important to ask the questions as written. If the participant doesn't understand a particular question because of its phrasing, make note of this and consider revising it for future interviews (see the "Dos" section about piloting). If you are conducting a semi-structured or unstructured interview, rephrase a question if the participant didn't understand it, or it is met with silence. You can also skip that question and return to it at the end of the interview.
- In semi-structured and unstructured interviews, use probes to elicit more detailed responses. For example: Who was involved in that situation? Why is that important to you? What happened next? Can you elaborate on that point a bit further?
- Try to stay impartial. Although it's impossible to be completely unbiased, it's important to try not to influence the discussion in a particular direction. This includes what you communicate both through body language as well as verbally.
- Take very detailed notes. This is advised even if you are recording the interview, in case there are problems with the audio file.

**CONTENT**

- ▶ [What is a qualitative interview?](#)
- ▶ [When would I use this method?](#)
- ▶ [Where do I start?](#)
- ▶ [Developing an interview guide](#)
- ▶ [How do I conduct an interview?](#)
- ▶ [Helpful tips](#)
- ▶ [How to analyze the data?](#)
- ▶ [Some strengths](#)
- ▶ [Some limitations](#)
- ▶ [For more information](#)

.....

 [Other available Mini-Toolkits](#)

.....

**About the Centre**

As a leader for child and youth mental health in Ontario, we build connections, share knowledge and draw upon our expertise to enhance the skills of front-line service providers. We passionately promote and share the benefits of both organizational learning and evidence-informed practice. Together with our partners we are working to strengthen Ontario's mental health programs and services for all children, youth families and caregivers.



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- Make sure to ask the participant if s/he has any final thoughts to share, or any questions about the interview or project.
- Explain what will happen next (i.e., the data will be analyzed, findings will be presented, etc.).
- Thank the participant for sharing her/his time and experiences with you.
- Write down any observations or reflections after the participant has left. For example, were there any surprises? Were there some questions the participant was hesitant to answer?
- Store notes, consent forms, audio files, etc. in a secure location. Make sure everything is labelled with the date and time of the interview. It is important to delete the audio file once it has been transcribed. According to Tri-council Policy Statement: [Ethical Conduct for Research Using Humans](#), all transcripts should be kept for seven years, and destroyed thereafter.
- It is often helpful to send the transcripts or written results to the participant to get her/his confirmation that your findings are an accurate representation of her/his experience.

**CONTENT**

- ▶ [What is a qualitative interview?](#)
- ▶ [When would I use this method?](#)
- ▶ [Where do I start?](#)
- ▶ [Developing an interview guide](#)
- ▶ [How do I conduct an interview?](#)
- ▶ [Helpful tips](#)
- ▶ [How to analyze the data?](#)
- ▶ [Some strengths](#)
- ▶ [Some limitations](#)
- ▶ [For more information](#)

.....

 [Other available Mini-Toolkits](#)

.....

**About the Centre**

As a leader for child and youth mental health in Ontario, we build connections, share knowledge and draw upon our expertise to enhance the skills of front-line service providers. We passionately promote and share the benefits of both organizational learning and evidence-informed practice. Together with our partners we are working to strengthen Ontario's mental health programs and services for all children, youth families and caregivers.



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# Some more helpful tips for conducting qualitative interviews:

## Do:

- **Pilot the interview.** This means trying out the interview guide with one or two participants and making changes to phrasing, content, etc. based on their feedback.
- **If you are conducting the interview in person, it's a good idea to “dress the part.”** Business casual is often appropriate.
- **Be aware of how characteristics of the interviewer can influence the responses gathered.** For example, if the interview is conducted by program staff, respondents may be hesitant to share certain information.
- **Make sure that you are adhering to ethical guidelines in your work.** Visit the [National Council on Ethics in Human Research](#) for more information.

## CONTENT

- ▶ [What is a qualitative interview?](#)
- ▶ [When would I use this method?](#)
- ▶ [Where do I start?](#)
- ▶ [Developing an interview guide](#)
- ▶ [How do I conduct an interview?](#)
- ▶ [Helpful tips](#)
- ▶ [How to analyze the data?](#)
- ▶ [Some strengths](#)
- ▶ [Some limitations](#)
- ▶ [For more information](#)

## ➔ [Other available Mini-Toolkits](#)

### About the Centre

As a leader for child and youth mental health in Ontario, we build connections, share knowledge and draw upon our expertise to enhance the skills of front-line service providers. We passionately promote and share the benefits of both organizational learning and evidence-informed practice. Together with our partners we are working to strengthen Ontario's mental health programs and services for all children, youth families and caregivers.



Ontario Centre of Excellence  
for Child and Youth  
Mental Health

[Helpful tips](#)[More information](#)[Other Mini-Toolkits](#)

# Don't:

- **Ask closed-ended questions.** Closed-ended questions limit respondents to one of several pre-determined responses, and do not allow for personal reflection. For example: “How many sessions did you attend?”
- **Ask dichotomous questions.** Dichotomous questions are a type of closed-ended question that can be answered using “yes” or “no”. They discourage in-depth information sharing, as participants will often not voluntarily elaborate on their responses. For example: “Are you currently on a waitlist for this service?”
- **Ask more than one question at a time.** These are called “double-barrelled questions” and require that participants answer two questions at the same time. For example: “What did you like most about this program and what did you like least?” Instead, ask one question, wait for the response, and then ask the other.
- **Ask leading questions, or questions that can lead to “socially desirable answers.”** These are questions which lead respondents to answer in a particular way. For example: “Most professionals in the field agree that this program is highly effective. What are your thoughts?”

## CONTENT

- ▶ [What is a qualitative interview?](#)
- ▶ [When would I use this method?](#)
- ▶ [Where do I start?](#)
- ▶ [Developing an interview guide](#)
- ▶ [How do I conduct an interview?](#)
- ▶ [Helpful tips](#)
- ▶ [How to analyze the data?](#)
- ▶ [Some strengths](#)
- ▶ [Some limitations](#)
- ▶ [For more information](#)

.....

 [Other available Mini-Toolkits](#)

.....

### About the Centre

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# How do I analyze the data that are produced in a qualitative interview?

- Qualitative interviews provide qualitative data. Qualitative data include people's experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge about a particular topic.
- Once the interview is complete, the recording (if applicable) is transcribed, and the written material (including the interviewer's notes and reflections) is analyzed.
- Analysis can be inductive (where the person doing the analysis discovers themes or patterns in the data) or deductive (where data are analyzed according to a pre-determined framework).
- Qualitative analysis provides "thick description"—this means that the reader gets a full, in-depth understanding of the situation being described.
- There are software programs that can help to analyze qualitative data, like [QSR NVivo](#). These tools are typically used in studies with large samples (e.g., more than 10 interviews). Such programs can be quite costly and require specialized training, so it is important to assess whether the benefits will outweigh the costs involved.

## CONTENT

- ▶ [What is a qualitative interview?](#)
- ▶ [When would I use this method?](#)
- ▶ [Where do I start?](#)
- ▶ [Developing an interview guide](#)
- ▶ [How do I conduct an interview?](#)
- ▶ [Helpful tips](#)
- ▶ [How to analyze the data?](#)
- ▶ [Some strengths](#)
- ▶ [Some limitations](#)
- ▶ [For more information](#)

---

### [Other available Mini-Toolkits](#)

---

#### About the Centre

As a leader for child and youth mental health in Ontario, we build connections, share knowledge and draw upon our expertise to enhance the skills of front-line service providers. We passionately promote and share the benefits of both organizational learning and evidence-informed practice. Together with our partners we are working to strengthen Ontario's mental health programs and services for all children, youth families and caregivers.



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- For more information on how to analyze qualitative research, see: *“Analyzing qualitative data” (1993) (A. Bryman & B. Burgess, Eds.), London: Routledge* or *“Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (3rd Ed.)” (2007) (A. Strauss & J. Corbin), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.*

# Some strengths of qualitative interviewing

- Can be flexible in terms of format and types of questions.
- Helpful in providing a lot of rich, in-depth data.
- Can be dynamic (the interview can be adapted based on the responses given).
- Able to provide non-verbal data (e.g., facial expressions or body language) that can be helpful during analysis.
- Can explore processes in depth, not just outcomes. For example, you might ask “What are your thoughts on the intake process?” to understand people’s early experiences with a program.
- Analysis can begin with the first couple of interviews, and is ongoing thereafter. This allows you to explore certain themes in more detail and perhaps refine your protocol with subsequent participants.

## CONTENT

- ▶ [What is a qualitative interview?](#)
- ▶ [When would I use this method?](#)
- ▶ [Where do I start?](#)
- ▶ [Developing an interview guide](#)
- ▶ [How do I conduct an interview?](#)
- ▶ [Helpful tips](#)
- ▶ [How to analyze the data?](#)
- ▶ [Some strengths](#)
- ▶ [Some limitations](#)
- ▶ [For more information](#)

### [Other available Mini-Toolkits](#)

#### About the Centre

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# Some limitations of qualitative interviewing

- Time-consuming to conduct and analyze.
- Findings cannot be generalized to larger segments of the population.
- The success of a qualitative interview is determined in large part by the skill and experience of the interviewer. Training in interview skills is often a combination of formal instruction and learning by doing, so it can take time to gain expertise in this area.

## CONTENT

- ▶ [What is a qualitative interview?](#)
- ▶ [When would I use this method?](#)
- ▶ [Where do I start?](#)
- ▶ [Developing an interview guide](#)
- ▶ [How do I conduct an interview?](#)
- ▶ [Helpful tips](#)
- ▶ [How to analyze the data?](#)
- ▶ [Some strengths](#)
- ▶ [Some limitations](#)
- ▶ [For more information](#)

➔ [Other available Mini-Toolkits](#)

# Where can I go for more information?

Patton, M.Q. (2002). "Qualitative Interviewing." *In Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Rubin, H.J. & Rubin, I.S. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*, (2nd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Gaudreau, L. & Lacelle, N. (1999). "Ne pas se noyer dans les techniques: l'entretien individuel." *In Manuel d'évaluation participative et négociée*. Université du Québec à Montréal, Services aux collectivités. (French only)

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