



Asking the right questions

Closed Questions

The easiest response to a closed question is 'yes' or 'no' and that's what people choose if they are unsure. Mostly they will agree unless the implication is negative, then they will mostly disagree [but see *pinning out* and *false confession* below].

Did you go to the café today?

Yes

Did you enjoy it?

Yes

Were you at the bus stop when the man hit Polly?

Yes

Is that the man who hit Polly?

Yes

Watch out for questions that masquerade as open but are actually closed. They usually begin with a word like *can*:

Can you tell me about the incident?

Open Questions

Open questions enable more elaborate answers. People might still say they don't know and you may have to ask more and different questions to find out whether this is so or whether there is another problem. The interviewee may not be confident enough to tell you what they do know, they may remember something but they think it's silly or unimportant, or maybe they didn't understand the question. This is why writing down the answers and using careful probes is so important.

Where did you go today?

We went to the garden centre and the swimming pool

What was that like?

Swimming was good but the garden centre was boring

What happened today at the bus stop?

This bloke came running up and bumped into Polly

What can you tell me about this man?

I can't remember but he was big and he had a red jacket

Leading questions

These offer correct information that may not be known to the interviewee. They are usually closed, but not always.

Was it a yellow sweater?

It's a cataract operation you're having, isn't it?

So then he went into Boots didn't he?

Have you signed the contract?

Misleading questions look the same but they offer incorrect information, often because the interviewer is guessing.

Upgrading Responses

This is where an imprecise term is replaced by the interviewer with a 'better' word that may be completely wrong. You will avoid this if you use the client's own words, this is why recording the interview in writing as you go is important.

Where people use language that might be construed as offensive, try to go with it just so long as it appears not to be intended as such. Sometimes people either don't know the 'correct' word for something, or they're not sure about it and



don't want to sound silly. Sometimes, especially in medical situations, the so-called correct word is more embarrassing to say out loud than the slang. Try not to educate or correct during the interview, this adds new information which is not in memory and so can't be used as evidence of understanding. But you might have to probe to ensure you both have the same understanding of the word the interviewee used instead. You might be unsure what a street term means and it's just possible it isn't being used that way in any case.

A story about plant pots:

So what happened next?
Well Jim brought these pot things in on a tray...
What, coffee pots, mugs do you mean?
Well he brought them in and dropped them
So the coffee went all over the floor?
I suppose so

A false confession:

So you were on your own on Thursday afternoon, what happened next?
I went to get the bus from town
From the bus station?
Maybe. I don't think so.
You can get lots of buses from there?
Yes
So you were on your own at the bus station when this girl was robbed
Well...
There was no-one else there so who could have done it?
Well, I suppose...

This example shows acquiescence and pinning out.

Beware Alternatives and Comparisons

Did she have brown hair or blond?
Was it wet or dry outside?
People often choose the second alternative when they are unsure
Was he taller or shorter than me?
Was the car bigger or smaller than ours?

People have trouble with comparisons, especially abstract ones – happier, calmer, lighter, darker and so on. They tend to choose the second or the last option.

Handy openers

Where....?
What....?
When....?
Why....?
How....?
Tell me about....
You said that.....what was that about/how does that work?

Starting with these almost guarantees that you won't fall into a closed, leading question trap but -

If you find yourself in the middle of a leading question, just stop and leave the leading element unsaid:-

So was that the time when.....?
Did you tell him about.....?
Was it the one in the.....?



People are very inclined to fill in a gap, just make sure your face is telling them you would like that to happen and not that you have no idea what to say next!

Hints

Try not to punctuate everything your interviewee says with *Ok*, *aha*, *right*, and other rewarding social fillers. These can set up both a desire to please, and a sense of having 'got it right' with their answers. If you can, go for Carl Rogers' *unconditional positive regard* in which your expression invites communication but does not convey judgement.

