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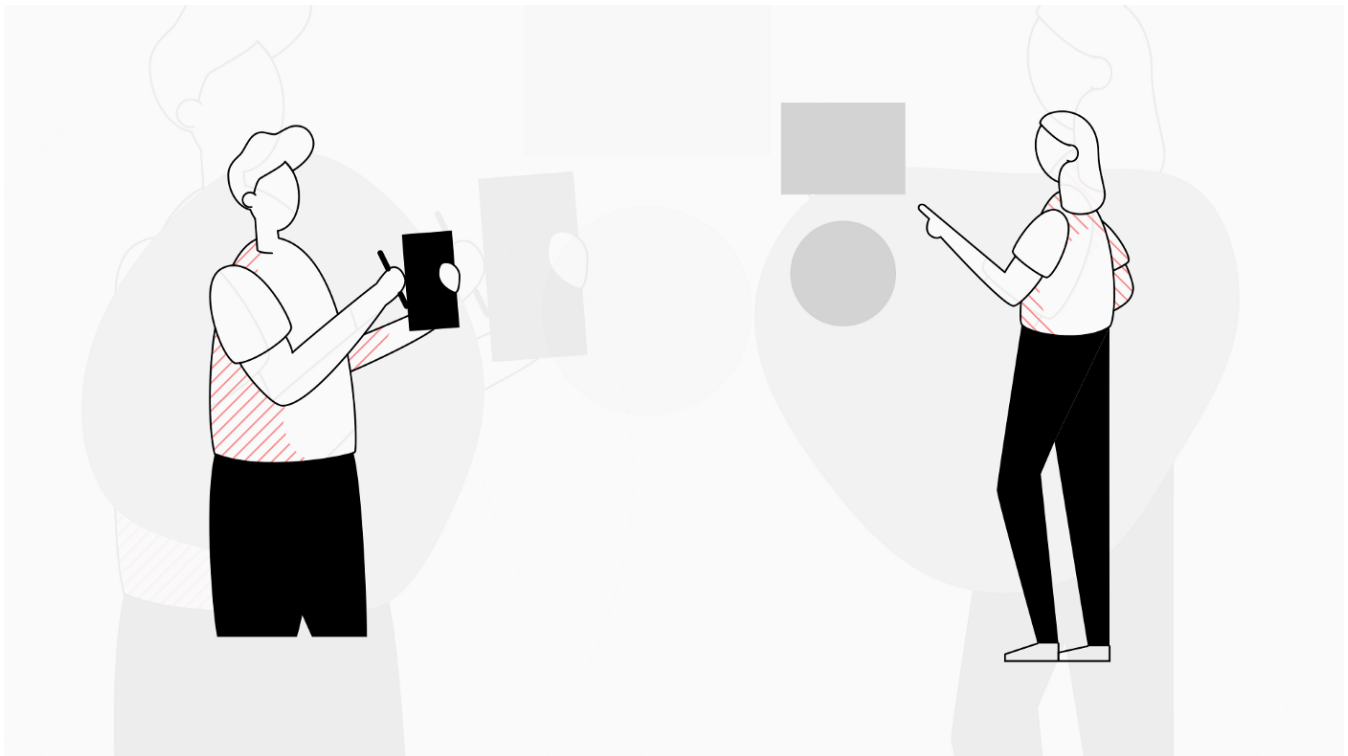
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# Interviewing: more than a user research method

Tips, tricks and free resources to nail interviews in UX.



The first time I came across the concept of *behavior as the medium of design* by [Robert Fabricant](#), it really hit home.

As a designer, it is easy to fall into the trap of focusing only in the creation of artifacts and prototypes to communicate the vision of the *to-be* experience – the world as a



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will be rendered obsolete.

Design is an enabler of change. As Karl Fast says: *Design helps us know the possible; the world as it might be. It's a mechanism for exploring, evaluating, and shaping the future.*

However, shaping the future is anything but a trivial endeavor, as designers need to correctly predict the way people will interact with the design.

*Do they find value in using it?*

*Do their mental models match with the conceptual model the design team envisioned?*

Fortunately, we don't need to travel to the future to answer these questions. We can do an extrapolation exercise by considering the best predictor of future behavior: *current behavior*.

## Making the Case for Interviews

Interviewing is one of the best research techniques designers can rely on to uncover not only behaviors but also the motivations and frustrations of the people who have influence over a project.

Through interviews, designers explore the uncharted territory that represents gathering insights from the business, technology, and human perspective, in order to make better design decisions and enable a fair exchange of value between users and organizations.

But interviewing entails more than scheduling sessions with participants and asking a series of predefined questions. It requires designers to develop what Indi Young defines as *cognitive empathy*: discovering the underlying thoughts and emotions that guide someone else's decisions and behaviors.

The first step towards cognitive empathy is being fluent in active listening.

*Converse like a talk show host, think like a writer, understand subtext like a psychiatrist, have an ear like a musician.*

– Lawrence Grobel



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Deep, active listening has never been a survival skill for humans. The homo sapiens species managed to persist during 70,000 years without the need to allocate mental resources to listen and understand other members of the group. We are far more comfortable speaking, because it makes us feel in control of the situation. In of the most popular TED Talks of all the time, author and radio host Celeste Headlee elaborates:

*The average person talks at about 225 words per minute, but we can listen at up to 500 words per minute. So our minds are filling in those other 275 words. [...] It takes effort and energy to actually pay attention to someone.*

### Types of Listening

In addition to her stellar TED Talk, Celeste also sheds some light during a conversation with Shane Parrish about the different layers of listening humans can have:

**Evaluative listening:** When someone responds immediately to what someone says with their judgment.

**Interpretive listening:** When there's an active interpretation — you're trying to understand.

**Transformative listening:** Listening with the willingness to change your mind and consider other points of view.

Most of us don't listen with the intent to understand, we listen with the intent to reply — Stephen Covey

It is transformative listening what designers should strive for during interviews, in order to honor the interviewees and learn as much as possible from them.

### Applying Interviewing to Different Situations

Interviewing is an activity you can conduct in a wide variety of scenarios, depending on your research questions. Following are some of the most common interview types within the UX discipline.



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trying to make progress in their lives, as well as avoiding designing for yourself and letting go of your own biases.

## Interviewing Stakeholders

Stakeholders — people who have an influence over the outcome of the project — can provide essential information to set the direction of the project up success. During the initial phases of a project, it is important to gather insights regarding the organization you're working with, how decisions are made, the way they operate and collaborate, business goals and metrics, definition of success, competitors, to name of few.

## Interviewing During Usability Tests

A lot of folks consider usability tests a technique focused only on learning about the product. However, there is always something we can learn from users, and more importantly, in order to successfully extract insights, a labor of moderation needs to be taken into account to put the user into the right *thinking aloud* mindset.

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## Leveling up as an Interviewer

The following advice is the distillation of my learnings through conducting and witnessing more than 100 interviews, as well as the gatherings collected from almost 10 books focused on user research.

## Before the Interview

Prior jumping out and start asking questions to participants, you need to plan your research project. Otherwise, it doesn't matter how many valuable insights you obtain, it will be hard to translate them into design decisions if you don't state a research goal and research questions first.



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Some questions you might ask yourself when planning your interviews:

- *What are the research questions I need to answer through interviews?*
- *What does the team know about the organization, users and product?*
- *What are some of the potential assumptions we're making and how could we reduce uncertainty?*

Tomer Sharon has a great resource of a [one-page research plan](#) you can leverage to lay out the foundation of your research efforts.

You can also [download my interview guide for free](#), which contains script templates, types of questions and best practices for interviewing.



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## Schedule a Dry Run

One of the biggest mistakes I caught myself doing over and over was not scheduling the right amount of time for interviews, which led to rushing the interviews at some times and not learning enough.

Dry runs or pilot tests can give you a fair sense of duration of an interview, as well as helping to validate whether the structure of your interview script facilitates a natural flow of conversation.

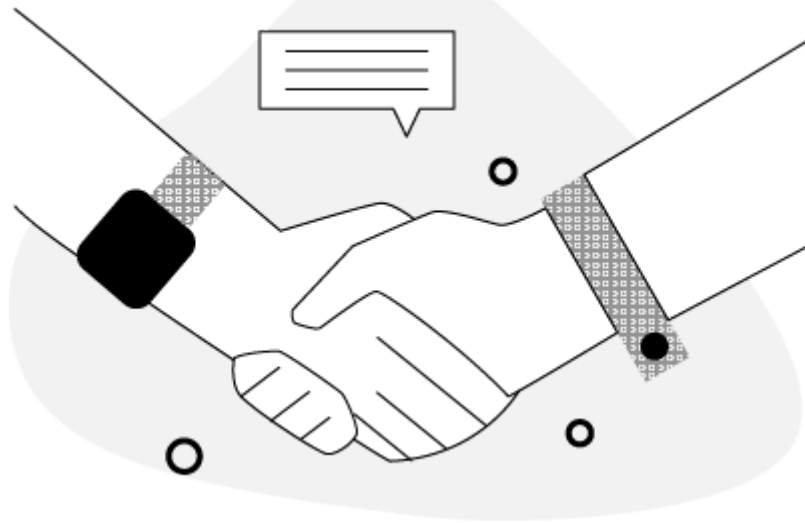
## During the Interview

### Set Proper Expectations

It is highly likely that your participants will not be familiar with the mechanics of the interview, as it is not something people are used to do on a daily basis. What they might do is to try to associate it with something they are familiar with, such as a conversation or a demo. The best thing you can do is to set expectations upfront so they can feel more confident about what is going to happen. You can include in your field guide something like:

*You might already know why are we here, but let me go over it again. We're currently [insert your high level goal here] and it is extremely valuable for us to have perspectives such as yours, in order for us to learn more. That's why I'll be asking you some questions, but this doesn't mean I will be testing you, I just want to learn from your experience. There are no right or wrong answers.*



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### Rapport Does Not follow an Agenda

In order for you to learn as much as possible from your participants, you need them to be articulate, confident, and calm. This is accomplished by successfully building rapport; however, this might take from 5 to 90 minutes to be achieved, depending on the personality of the participant and your interviewing skills. You shouldn't rush this crucial part of the interview, because if you're not able to foster an environment of comfort and looseness, the insights from the interview will fall short.

The best way to build rapport is by asking warm-up and contextual questions that the interviewees can feel confident answering, so they build momentum.

This is an example of warm-up questions for an enterprise research project:

*Tell me about your job.*

*What does a day-to-day look like?*

*Do you have any hobbies?*

*What kind of tools do you use on a daily basis?*

*How do you work with other teams?*

### Don't Mistake Empathy for Equating Experiences

In other words: be interested, not interesting.

While a conversation is a mutual exchange of information, an interview should be



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This is not the moment for you as the interviewer to brag about how much you researched about the subject upfront, or how familiar you feel with the topic. It is the moment to keep the knowledge to yourself and pay attention to what your guests have to say.

### **Pay Attention to the Unspoken**

UCLA Professor Albert Mehrabian conducted a study which revealed that only 7% of what we communicate depends on the content of the message, 38% corresponds to voice (intonation, tone and volume), while an outstanding 55% can be attributed to body language. This is why is so important as interviewers to develop skills that allows us to read the subtext in our participants and pay attention to their non-verbal communication.

To do so, you need to immerse yourself in the conversation, avoid multitasking, and be mindful of the reactions, facial expressions, and postures your interviewees adopt, as this communication will give you valuable insights about their behaviors.

### **Embrace Bland Curiosity**

In his book Interviewing Users, Steve Portigal mentions how he is often asked about surprising things ever learned during fieldwork, and how he always struggles to answer. This is in part because of bland curiosity — letting go of all the preconceived expectations and beliefs you might have, and embrace every interview with an open mind.

Of course, you cannot leave your research questions aside, but they should help to explore new avenues in the conversation, instead of leading to dead ends.

Always be always prepared to be amazed.

### **Strive for Stories**

Portigal defines this as the tipping point in the interview, where the flow changes from *question-answer* to *question-story*. This is the point of immersion when you can extract more insights from your participants, because stories inherently convey meaning, emotion, and detail.







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## Update your Personas or Models

Once you finish your round of interviews and analyze the findings, you can distill the information just learned by creating or updating your personas if you interviewed users, or your stakeholder maps and service blueprints if you got to talk to stakeholders.



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## Key Takeaways

Interviewing is a powerful method to develop cognitive empathy and active listening, as well as great way to let go of your own biases and preconceptions.

Little by little and with practice, your interviewing skills will also permeate in your life, and you will become a better listener and a better conversationalist.

## Further readings



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Hall, Erika, Jeffrey Zeldman, and Rose Fox. *Just enough research*. New York, New York: Book Apart, 2014. Print.

Young, Indi. *Practical empathy: for collaboration and creativity in your work*. Brooklyn, New York: Rosenfeld Media, 2015. Print.

Headlee, Celeste. *We need to talk: how to have conversations that matter*. New York: Harper Wave, 2017. Print.

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