


# INTERVIEWS AND CONVERSATIONS


When you're starting with people, you need to talk to them. Interviews, conversations, and contextual inquiries are ways to build relationships and empathy, learn about what people think, and inform your design ideas from the expertise and experience of others.

## WAYS TO BUILD EMPATHY


The content in this guide comes from human centered design research, which is about looking forward with empathy to the many possible answers to a problem. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. You build empathy through observing, immersing, and engaging.



**Observations** are seeing people, objects, and actions in context. This method is ideal for seeing interactions, contrasts, and systems.



**Immersions** are experiencing something as the person who lives with it might, and through a lens that is different than your own. This method allows you to be in the mindset of someone else.



**Engaging** methods include a range of ways that you might interact with people who are primarily impacted by something. This could include interviews, ethnographies, contextual inquiries, intercepts, focus groups, charrettes, and more. These methods are most appropriate for deep exploration and relationship building. *This guide covers methods of engaging.*

## MAKING A PLAN

Learning from people is a creative part of the engagement process. Take the time to prepare in advance before you dive into your research by answering these questions:

- Define your problem or question. What information would help you to explore your area?
- What sources would you like to obtain information from? Who, what, where, when? How will you get in touch with these people?
- How will you obtain information from these sources? What questions will you ask, and how? What tools will you use to ask these questions?

Develop a research plan that addresses these questions, and that outlines the questions you might ask, the tools you will use, and the timeline you are working under. It can be hard to know when research should end, but creating a plan helps you to establish checkpoints along the way.

## ALL KINDS OF EXPERTS

We talk to people because they have knowledge and expertise we want to more deeply understand. Treat everyone as an expert, and pursue valuable lived experience.

- Be sure to differentiate between *authorities* or *specialists*, who have a high-level view of a problem or an issue, and can speak about issues that may impact many people, and *the people primarily impacted by something*, who may be referred to as users, residents, stakeholders, or otherwise. For example, dentists and people who go to the dentist have different types of expertise. Both groups have expertise, but may require a different approach.
- When speaking with specialists, *recognize that they may have blind spots in lived experience* that may prevent them from explaining or appreciating others' lives. For example, chefs might be able to talk about how customers respond to certain things, but won't be able to discuss the specifics of a diner's experience.
- When speaking with those impacted by a problem, *treat them as experts in their own experience*. When something doesn't line up with your understanding, ask for more information in a non-accusatory way. Try to understand how their world-view has been shaped, and be open to new perspectives.

## CREATE A DISCUSSION GUIDE

A discussion guide provides a backbone or a flow to an interview or conversation, and helps you organize your thoughts strategically. It is not a checklist! Make your guide easy to read at a glance, and feel free to revise as you start talking to people.

Good interview questions:

- Are open-ended
- Ask for description, comparison, or contrast
- Are not leading or judgmental
- Use "native language," i.e. what the participant would say
- Lends towards follow-up questions, laddering, or showing instead of telling
- Might make you feel dumb for asking

It can help to start specific, and then go broad in your questions, for example:

- Describe what you ate yesterday.
- What did you find frustrating about eating lunch today?
- Are there things you always do when eating lunch?

Questions might help you understand hopes, fears, and ambitions.

- What is your dream restaurant experience?
- Describe your favorite meal. What do you love about it?
- What would you change about the way your family eats?

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## QUESTIONS IN ACTION

*Human centered design researchers come with open minds and a lot of curiosity. Here are some techniques to use in a session to explore more.*

Ask a classic researcher question:

- “Tell me about a time when...”
- “Tell me about the best/worst experience you ever had with...”
- “Could you walk through the steps and describe what you are doing to me?”
- “Say more about that.”
- “Could you show me that?”

Feel comfortable with:

- Asking naive questions — they are the expert. Don’t assume. Let them explain.
- Following up on their answers, and ask them to show you when they describe something.
- Active listening (but without words). Try to keep your affirmations and noises to a minimum, especially if you’re recording.
- Uncomfortable silence. If someone doesn’t have an answer right away, give them space to think.
- Veering off your plan and following interesting threads. Your guide isn’t a checklist, it’s a way of being strategic about the questions you ask.

Watch for these important details:

- Body language
- Work-arounds where someone has created their own system
- Unintended uses of systems or objects
- Mismatch between words and actions
- Revealing motivations

Find more resources at [sites.wustl.edu/insidesfs/engagement/](https://sites.wustl.edu/insidesfs/engagement/)

## ETIQUETTE OF INTERVIEWS

*How you show up and what you say shows a lot about your respect for the people you’re working with.*

Before an interview:

- Be in touch beforehand: let them know who’s coming, why, what you’ll be talking about, and for how long.
- Send a reminder confirming time and location.
- Be relaxed, and dress appropriately.
- Be organized: prepare your equipment and questions ahead of time.
- Be on time!

Assign roles in the field:

- **Session leader:** asks most of the questions, follows the discussion guide, most actively responds to participant.
- **Notetaker / Timekeeper:** makes notes in a notebook or paper on the session, makes sure session is on time.
- **Photographer / Videographer:** takes pictures of the session, especially of the user, their objects and activities
- *Those not leading the session can ask questions, but they mostly listen quietly.*

When you get started:

- Get permission to record/take photos before you start doing so.
- Spend time building rapport. Write that time into your discussion guide.

Don’t forget:

- You’re here to work
- Respect others time
- Be thoughtful about privacy
- YOU are running the session

## DEBRIEFING AND MAKING SENSE

*After an interview, you should have a lot of new ideas in your head. Get them out as quickly as possible so you don’t forget.*

Immediately after an interview, debrief with your team what you just experienced:

- Share stories that stood out with each other. Take notes on these.
- Capture small pieces of information (like quotes or stories) individually, so you can reference them later.
- Keep your participants’ voices present, using their words.
- Note what you found most surprising and interesting.
- You should have a lot of notes! The more, the better. You’ll refer back later.

Debriefing does not mean making sense of your information...yet. Hold off on conclusions and solutions until you can synthesize your data together.

## WHEN AM I DONE TALKING TO PEOPLE?

*It can be hard to know when you should stop talking to people. The goal is not to be exhaustive, but to find inspiration that can inform you. You may need engage with people throughout the process. Consider:*

- Are you starting to see themes emerge? Can you draw some conclusions that lead you to new ideas?
- Do you have time to talk to more people?
- Are there more people you need to engage because of their connections, role, or perspectives?
- Can you reengage people later?

## HOW TO FIND PEOPLE TO TALK TO

*Many times, you won’t know who to talk to. The process of finding your users is known as recruiting, and here are some techniques to consider.*

**Work with an organization:** In a community or an issue area, you may develop a partnership with an organization to help with connections. Read more about developing partnerships [here](#).

**Participate in local activities:** Volunteering, attending events, and participating in a community can be great ways to get to know people and build relationships.

**Snowball recruitment:** If you have one or two connections, ask them for introductions to others who may be willing and able to speak with you.

**Cold-calling:** Sometimes phone calls, visits, or emails can lead to connections and information that you can build on.

**Intercepts (on the street):** You can try to catch people on the street or in public and ask them to spend some time talking with you. You will likely be rejected more frequently than not — and that’s ok!

### GETTING AN INTERCEPT

On the street, make sure you introduce yourself, be casual, and get to the point quickly. Be brave, because you’re likely to be turned down. Intercepts are easier in pairs, and can be a great way to find out more about a behavior or activity.