## Structured Interviewing Guidance for Interviewers

**Note:** *This guidance is designed to ensure that GAO policies on evidence and generally accepted government auditing standards are met. The guidance conforms to the generally accepted principles and practices of the appropriate disciplines. Statements that particular actions "should" be taken are practices that are expected to be followed, unless there are good reasons for not doing so. Before deviating from a practice expressed as a "should" statement, staff members must consult with an appropriate staff member in Applied Research and Methods (ARM) or a team specialist and must document the consultation.*

This guidance is for training GAO staff in conducting structured interviews. A structured telephone or in-person interview using a standardized questionnaire is a carefully guided conversation between an interviewer and a respondent. This guidance describes practices that might not be required for less-structured interviews, but are necessary for collecting high quality data from structured interviews.

While in-depth "unstructured" and "semi-structured" interviewing allow for more flexibility in adapting questions, changing question order, and interacting with the respondent, structured interviewing requires interviewers to closely follow a survey questionnaire with instructions on what should be read to the respondent and how answers should be recorded.

Comparison of Structured to "Semi-structured" Interviewing:

| Structured Interviewing | Semi- or Unstructured Interviewing |
|---|---|
| Analysis goal more often is aggregation of quantitative data | Analysis goal is more often summary of qualitative data |
| More closed-ended questions (pre-coded answer choices) | More open-ended questions (narrative, text answer) |
| Pre-scripted question wording, interviewer instructions, followup probes and prompts | More interviewer discretion in paraphrasing questions and directing the interaction with respondent |

## Types of Questions

Questions can be asked and responses recorded in more than one way. There are basically two types of question formats: 1) pre-coded questions, commonly known as "closed-ended" and 2) "open-ended" questions with no pre-coded responses. While structured interview questions tend to be closed-ended, both types may occur in a structured interview, and both require specific handling by interviewers,

The **closed-end question** – This is a question that has pre-identified response categories. The purpose of asking a closed-end question is to have a respondent select one of the existing response categories. Closed-end questions can be in the form of "yes/no," multiple choice answers, or "check all that apply" questions. A multiple choice question is where the respondent indicates one answer; a "check all that apply" question is where a respondent may indicate more than one response. Closed-end questions may also be in the form of rating scales.  Typically, most answers in a closed-ended question are read aloud to respondents, who select from the choices read.  However, in some questions some or all of the response options are not read aloud, and interviewers are ask to code what the respondent says into the closest category, or indicate that a respondent mentioned or did not mention each of a series of possible answers. Some researchers refer to such questions as "open-ended, with precodes."

The **open-end question** – An open-end question is one that does not have any precoded response categories. Therefore, an open-end question requires the interviewer to accurately record every word a respondent says. This type of question is used when answer categories cannot be anticipated, a prompted answer is not desired, an in-depth answer is specifically sought, or quotable anecdotes are wanted.

Many closed-end questions have what is called an "Other, please specify" response category. This category is similar to an open-end question and is to be used if the respondent gives an answer that does not fit into one of the question's precoded response categories. If this occurs, select the "other" category and, as with an open-end question, record the response verbatim.

For the information obtained from open-end questions to be helpful, it is crucial that a respondent's answer be recorded word for word. It may take a minute or two to record the respondent's answer verbatim. However, take the time; do not rush through this and record notes or abbreviations that no one will be able to understand. Simply say to the respondent something like, "Just a minute while I record your answer."

Sometimes respondents will give an ambiguous answer to a question. A section on probing to obtain meaningful answers to questions is below.

## General Rules for Structured Interviewing

1) While it is structured and must be followed precisely, the interviewer should be so familiar with the questionnaire that the questions seem and sound natural and easy.

2) Ask questions exactly as they are worded. This is perhaps the most important rule in structured interviewing. Never interpret or restate a question in your own words for a respondent because to do so could seriously affect the reliability of the question by destroying its comparability – questions need to be read in the same manner to all respondents. For items where you read the response categories as part of the question or you read the categories immediately after reading the question, read all categories to the

respondent before accepting an answer. If you are not supposed to read the response categories, there should be instructions included with the question telling you not to do so.

Sometimes a respondent will not understand a question or its response categories. When this occurs, slowly repeat the question verbatim to the respondent – changing the words might change how the question is interpreted and alter the respondent's answer. Most people will understand after a second reading.  In the event a respondent continues to ask for clarification, some of the techniques described in the "probing" section below may prompt an answer without unduly influencing it.  As a method of last resort, you could prompt a respondent who is still unsure of the meaning of a question by saying "try to answer this question using your best idea of what it means to you."

3) Ask all questions that you are supposed to ask the respondent. If you reach a question you think the respondent has already answered in a previous question or in his/her comments during the course of the interview, ask the question anyway. You may preface the question with a phrase such as "You may have already told me this, but let me read this question anyway" or "Let me check on something you said earlier to make sure I have it right." Questions are to be skipped only if instructed to do so by skip instructions.

4) Listen carefully to the respondent's answers. For open-ended questions, only record what a respondent says; do not attempt to interpret their response for them. This is especially important for items where you will code open-ended responses into closed-ended categories later.

5) Never rush the respondent. However, if he/she begins to digress from a question to other topics the interview covers later, you might politely say something like "We'll be getting to that in another section, please tell me about that then." Politely try to always keep the respondent focused on the questions in the interview.

6) Record only one response for each question unless specifically instructed to "Check all that apply."

7) Do not lead the respondent to an answer or suggest an answer to him/her – do not bias a respondent's answer.

8) If a respondent does not know the meaning of a term, read definitions verbatim from a glossary or other listing of questionnaire terms. If a term is not defined in the questionnaire, do not attempt to define it yourself. Ask the respondent instead to answer the question as best they can, based on what the terms mean to them.  You could also record what their understanding of the term was, to later discuss with ARM the basis the respondent had for answering the way they did, and reach a decision on whether or not to edit the answer.

9) Only ask questions that have been included in the questionnaire. If you are accustomed to semi-structured interviewing (when information to be obtained is identified, but the

particular phrasing and ordering of questions or data items can vary with every respondent) or unstructured interviewing (when no pre-specified set of questions is used nor are questions asked in a specific order and response categories have not be pre-identified), it is natural, on occasion, to want to ask impromptu followup questions because of something a respondent says. However, in structured interviewing, it is essential that the questionnaire is administered consistently to all respondents – unplanned follow-up questions are not to be asked during the interview. Such questions are to be held until the interview is finished.

10) If a respondent has concerns about the use of the data or whether a confidentiality condition is in place, use whatever procedures have been put in place for that engagement.  The default condition is that GAO won't publish identifiable information in its products, and such information would not be released unless compelled by law or required by the Congress.

11) When interviewing members of the general public, who have no obligation to cooperate with GAO requests, and who you may be contacting without much advance explanation, the first few seconds of a telephone interview are essential to ensure cooperation and avoid break-offs.  It is helpful to practice briefly and decisively reading introductions and meeting likely initial objections to an interview.

12) Round-robin or "mock-up" interviewing between team members is a good way to practice interviewing skills.

## Probing

As an interviewer you must make sure that the answer you get to each question is accurate and appropriate. To do this, you may need to help the respondent by probing effectively. Often respondents will give you a vague answer when you need a more precise or specific response. Or, they might give you one reason or response for doing something when there are more. Or, a respondent might answer "I don't know" when, if they thought about the question, they could give an answer. In these cases you should probe for a more precise or complete answer or probe to help the respondent decide on an answer when he/she is uncertain and wants to respond "Don't know." Always probe when you get what you believe is an imprecise or incomplete answer – never accept a "Don't know" unless you probe first to make sure the respondent can't give you an answer.

In some questionnaires, specific probes may be written out for you in anticipation of likely respondent problems that were discovered during pre-testing of the instrument.

The key to effective probing is to make your probes as non-directive and neutral as possible. Don't suggest an answer to the respondent or lead the respondent. What you say and how you say it can have great influence on the answers respondents give. Use the non-directive probing techniques listed below to minimize that influence and help the respondent answer accurately.

1) Repeat the question as it is printed. This gives the respondent another chance to answer. It is useful when the respondent does not understand the question, misinterprets the question, seems unable to make up his/her mind, or strays from the subject. You can say something like "Let me repeat the question for you."

2) Repeat the respondent's reply. This suggests to the respondent that you expect him/her to clarify or enlarge upon the response. Repeat the response verbatim, don't add to it or interject your own interpretation.

3) Pause expectantly. A mere pause after the respondent has given a reply is often enough to convey that you expect the respondent to elaborate on his/her answer – sometimes silence is effective in eliciting a response. 4) Make brief neutral assenting comments such as "I see," to show the respondent that you are giving your attention to the answer. Such comments can encourage the respondent to provide additional information. If you must probe directly, make sure your statements and questions are neutral; they shouldn't lead the respondent to answer one way or another. For example, you might say "How many cases did your office have?" when probing for the office caseload, not "Did your office have a lot of cases?" Or, "You say 350 to 450 cases. Well, which number comes closest, 350 or 450 cases," or "Would you say that the number of cases is 400 or less or more than 400. Okay, now which comes closest, 350 or 400 cases?"

4) Your manner when you probe, as well as in the entire interview, is important. A demanding or impatient tone can damage rapport. It is sometimes a good technique to suggest in your probe that it is you, not the respondent, who is a fault. For example, you might say, "I'm not sure what you mean by that – could you tell me a little more?" rather than "What do you mean?" This technique can encourage the respondent to cooperate with someone who is conscientiously trying to do a good job. However, do not overplay this technique. The respondent should not get the impression that you do not know when a question is answered properly or that you are not paying attention.

5) For questions asking respondents to volunteer one or more answers that are listed as a series on the survey instrument in a "mentioned/not mentioned" answer format, but are not read aloud to the respondent, to get a complete response, continue to prompt the respondent for additional responses until no more are given. For example, you might ask, "Is that all?" or "Anything else?" until you get a "No" response.

6) Anytime you feel that the answer to a question is suspect or there are circumstances which should be explained, write a note on the front of the questionnaire or on the accompanying interview control or log sheet. These issues can be discussed later with ARM to reach a decision on whether or not to edit the answer.