



Participant Manual

Date Last Edited:
September 2013

Class Date:

Structured Interviews: Basic Principles

Why This Course is Important

This course is on designing and conducting structured interviews to collect data. At GAO, we do not separate data collection from everything else we know about planning and engagement design. This type of data collection needs to be carefully planned and fully integrated with the rest of what we are doing on an engagement.

Our data collection needs to make sense in terms of answering our researchable question, using the appropriate information we have collected, and leading us to the types of statements we expect to be able to make in our product.

Questions to Ask the Learner after Class

- Have you ever participated in a structured interview on an engagement—what was your experience?
- What aspects of structured interviewing were new to you and how might you apply the technique to your current engagement?
- What are the advantages of using closed- versus open-ended questions? Are there times when you should consider open-ended?

ACHIEVING RESULTS

Structured Interviews: Basic Principles

The Knowledge and Skills This Course Covers

The primary objective of this course is to help the participants decide when structured interviewing techniques would be useful to their engagement. The course covers:

- Interviews, surveys, and structured interviews,
- How to develop structured interview questions, and
- Issues to consider in administering structured interviews.

Through lecture, discussion and exercises, the participants learn about the similarities and differences between interviews, surveys, and structured interviews. All of these are methods for collecting testimonial evidence from a group of respondents, and each has its pros and cons. A structured interview can be thought of as a combination of both an interview and a survey. It follows an instrument that usually contains both open- and closed-ended questions, all of which are asked of the respondents in the same order, and is administered in person or by phone.

Participants role play as interviewers and interviewees to understand the dynamic of the structured interview. They then debrief on how easy it was to administer and respond to the question types. The participants also discuss the strengths and limitations of each question type, including how they would likely report on them in a GAO engagement.

As the course progresses, participants learn the stages of structured interview development, such as how to create the basic design and then develop the structured instrument. They are taught about benefits of developing closed-ended questions for a structured interview at the front end as opposed to doing content analysis of open-ended responses at the back end. They also learn that structured interview development can take up to 2-3 months, depending upon their knowledge of the issue, the complexity of the questions, and their ability to access respondents.

Finally, participants learn about administering and structuring the questions, the options available for closed-ended questions, and are provided relevant examples. They also learn how to structure the interview to make it as natural as possible yet still ensure rigor and how to minimize interviewer bias.

Registrar Information

Structured Interviews: Basic Principles (COAN931)	This course is on designing and conducting structured interviews to collect data. Through lectures, discussion and exercise, participants learn about structured interviews and the dynamic of interviewing. They also learn about their options for question types and modes of administration. Finally, the course will demonstrate the types of statements that can be made in GAO reports based on the results of structured interviews.
Who Should Enroll	All GAO Staff
Prerequisite	None
Advanced Preparation	None
Recommended Related Courses	None
Course Objectives	Take this course and learn to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Determine when a structured interview would be appropriate.• Develop structured interview questions• Administer a structured interview
Competencies	Achieving Results, Presenting Information Orally
Instructional Method	Classroom
Length	2 .5 Hours
CPE Credits	3 (1 government-related)
Course Manager	Linda Hawkins, (202) 512-3094
Course Evaluation	The first business day after the class ends, participants will receive an electronic evaluation. The first question on the evaluation asks whether or not the participant attended and completed the entire course. Marking “yes” and going on to complete the course evaluation will automatically update training records to reflect completion data and CPE credit. Note: Participants must attend and participate in the entire class to be eligible for CPE credit.

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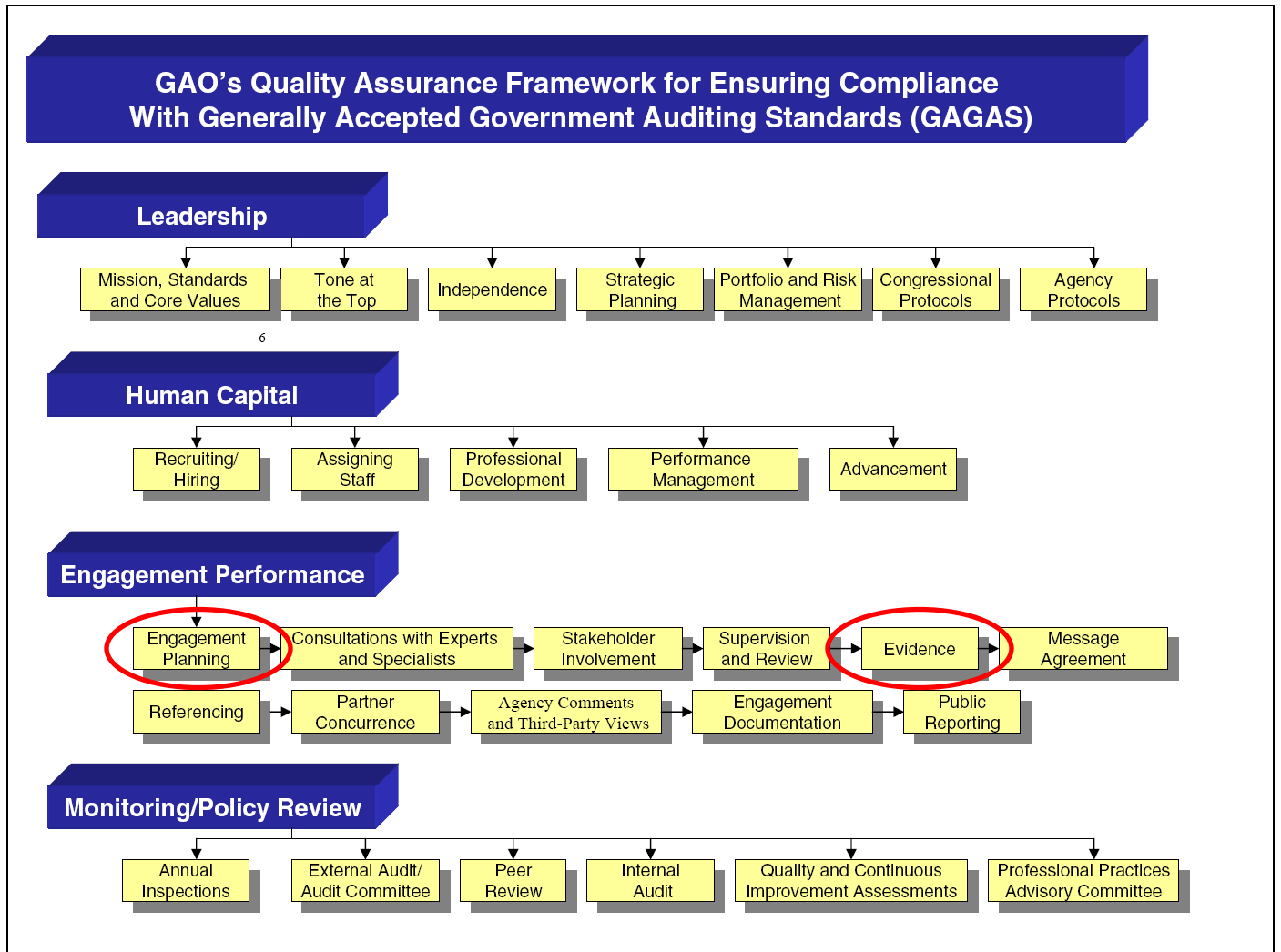
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Agenda

9:00	—	9:05	Introduction
9:05	—	10:00	Defining and Role Playing Structured Interview Questions at GAO
10:00	—	10:15	Deciding Whether to Do Structured Interviews
10:15	—	10:25	Stages of Structured Interview Development
10:25	—	10:50	Developing and Administering the Questions
10:50	—	10:55	Pre-testing the Questionnaire
10:55	—	11:10	Basic Interviewer Process
11:10	—	11:15	Selecting and Training Interviewers
11:15	—	11:20	Data Entry and Analysis
11:20	—	11:25	Example of a Structured Interview
11:25	—	11:30	Questions

Agenda

Quality Assurance Framework





Structured Interviews: Basic Principles

Applied Research and Methods (ARM)
Center for Design, Methods, and Analysis
(CDMA)

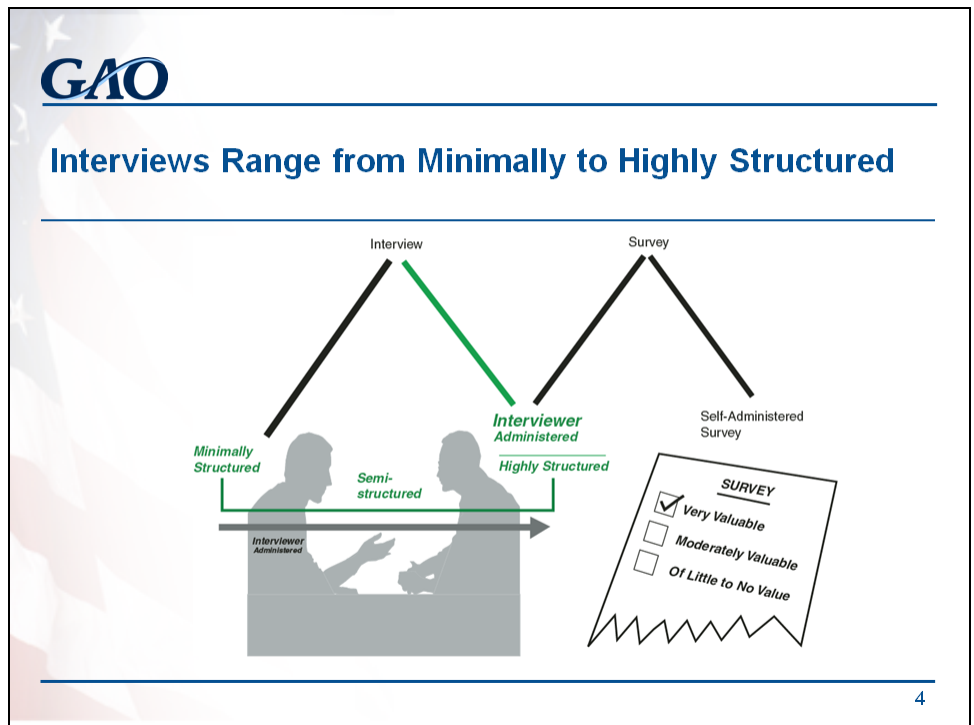
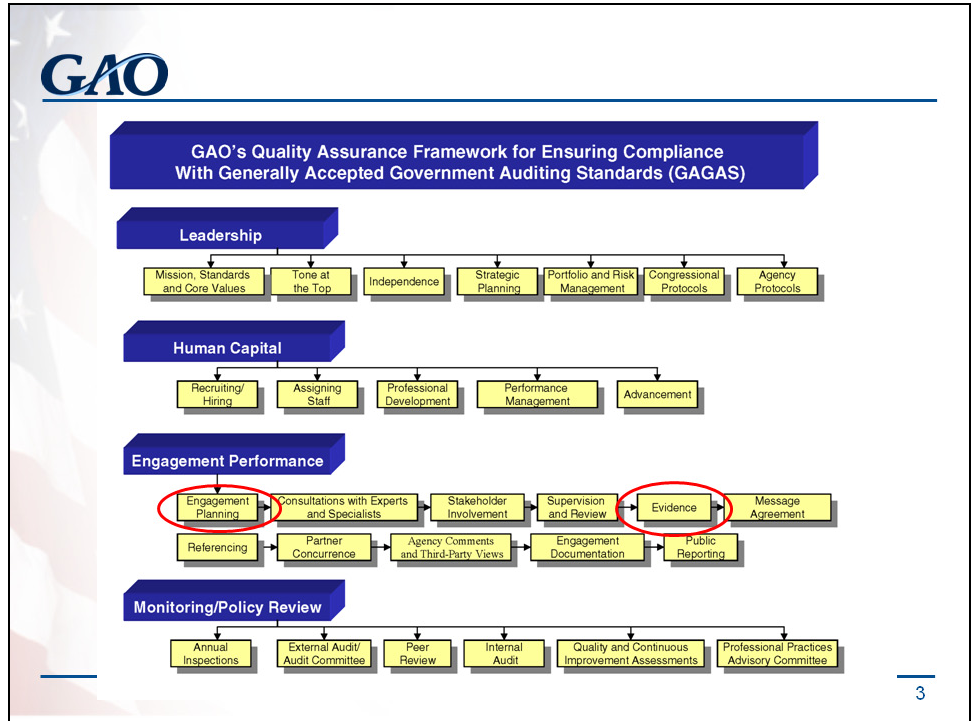
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Purpose and Design of this Session

- Help you decide when structured interviewing techniques would be useful for your job
 - Covers:
 - Continuum of structure from minimally to highly structured interviews
 - Stages in developing a structured interview instrument
 - Issues to consider in administering structured interviews
-

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What is a Structured Interview?

- A systematic collection of the same information from multiple respondents in the context of a face-to-face, telephone or VTC meeting (with each respondent interviewed separately)
- Questions are asked in the same order for each respondent
- Question wording and response options are identical for each respondent
- Allows for discussion and exploration but usually also allows key issues to be summarized through closed-ended response scales
- Allows for valid comparison of responses across respondents

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Exercise 1: Role Play of Structured Interview Questions

- **See Appendix 1: Role Play of Structured Interview Questions**

After the role play, we'll discuss the following issues:

- How easy or difficult was it to administer the questions?
- How easy or difficult was it to respond to the questions?
- What worked well and didn't work well using (i) the basic questions and (ii) the more structured interview questions?
- How much additional work would it take to develop the more structured set of questions?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of providing the interviewee the interview questions for both sets of questions?
- When might you use a more structured approach and techniques such as follow-ups, probes and response cards on a GAO job?

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Minimally Structured Interviews: Pros and Cons (vs. More Highly Structured Interviews)

	Minimally Structured Interviews	Highly Structured Interviews
Pros	Flexibility in <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topics or questions covered • Order of topics or questions covered • Time spent on specific topics • Making changes at the time of the interview • Preparation time 	Facilitates <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantification of responses • Comparisons across all respondents or by subgroups • Analysis and reporting
Cons	Limited ability to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare responses across all respondents or by subgroups of respondents • Quantify responses 	Less flexibility in <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content or ordering of questions, once structure has been agreed upon • Time required up front for preparation of questions and pretesting

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Deciding Whether to Do Structured Interviews: Key Considerations (1)

1. Do we have a meaningful group of respondents?
 - 13 trade associations representing 80-90 percent of an industry
 - 120 U.S. businesses in China that represent the universe in 4 selected industries
 - 31 commodity analysts at the Bureau of Labor Statistics who make adjustments to the Consumer Price Index
 - 15 agency officials, each with a different set of program responsibilities
2. Do we want to report any information quantitatively?
 - The majority of experts we spoke to reported x
 - 24 out of the 28 respondents reported Y

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Deciding Whether to Do Structured Interviews: Key Considerations (2)

3. Do we have time to:
 - Develop good questions?
 - Pre-test?

4. Will the results meet GAO's criteria for evidence?
 - Structured interview data are testimonial evidence

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Stages of Structured Interview Development

- **Create basic design**
 - Identify specific goals for structured interview
 - Define population & identify study sample
 - Consider seeking subject matter expert input or review before pretesting

- **Develop structured instrument**
 - Develop draft questions based on goals
 - Decide which questions should be closed-ended and which should be open-ended
 - Ensure good flow/transition between questions and include acceptable probes
 - Decide whether mode will be in person or via telephone or VTC
 - Reconsider your questions in light of your analysis plan and modify as appropriate

- **Develop a script/detailed instructions for the interviewer**

- **Pretest & revise instrument, including interviewer instructions**

- **Select & train interviewers**

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General Strategy for Developing Structured Interview Questions

- 1) Start with the researchable question
- 2) Define abstract terms; write subquestions, increasing the level of specificity
- 3) Develop a focused set of potential questions and response options that address the sub-questions
- 4) Test, evaluate and refine the questions

1. What are users' opinions about TSA's security products and services?
2. How satisfied or dissatisfied are commercial transportation security officials' with the timeliness of the security email alerts they receive from TSA? ... with the relevance of the email alerts they receive?...
3. *Surveying security officials at major airlines:* How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with ... you received from TSA in the last 12 months?

Very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, very dissatisfied, don't know

For more details, see the GAO/ARM course on developing survey questions

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Features of Good Structured Interview Questions

- Questions should be clear and specific
- Questions should be about one issue at a time
 - No double-barreled or multiple questions
- Questions should only be asked about information respondents are likely to know
- Questions and response options should be balanced to avoid bias
- The burden on respondents should be mitigated
 - As few as possible, as short/simple as possible
- Questions must work well when heard (not just read)
- Should use a conversational tone as much as possible

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Differences Between Interview and Self-Administered Questions

- Interview questions (and response options) often must be written differently than similar questions in a self-administered questionnaire
- Interview respondents often can't re-read questions and generally do not control the interviewer's reading pace
- Interview questions and response options should generally be shorter and simpler than self-administered questions
- Sometimes, long or complex response options may be shown to the respondent visually

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Self Administered Format

#. How important, if at all, are the following aspects of your job to you?

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Somewhat important	Very important	Don't know
a. Job assignments.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Quality of management.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Opportunity for advancement.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Interview Format – Without Visual Response Options

Interviewer reads:

How important, if at all, are job assignments to you? . . . Would you say they are “not at all important”, “slightly important”, “somewhat important”, “very important”, or do you not know?

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Interviewer Records the Response

Not at all important	Slightly important	Somewhat important	Very important	Don't know
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Interview Format –
With Visual Response Options

Interviewer gives the response card in Appendix 2 and then reads:

“Please look at the response card and use it to tell me how important, if at all, the following aspects of your job are to you. . .

How important, if at all, are job assignments to you?”



Class exercise 2

What concerns might you have about the following question asked to an agency staff member during an interview?

.....



Class exercise 2 (continued)

In the last 12 months have you read an agency regulation, read an agency policy document other than a regulation, taken an agency-sponsored class in-person, taken an agency-sponsored class online, or provided input to an agency regulation, policy document, or course?

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Class exercise 2 - Rewritten question(s) for an interview:

Now I'm going to ask you about several things you may or may not have done in the last 12 months. In the last 12 months, have you done each of the following things?

Have you read an agency regulation?

Have you read an agency policy document other than a regulation?

... etc.

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Pretest the Questionnaire

Why pretest?

- Identify and fix problems before actual interviews
- Ensure respondents can provide accurate and complete (i.e., reliable) responses
- GAO requires pretesting for structured interviews

What's involved in pretesting?

- Several iterative rounds of cognitive pretesting, as changes that fix one problem may create new problems that should be identified and fixed
- Review by an ARM or team survey specialist

How to pretest?

- See the GAO/ARM course on pretesting questionnaires

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Basic Structured Interview Process

- Establish rapport at start and maintain throughout interview
- Although highly-structured, should seem conversational
- Motivate respondents to answer accurately and completely
 - Explain confidentiality, if any
- Speak slowly
- Allow adequate time to respond
 - Awkward silence is your friend

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Basic Structured Interview Process (Continued)

- Maintain structure:
 - Ask questions in the standard order in which they appear in the questionnaire
 - Do not paraphrase questions; read them as written
 - Ask all questions in the questionnaire, even if you think a question was already answered during a previous question
 - Don't deviate from structure unless necessary to re-focus respondent or to probe to ensure accuracy and completeness
 - Probe as neutrally as possible
 - For the most-highly-structured interviews, do not ask unplanned follow-up questions during the interview
- At end of interview, explore additional issues if desired but do not alter recorded responses to structured questions

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Using “Probes”

- Follow-up questions that are necessary to get an accurate and complete answer to a key question
 - Pre-planned/scripted in anticipation of a specific problem
 - Unplanned/unscripted, open-ended, non-leading
- Necessary when the respondent:
 - Doesn't understand a key question
 - Provides an inaccurate or incomplete answer
 - Answers “don't know” to a key question
- Worded as neutrally/non-leading as possible
 - “Can you tell me more about that?”

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How to Reduce Interviewer Bias

- Maintain structure during the interview:
 - Create a script or detailed instructions for interviewers
 - Follow that structure
- Interviewer training:
 - Instill discipline and practice techniques
 - Observe each other during pretests and early interviews
 - Obtain feedback on interview style
 - Debrief after pretests and early interviews

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Selecting and Training Interviewers

Selecting Interviewers

- Must be willing and able to conduct structured interviews adequately
 - Clear speech, understandable to respondents
 - Willing and able to follow structure requirements

Training Interviewers

- Goals:
 - Discipline in maintaining structure (and understand the reason for it)
 - Familiarity with questions
 - Familiarity with appropriate answers
 - Consistency between interviewers
- Methods:
 - Reviewing the instructions, questions, and answers in detail
 - Role-play "what-if" scenarios
 - Observing each other conduct interviews & providing feedback

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Data entry and analysis

- Data entry and analyses for structured interviews are different than for semi/unstructured interviews
- Not a qualitative interview write-up as for usual GAO interviews
- More likely to include quantitative data that needs to be entered in a spreadsheet and analyzed quantitatively
- Often will include some open-ended responses, which could either be summarized qualitatively or content analyzed and summarized quantitatively

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Example of a Structured Interview

- See the example in Appendix 3

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Additional Resources

Guidance Papers Available on the ARM Web Page:

- **Using Structured Interview Techniques** (<http://archive.gao.gov/t2pbat7/144388.pdf>)
 - Update to "Using Structured Interview Techniques" (DM 3105553)
- **Structured Interviewing Guidance for Interviewers** (DM 2778283)
- **Developing and Using Questionnaires** (<http://archive.gao.gov/t2pbat4/150366.pdf>)
 - Update to "Developing and Using Questionnaires" (DM 3132680)
- **Conducting Questionnaire Surveys** (DM 2872032).

GAO Courses:

- Interviewing for Information
- Developing and Writing Structured Survey Questions
- Pretesting Surveys

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Discussion/Questions

We covered some of the basics of structured interviewing:

- What it is
- How to develop structured interview questions
- Issues to consider in conducting structured interviews, like format and reducing interviewer bias
- The importance of pre-testing
- Selecting and training interviewers

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Appendix 1 Role Play of Structured Interview Questions

Exercise 1 Instructions: This exercise will involve 2 pairs of volunteers. Each pair will include one volunteer who acts as an interviewer and the second volunteer who acts as an interviewee. Both pairs will conduct interviews about the importance of subject matter expertise to GAO teams' work. The first interview will rely on a basic set of questions while the second will rely on a more structured set of the same questions that has been developed to be delivered in a more conversational format. GAO teams have conducted semi-structured and structured interviews using both approaches. The purpose of the exercise is to illustrate some structured interview techniques, and ensure a discussion about how and when to use them.

The role players should act as if they are in the context of conducting an actual interview. For the first role play of the initial draft of the questions, the interviewer will give the set of questions to the interviewee and conduct the interview. The second role play pair will not give the set of structured interview questions to the interviewee but will rely on the card with response options, found on the last page of this appendix, when needed. The rest of the class should observe with the class materials.

Following the role play of the two sets of interviews, the class will have a general discussion on the differences between the two approaches. The following questions can be used to stimulate that discussion:

- 1) How easy or difficult did it seem to administer the (i) basic questions and (ii) more structured interview questions? How comfortable would you be administering both sets of questions?
- 2) How easy or difficult did it seem to respond to the (i) basic questions and (ii) more structured interview questions? How comfortable would you be responding to both sets of questions? (Note that these are questions asked of interviewees in pretesting.)
- 3) In your view, what worked well and didn't work well about using the (i) basic questions and (ii) the more structured interview questions?
- 4) In your opinion, how much additional work would be required to develop the more structured set of questions?
- 5) In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of providing the interviewee with the interview questions for the basic and the more structured set of questions?
- 6) Based on your experience at GAO, when might you use a more structured approach to your interviews? Which of the techniques (instructions, follow ups, probes and cards) that you saw illustrated do you think you might use and why?

Background on Questions: The questions in this exercise are designed to elicit views about how to ensure that GAO analysts have the skills they need to do their job. More specifically, the questions focus on analysts' views concerning the importance of having subject matter expertise relevant to the work of their mission team, and the modes of training that analysts have found to be most effective.

First Role Play Using Basic Questions

Subject Matter Expertise Relevant to Teams' Work

Subject matter expertise relevant to a Team's mission work may vary across mission teams. For example, knowledge of environmental issues may be relevant for NRE staff, whereas financial issues are likely more relevant for FMCI staff.

1) In your view, what subject matter expertise is most relevant to your Team's work?

2) How important, if at all, do you think it is for analysts in your Team to have a specific educational or professional background in subject matter that is relevant to the Team's mission work? *(Please check one of the boxes below)*

- Extremely important
- Very important
- Moderately important
- Somewhat important
- Of little to no importance

Not sure

3) During your time at GAO, which of the following training modes have you taken to obtain subject-matter expertise relevant to your Team’s work? (Please check one answer in each row.)

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
a) On-the-job (OJT) training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) Learning Center training taught by GAO staff or contractors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) Outside training courses provided by an academic institution, contractors or other relevant professional entities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Professional conferences	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) Brown Bags or seminars organized and presented by Team staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f) Team Brown Bags or seminars with outside speakers.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g) Self-paced training prepared by GAO staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h) Self-paced training prepared by schools, contractors or other relevant professional entities.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i) Other (Please specify) _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
j) Other (Please specify) _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4) Of the training modes that you indicated taking to obtain subject matter expertise relevant to your team’s mission, which three modes provided the most useful information from your perspective. (Please enter the letter associated with your top three in the spaces below.)

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

Second Role Play Using More Structured Version of the Questions

Subject Matter Expertise

(Instructions to Interviewers: Begin with the introduction and invitation to the respondent to ask any questions.)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I'd like to start out by asking you some questions about subject matter expertise that's relevant to your Team's mission. To provide one or two examples of what we'd like to discuss, this sort of subject matter expertise could include knowledge of environmental issues for staff in NRE or financial issues for staff in FMCI. Do you have any questions before we begin?

*(Instructions to Interviewers: Answer any questions that the participant raises. When you are ready to begin the interview, indicate that by saying: **Right, I'll begin the interview now.***

1) In your view, what subject matter expertise is most relevant to your Team's work?

(Instructions to Interviewers: Read the question in the exact same way to each respondent.

Follow up: Could you please explain your answer? Why do you think that?

2) Next, could you tell us how important you think it is for your Team's analysts to have an educational or professional background in subject matter that's relevant to your Team's work? Would you say it's very important, somewhat important, not important, or are you not sure?

(Instructions to interviewer: Check off the appropriate response.)

- Very important**
- Somewhat important**
- Not important, or**
- Not sure**

Follow up: (If Very or Somewhat important) What are some of the ways your Team's analysts benefitted from backgrounds that provided relevant subject matter expertise? Why do you think that?

(If not important) What are some of the reasons you think it's not important for your team's analysts to have backgrounds that provided subject matter experts? Why do you think that?

(If Not sure) Why are you not sure?

3) Now I'm going to ask about the types of training you've taken at GAO to obtain subject matter expertise relevant to your Team's work. Please look at this card and tell me which types of training you've taken and haven't taken. *(Instructions to interviewers: Hand the card to the respondent and give him or her sufficient time to read through it and respond. Check the boxes corresponding to the training type that respondents report having taken. When the respondent has completed the task, read back the training s/he reported and make sure it's correct.) Thank you. Now just to be sure we have your responses correct, we have recorded that you have taken...*

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
a) On-the-job (OJT) training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) Learning Center training taught by GAO staff or contractors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) Outside training courses provided by an academic institution, contractors or other relevant professional entities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Professional conferences	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) Brown Bags or seminars organized and presented by Team staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f) Team Brown Bags or seminars with outside speakers.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g) Self-paced training prepared by GAO staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h) Self-paced training prepared by schools, contractors or other relevant professional entities.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i) Other <i>(Please specify)</i> _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
j) Other <i>(Please specify)</i> _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Follow up: *(Instructions to interviewers: If the respondent indicates that they have taken one or more type of training). Would you like to take any additional types of training? If so, which types? Why?*

4. a) Of the training modes you've taken, which type do you think was the most effective in providing you with subject matter expertise relevant to your team's mission?

(Instructions to Interviewers: Record the type of training that the respondent reports as most effective.) _____

Follow up: What made this mode of training effective, in your opinion?

4. b) Of the training modes you've taken, which type do you think was the second most effective in providing you with subject matter expertise relevant to your team's mission?

(Instructions to Interviewers: Record the second most effective type of training that the respondent reports. If the respondent cannot select a second most effective type of training, go to the probes below.)

Follow up: What made this mode of training effective, in your opinion?

4. c) Of the training modes you've taken, which type do you think was the third most effective in providing you with subject matter expertise relevant to your team's mission?

(Instructions to Interviewers: Record the third most effective type of training that the respondent reports. If the respondent cannot select a third most effective type of training, go to the probes below.)

Follow up: What made this mode of training effective, in your opinion?

Probes: (Instructions to Interviewers: Use probes only if needed)

Do you have any comments about:

- The length of training
- The cost to GAO
- The timing of the training
- Your ability to apply the training directly to your work

Exercise 1 Response Card for Second Role Play

Given to an interviewee as an index card or piece of paper:

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
a) On-the-job (OJT) training	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) Learning Center training taught by GAO staff or contractors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) Outside training courses provided by an academic institution, contractors or other relevant professional entities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Professional conferences	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) Brown Bags or seminars organized and presented by Team staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f) Team Brown Bags or seminars with outside speakers.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g) Self-paced training prepared by GAO staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h) Self-paced training prepared by schools, contractors or other relevant professional entities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i) Other (Please specify) _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
j) Other (Please specify) _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Appendix 2 Response Card

Given to an interviewee as an index card or piece of paper:

“Importance” Scale Choices:

Not at all important

Slightly important

Somewhat important

Very important

Don't know

Appendix 3

Structured Interviews with Truck Drivers

Commercial Motor Carriers: More Could be Done to Determine Impact of Excessive Loading and Unloading Wait Times on Hours of Service Violations GAO-11-198, Jan 26,2011.

The problem: As part of a request from Congress, GAO needed to understand the interaction at the trucker level between Federal regulations that set limits to the hours truck drivers can be on the road (service safety regulations) and various other factors, such as delays---called detentions---for loading or unloading that interrupt their progress between shipping to receiving facilities. DOT found detention times and their ripple effects cost the motor carrier industry an estimated \$4 billion dollars per year and report that violations of the hour limits truckers can drive are in the top ten violations that put them out of service. ***Yet DOT did not have information on the frequency of detentions, the factors contributing to them or their effects.***

GAO did an exploratory study: An intercept survey with truckers---the most effected group---demonstrated that information can be obtained on the detentions,factors and effects.

The research questions: (1) How regularly do truck drivers experience detention time and what factors contribute to it? (2) How does detention time affect the commercial freight vehicle industry? (3) What federal actions could be taken to address detention time issues?

The structured interview: The team developed a structured interview with both open and closed questions administered to 300 willing truckers at 4 truck stops in 4 states. Generally the team expected structured interviews to shed light on (1) how frequently truck drivers experience detention time, (2) what truck drivers perceive to be the factors that contribute to detention time and (3) how detention time affects them. They considered looking at driver's logs, but in the course of scoping they found drivers sometimes falsify the logs to bring them within regulatory limits. Pre-tests were conducted at truck stops in two states. (See the interview on following pages.)

Analysis: The structured interview contained a mix of closed ended and open-ended questions. The resulting paper documents were entered into a QPL-based data entry system for data and content analysis. The analysis summarized responses to open-ended survey questions and demonstrated useful information about the complex interactions between detentions and safety regulations. The Highlights to the report reflects that the survey analysis contributed new quantitative and qualitative information. For example:

- A majority of respondents (68%) had experienced a detention beyond 2 hours in the last month.

- Factors contributing to these delays include facility limits, product not ready, scheduling practice such as first-come-first-served which causes the trucks to line up before opening at seaports.
- The impacts include revenue loss for drivers and drivers choosing whether to violate the speed limit or violate the hour limit on driving in order to make a delivery.



Highlights of [GAO-11-198](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Highways and Transit, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The interstate commercial motor carrier industry moves thousands of truckloads of goods every day, and any disruption in one truckload's delivery schedule can have a ripple effect on others. Some waiting time at shipping and receiving facilities—commonly referred to as detention time—is to be expected in this complex environment. However, excessive detention time could impact the ability of drivers to perform within federal hours of service safety regulations, which limit duty hours and are enforced by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA).

This report discusses: (1) How regularly do truck drivers experience detention time and what factors contribute to detention time? (2) How does detention time affect the commercial freight vehicle industry? (3) What federal actions, if any, could be taken to address detention time issues? GAO analyzed federal and industry studies and interviewed a nongeneralizable sample of truck drivers, as well as other industry stakeholders and FMCSA officials.

What GAO Recommends

report to DOT for review. DOT officials provided technical comments, which we incorporated into the report, as appropriate.

View [GAO-11-198](#) or key components. For more information, contact Susan Fleming, 202-512-2834, flemings@gao.gov.

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COMMERCIAL MOTOR CARRIERS

More Could Be Done to Determine Impact of Excessive Loading and Unloading Wait Times on Hours of Service Violations

What GAO Found

While there are no industry-wide data on the occurrence of detention time, GAO interviews with over 300 truck drivers and a number of industry representatives and motor carrier officials indicate that detention time occurs with some regularity and for a variety of reasons. (Q2) 59 percent of interviewed drivers reported experiencing detention time in the past 2 weeks and over two-thirds reported experiencing detention time within the last month. Drivers cited several factors that contribute to detention time (Q9).

43 percent of drivers identified limitations in facilities, such as the lack of sufficient loading and unloading equipment or staff. These limitations can occur when facilities overschedule appointments, creating a backlog of vehicles. Another factor cited by about 39 percent of drivers was the product not being ready for shipment. Other factors include poor service provided by facility staff, facility scheduling practices that may encourage drivers to line up hours before the facility opens, and factors not under the control of the facility, such as drivers filing paperwork incorrectly. Some facilities are taking steps to address these factors, such as using appointment times.

Detention time can result in reduced driving time and lost revenue for drivers and carriers. For those drivers that reported previously experiencing detention time, (Q13) 80 percent reported that detention time impacts their ability to meet federal hours of service safety requirements—a maximum of 14 hours on duty each day, including up to 11 hours of driving—by reducing their available driving time. (Q 14,15,16) 65 percent of drivers reported lost revenue as a result of detention time from either missing an opportunity to secure another load or paying late fees to the shipper. Some practices can mitigate these economic impacts, such as charging detention time fees and developing relationships with facilities so drivers become familiar with a facility's process. According to industry representatives, carrier companies are better positioned than independent owner operators to use such practices and are better able to handle logistical challenges that may result from detention time.

While FMCSA collects data from drivers during roadside inspections, which provide information on the number of hours of service violations, the agency currently does not collect—nor is it required to collect—information to assess the extent to which detention time contributes to these violations. Agency officials stated that FMCSA does not identify the factors that contribute to hours of service violations, and detention time could be just one of many factors. To date, FMCSA research has focused on an overview of freight movement, but not the extent to which detention time occurs or how it may impact hours of service violations. FMCSA plans to conduct a 2012 study to better understand the extent to which detention time occurs. Obtaining a clearer industry-wide picture about how detention time contributes to hours of service violations could help FMCSA determine whether additional federal action might be warranted.

United States Government Accountability Office

TRUCK DRIVER DETENTION TIME QUESTIONNAIRE

Hello, I'm (name) from the GAO. Would you have about 3 minutes to answer a short survey for Congress about your experience with detention time, that is, having to wait more than 2 hours before you can load or unload your cargo?

- 1) Have you experienced any detention time in the past 7 working days?
 YES (SKIP TO QUESTION 3)
 NO (SKIP TO QUESTION 2)

- 2) When was the last time you experienced detention time? Was it:
 In the last 2 weeks
 In the last month
 More than 1 month ago (if more than one month, how long ago? _____)

- 3) **For the next set of questions, please think only about the last time you experienced detention time.** Did you collect detention fees?
 YES
 NO

- 4) Does the company you work for collect detention fees?
 YES
 NO
 DON'T KNOW

- 5) During your last detention time, how long did you wait from gate to gate?

- 6) Did you have any wait time before you got to the gate?
- YES
 - NO (SKIP TO QUESTION 8)
- 7) If so, what were the reasons for the wait time before you got to the gate?
- 8) Did you have an appointment time?
- YES
 - NO
- 9) For the last time you experienced detention time, what was the reason?
- 10) For the last time you experienced detention time, how did the detention time impact you, if at all?
- 11) What type of freight were you hauling?
- 12) What type of facility were you delivering to or picking up freight from?

13) In general, does detention time impact your ability to meet the Federal Hours of Service (HOS) requirement?

YES

NO

14) If yes, in what way does it impact?

15) Besides the reason you mentioned previously, are there other reasons for why you have experienced detention time in the past?

16) Besides the impacts you have mentioned, has detention time impacted you in other ways in the past?

17) Are you are an owner operator, an owner operator leased, or a company driver?

Owner Operator

Owner Operator Leased

Company Driver

18) Are you paid according to your mileage or by a percentage, hourly, or by some other method?

Mileage

Percentage

Hourly

Other

19) Are you a Long Haul or Short Haul driver?

Long Haul

Short Haul

20) Are you an individual or team driver?

Individual

Team

Appendix 3
Structured Interviews with Truck Drivers
