

## TYPES OF QUESTIONS AND THE INTERVIEW

When developing interview questions, consider what types of question would best give you the information you are seeking. Listed below are different types of interview questions and when each is best used or should be avoided:

- **Theoretical (Situational) questions** place the interviewee in a hypothetical situation. These questions usually take the form of “Here’s the situation... What would you do?” Example: “If you were in this situation, what would you do?”
- **Alternate choice questions** consist of two or more equally desirable or undesirable options. These types of questions should be avoided because of the uncertain outcome and the limitation of answers. Example: "Do you prefer establishing your own work priorities or having them pre-determined for you?" Always follow-up with why the person chose one answer over the other.
- **Yes or No questions** should be avoided because they obtain very limited information from the interviewee. Examples: “Do you think that this is right?” or “Did they follow the AAUP rules?”
- **“Inch” question** - inch questions require a one-word answer and generally little research. Usually the answer can be found in one source and you should not waste interview time with them. Examples: "How many states make up the United States?" or "What is the capital of India?"
- **Comprehension question:** a comprehension question is asked for a straightforward explanation of concepts and facts. Example: “How was the Fifth Republic formed?”
- **Synthesis question:** the response requires the interviewees to think about the answer from difference perspectives, to synthesize that information, and to draw their own conclusions. These are interesting but difficult questions to ask. The answer might take a long time. Example: “How is the current German political system influenced by Germany’s history?”
- **Loaded or leading questions** should be avoided because they suggest a correct answer. Such questions often reveal the interviewer’s attitudes and may force the interviewee to create answers to fit those attitudes. Example: “Our department wants hard working employees. What kind of employee are you?”
- **Direct questions** are used to get very specific information, such as "Which countries have you visited during that trip?" They are valuable for questioning people in depth or on topics brought up by interviewee’s responses to open-ended or theoretical questions. The outcome of the answers is difficult to predict.
- **Definitional questions** are usually posed in a “What is a ...” or “What does \_\_\_\_\_ refer to or mean?” format. They are useful to ask the interviewee to explain difficult terms, concepts, and ideas.
- **Open-ended questions** require more than a yes or no response. They often begin with “Tell me...” “Describe...” “When...”. Open-ended questions are basic to any effective interview because they call for interviewees to relate information and ideas that they feel are important.

You can ask questions for different **purposes**:

- Determine a causal relationship (does \*this-thing cause \*that-thing?):

Example: Does eating more food cause a cat to grow longer?

- Find relationships between things, or effects (what effect does \*this-thing have on \*that-thing?):

Example: What effect does an object's shape have on its motion?

- Find causes (what causes \*this-thing to happen?):

Example: What causes loneliness?

- Find all factors or important elements (what are all the factors that affect \*this-thing?):

Example: What are all the factors that lead to close friendships?

- Characterize processes and mechanisms (what processes enable \*this-thing to happen?):

Example: How does a heat shield on a spaceship work?

- Determine effective strategies (what are good strategies for accomplishing \*this-goal?):

Example: What collaboration strategies lead to good teamwork?

- Explain functions or purposes (what is the function or purpose of \*this-thing?):

Example: What function does a teacher have in a classroom?

- Explain how functions or purposes are achieved (what enables \*this-purpose to be achieved?):

Example: How does eating food provide a cat with energy?

- Create taxonomies (what are all the different types of \*this-thing?):

Example: What are all the different kinds of soldiers?

- Determine properties (what are the characteristics of \*this-thing?):

Example: What are the characteristics of an effective language lesson?

- Determine stages (what stages does \*this-thing go through as it evolves?):

Example: What are the stages of a tree's life?

- Create diagrams, maps, charts, tables (what are the components of \*this-thing and how are they interconnected?):

Example: What's the structure of a cat's digestive system?

Interviewers should also have several **follow-up questions** and probe for details that explore all aspects of a given situation or experience. Examples of follow-up questions:

1. Please clarify what you mean by ...
2. How did you feel when that happened?
3. Did you consider other options at the time?

4. What do you think about that?
5. Please give me more details about ...
6. Do you believe that...?
7. How do you think others felt about ... at the time?
8. Looking back on the experience, how do you see things now?
9. Can you give me an example?
10. Why do you think that happened?
11. What do other people think about that?
12. Can you give me more information about ...?
13. I didn't really understand how/why..."
14. Can you explain ... again?
15. What did you do?
16. What does ... mean?
17. What was your role?
18. What was the result?
19. What piece of advice would you give...?
20. What would you think if...?
21. If you could change...

And finally, here are some interview **strategies**:

- Gain some good background knowledge of your topic.
- Prepare your specific list of questions in advance
- Brainstorm questions with classmates.
- Test the questions on your people to see what kinds of responses you will get.
- Make an appointment with your interviewee.
- Bring paper and a pen to take notes, and maybe a tape recorder (ask for permission to record!)..
- Dress professionally.
- Allow enough time for the interview. Don't rush your interviewee.
- Be on time! Or even early!
- Introduce yourself and your research.
- Ask only one question at a time. Be sure to word it clearly.
- Wait for the answers. Don't interrupt!
- Avoid leading and yes/no questions.
- Be an active listener. Show your interest.
- Be courteous and respectful.
- Ask for explanations, clarifications, and details.
- Admit that you don't understand something. Don't pretend.
- Prepare some closing questions and comments.
- Be grateful for the information you got.

This handout has been created from an adaptation of numerous anonymous sources and my own ideas.