

# tool 33 Interviewing Techniques

## Checklist

Once victims or witnesses are identified, interviewing them is usually the most effective way of gathering information, but it is also the most likely to negatively impact their well-being, place them at additional risk, and, if not carried out properly, affect the quality and reliability of the information provided. The following checklist offers some tips and advice on how to plan and conduct an interview.

Interview plan	Interview techniques
<p><b>Preparing for the interview</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Carry out a thorough risk-assessment:</b> List all possible security concerns and develop contingency plans to deal with each one of them. Know who the main actors are, what their interests are and whether they represent a credible threat. Prepare responses regarding the reasons for your visit and what you are doing in case people ask you difficult questions or appear suspicious.</li> <li>• <b>Empower yourself:</b> Find out as much as you can remotely about the case. Be knowledgeable about legal standards regulating violations, possible remedy and how to best access referral services.</li> <li>• <b>Get the facts:</b> Establish a list of what you already know about the case and what information is missing.</li> <li>• <b>Prepare your interview format:</b> Write down a checklist of the data and facts necessary to assess the allegations. Familiarize yourself with a map of the area to build geographical references. Establish the structure of the interview, develop a questionnaire and test your interview plan with local colleagues.</li> <li>• <b>Be self-aware:</b> Cultural differences may impede good communication. Cross-cultural differences include attitudes about the meaning of the traumatic experience, gender relations and appropriate topics of conversation. Physical interactions such as eye contact and hand-shaking can lead to misunderstanding. Some cultures may communicate in a more direct fashion than others.</li> <li>• <b>Composition of the delegation:</b> If the monitoring mission is composed of various members, ensure gender balance and ethnicity / languages, and train a translator if necessary.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Setting the interview</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Consider the location of the interview carefully:</b> Plan the interview in a location that is safe, private and easily accessible for the interviewee. Choose a time of day bearing in mind the person's daily routine, distance, means of transportation and cost.</li> <li>• <b>Avoid group interviews:</b> Except when the interviewee requests to be accompanied for greater comfort or support, individual interviews should be prioritized to avoid testimonies being influenced by the presence of others.</li> </ul>

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Interview plan	Interview techniques
<b>Initiating the interview</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Introduce yourself:</b> Give your name and the name of the organization you represent. Introduce the interpreter if applicable and explain what his/her role is.</li> <li>• <b>Establish an initial rapport:</b> Project an attitude of professionalism, sincerity and sensitivity. Acknowledge and be appreciative for the effort made by the interviewee to engage in what might be a challenging discussion.</li> <li>• <b>Clarify the purpose of the interview:</b> Explain why you asked for the interview, the type of questions you are interested in asking and how you intend to use the information.</li> <li>• <b>Confidentiality:</b> Explain that the information will be kept confidential in a protected database, and that reports will be anonymous to prevent traceability.</li> <li>• <b>Establish ground rules:</b> Clarify that participation is entirely voluntary and that the interviewee may decide to stop the interview at any moment or impose specific restrictions on how certain information may be used. If your organization provides services, be clear that access to assistance is not conditional, in any way, on participation in the interview.</li> <li>• <b>Notes:</b> If you intend to take notes, tell the interviewee and ensure you protect the content. Some organizations refrain from using audio/video recordings; if used, make sure you manage them with extreme caution and protect the identity of the interviewee if the content is extremely sensitive.</li> <li>• <b>Obtain consent:</b> Explicitly ask whether the interviewee would like to proceed under the conditions described. If the child is too young to understand the implications of his/her participation, seek the consent of a parent or caregiver.</li> </ul>
<b>Interview</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Narrative statement:</b> Ask the interviewee if he/she would like to begin by narrating his/her story. Listen, do not interrupt or ask follow up questions right away and be patient with circular or repetitive statements that may not be a priority for you.</li> <li>• <b>Specific questioning:</b> Once the interviewee has given his/her narrative, complement by asking targeted questions. Start with clarifying elements of the narrative which you may not understand entirely, and seek additional or more specific information which was not yet addressed.</li> <li>• <b>Use open-ended questions:</b> Close-ended questions can only be answered by yes or no and do not offer the interviewee sufficient opportunity to elaborate and share important information you may be seeking. Avoid them, except if you need to clarify a very specific point.</li> <li>• <b>Avoid leading questions:</b> Those are questions that suggest a particular answer or contain the information you are looking to have confirmed. This may influence the testimony in significant ways.</li> <li>• <b>Seek clarification:</b> Revisit previous statements by saying "you mentioned this" and seek more in-depth information by asking "how do you know" or "what led you to that conclusion?"</li> <li>• <b>Seek details:</b> Clarify dates, times, places, identities, numbers, ranks of alleged perpetrators, physical descriptions, etc. If the interviewee is describing the scene of an alleged crime, ask him/her to make a sketch of it for you. Bring a map to pinpoint implicated places.</li> <li>• <b>Remain professional:</b> Stay objective and neutral. Do not judge or show your opinion as this may affect what the interviewee may choose to omit and disclose, or undermine their confidence. Be careful not to communicate through body language; ensure your demeanor does not portray skepticism.</li> <li>• <b>Show sensitivity and empathy:</b> Maintain eye contact, even partially if you are taking notes. Work from non-controversial and non-sensitive questions towards more sensitive issues. If a line of questioning is too difficult for the interviewee, offer to take a pause or skip to another question. Acknowledge how difficult revisiting traumatic events may be.</li> </ul>

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Closing the interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Supporting evidence:</b> Ask whether the victim/witness may have supporting documentation (arrest warrants, threatening notes, death certificates, autopsy reports, hospital records); photos or videos of the incident; shell casings, ammunitions or other remnants of war. Do not keep but ask whether you can take pictures.</li> <li>• <b>Follow up:</b> Ensure that the interviewee knows about possible referral services. Ask whether he/she would like you to facilitate access to services to the extent possible. Orient the interviewee if appropriate.</li> <li>• <b>Last question:</b> Ask the interviewee if he/she has any questions or can think of any additional information which may be useful.</li> <li>• <b>Contact:</b> Make sure the interviewee knows how to contact you should they have any concerns or questions, and obtain contact information for the interviewee if it does not put him/her at risk.</li> </ul>

## related tools

-  [tool 31](#) – Factsheet ‘What information is needed for the MRM?’
-  [tool 32](#) – Factsheet ‘Information gathering’
-  [tool 40](#) – Self-assessment exercise ‘Security risks when gathering information on grave violations’
-  [tool 29](#) – Checklist ‘Confidentiality’
-  [tool 30](#) – Checklist ‘Informed consent’

## other resources

- *Manual on Human Rights Monitoring*, OHCHR, 2001 - Chapter 7 (Information gathering) and Chapter 8 (Interviewing).
- *Security in a Box: Tools and Tactics for Your Digital Security*, Tactical Technology Collective and Front Line Defenders, 2009.
- *Workbook on Security: Practical Steps for Human Rights Defenders at Risk*, Front Line Defenders, 2011.