

Conducting Primary Research

Throughout your college career, you will probably be asked to conduct **primary research**, which is research for which you gather the data yourself. This is opposed to **secondary research**, for which you cite data that has already been published by someone else (such as in an academic journal article or book).

This resource provides some guidelines for two of the most common methods of primary research: interviews and surveys. However, these are not the only methods of primary research. The following resource from the Purdue Online Writing Lab provides more examples and explanations:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/conducting_research/research_overview/primary_research.html

Requesting Interviews

Interviews are one of the best sources of **qualitative data**, or data that cannot be represented numerically, such as quotable phrases. Conducting a good interview starts with arranging the interview, so follow these steps to ensure that you maintain **good will** with your interviewees:

1. Request interviews in advance. Contact prospective interviewees with enough advance notice that you can make alternative arrangements if they decline the interview or are unable to do it. This also demonstrates respect for interviewees' time, which furthers good will, increasing the chances that you get useful data from the interview.
2. Clearly explain to prospective interviewees (1) your purpose for the interview, (2) why you want to speak with them in particular, (3) how long you expect the interview to last, (4) what format the interview will take (face-to-face, phone, online video meeting, email, etc.).
3. Make it very clear to interviewees how you intend to use their responses. If you intend to publish or otherwise share them beyond your class, you will need to secure approval from Cottey's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Follow this link to learn more about the IRB application process: <https://cottey.edu/irb/>
4. Work with your interviewees' availability to the greatest extent possible. Ask them what dates and times work best for them, and arrange your schedule to accommodate their preferences. Be prepared to change the format of the interview (e.g., from face-to-face to email) if necessary.

Don't forget that you are asking a favor of your prospective interviewees, so the tone of your communication should be respectful and professional. Do not respond negatively if someone declines or is unable to meet your request.

Writing Effective Interview Questions

An interview is only as effective as the questions that you ask. To that end, follow these tips to ensure that your questions give you reliable, compelling data:

1. Ask open-ended questions rather than yes/no questions or questions to which the interviewee could give a very short answer. You want to prompt interviewees to give you a good amount of information.

Ineffective question: Do you like working here?

Effective question: What do you like about working here?

2. If the interviewee gives you a short answer, remember that you can always follow up with "Why?" or "Can you give an example of that?"
3. Keep your questions short and to the point. Ask one thing at a time.

Ineffective question: Can you tell me about what you do here and what you enjoy about your work?

Effective question: Can you tell me about what you do here?

4. Avoid asking leading questions, which predispose interviewees to respond a certain way.

Ineffective question: What makes your job so difficult?

Effective question: Do you find your job difficult? If so, what about it do you find difficult?

5. Ask relevant questions that will give you the data you need to complete your project.
6. Order your questions in such a way that one logically leads to the next.
7. Go into the interview with a prepared list of questions, but be open to the possibility that you may need to shift the order of questions, abandon some questions, or even add new questions during the interview. Be flexible!

Conducting Interviews

Now that you have your questions, what should you do to make sure the interview goes smoothly?

1. In most cases, send the interviewee your questions in advance so they can prepare their answers.
2. If you intend to record the interview, get permission first. Never record someone without their clear consent.
3. Take notes, but don't bury your head in your notebook: still show engagement with the interviewee.
4. Focus on the interviewee. Avoid interrupting or talking about yourself, unless the interviewee invites you to.
5. Don't be afraid to ask follow-up questions or request clarification for a particular answer.

At the end of the interview, extend good will by thanking the interviewee for their time. Within a day, send the interviewee an electronic or handwritten thank-you note reiterating your gratitude. Your note should be 5-7 sentences long and should be very specific in showing your gratitude and explaining how the interview helped you with your work.

Creating Surveys

Surveys, like interviews, can be used to obtain qualitative data, but they are also excellent ways to acquire **quantitative data**, or numerical data. An advantage of quantitative data is that it can easily be represented in visual form, such as tables, charts, and graphs. There are many types of survey questions, each with its own benefits. Some of these include:

1. Yes/No questions: forcing respondents to choose between “yes” or “no” can provide useful quantitative data for a pie or bar chart. However, it may sometimes be wise to include an “undecided” or “other” answer choice.
2. Multiple choice questions: respondents choose one answer from a list. Keep the number of answers to about five, and include an “Other” answer in case none of the answers apply to a respondent.
3. Checkbox questions: these are similar to multiple choice questions but allow respondents to choose any number of answers.
4. Dropdown questions: these provide respondents with a dropdown list of answer choices. Dropdown questions are useful alternatives to multiple choice questions when you have more than five answer choices.
5. Scale questions: respondents are presented with a range of answer choices and choose the most appropriate answer. These may take the form of “strongly agree – strongly disagree” scales or numerical scales such as 1-5.

This resource was prepared by the Cottey College Writing Center.

<https://cottey.edu/campus-community/kolderie-center/learning-center/writing-center/>

6. **Ranking questions:** respondents are presented with several items and asked to rank them in a certain order.
7. **Open-ended questions:** respondents are provided with a blank or text box that allows them to type their own answer. These questions are useful for acquiring qualitative data, such as relevant quotations.

Now that we've discussed the types of survey questions, what makes a *good* survey question?

1. Clarity. Use specific, easy-to-understand terms that leave no room for ambiguity.

Ineffective question: What is the best movie?

Effective question: What movie has the most impressive special effects?

2. Simplicity. Ask one question at a time. Ensure that answer choices do not contain multiple answers in one.

Ineffective question: Which movie has the best characters and actors?

Effective question: Which movie has the best characters?

3. Comprehensiveness. Give respondents all possible answer choices. Consider adding an "Other" choice with text entry box.
4. Objectivity. As with interviews, avoid leading questions.

Ineffective question: How would you rate this critically-acclaimed movie?

Effective question: How would you rate this movie?

5. Balance. Provide an equal number of positive and negative responses. For scale questions, use an odd number of choices (e.g., 5 or 7) to allow for a neutral or "undecided" option, and clarify what each number represents.

Ineffective question: On a scale of 1-4, how would you rate the movie?

Effective question: On a scale of 1-5, 5 being the best rating, how would you rate the movie?

Distributing Surveys

The larger your **sample size**, or number of responses, the more valid your survey data. However, ensure that you take the correct approach to distributing surveys to maximize your odds of getting a good number of responses.

1. When you distribute your surveys, contextualize them for your potential respondents: include a brief description of the survey's purpose, and clarify whether answers will be anonymous, how the responses will be used, and whom to contact if respondents have questions about the survey. If you intend to publish or otherwise share the data that you receive from your surveys beyond your class, you will need approval from Cottey's IRB.
2. Be aware of **survey fatigue**, a phenomenon in which respondents lose interest in the survey, thereby skewing how they answer the questions. Keep your surveys brief (no more than about 10 questions), and let respondents know how long the survey will take. It's a good idea to limit surveys to about five minutes.
3. Time the distribution of your surveys strategically. Do not send them on Friday afternoons or weekends, and do not send them at particularly busy times in the semester.
4. Before sending your survey, contact any parties that are relevant to your topic (such as departments and faculty/staff) to let them know that you would like to send the survey and get their approval to send it. Invite them to provide feedback on your survey questions. Always maintain good will.

This resource was prepared by the Cottey College Writing Center.

<https://cottey.edu/campus-community/kolderie-center/learning-center/writing-center/>