

# Empathy Interview Planning

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Use this document to plan with your team.

## Articulate your why

Empathy interviews can reveal insights into what is working and not working for them in the current system. Consider these potential reasons why you might conduct empathy interviews:

- Identify or prioritize a problem you want to solve
- Understand or prioritize the root causes of a problem
- Uncover specific needs that will inform system redesign



Why do we want to conduct empathy interviews?

## Create and train an interview team

Assemble a team of interviewers that is both broad and diverse. As you build the team, consider:

- Relationships. When possible, consider an interviewer who already has a trusting relationship with those you are interviewing.
- Power dynamics. Consider how race, position, age, or gender might play out in an empathy interview setting. Deliberately work to reduce harm.
- Language needs. Include multilingual interviewers or translators on your team.
- Community. Consider including students, families, and community members as interviewers.

At a minimum, training for interviewers should include:

- The purpose of empathy interviews
- How to create the conditions for an empathy interview
- Practice opportunities with reflection and feedback
- Information on logistics, such as data entry and timeline



What training and experience do team members already have? What's our plan to provide more training/support? Do we need support?

## Decide on virtual and/or in-person interviews

Empathy interviews are best conducted when the interviewer and interviewee can see one another. On the one hand, interviewing someone in-person is ideal because it usually allows for the deepest personal connection. On the other hand, virtual connections with a camera (Zoom, Facetime, Google Meet, etc.) have proven over the past several years to be a very effective strategy, often helping overcome barriers of time, transportation, or childcare that stand in the way of in-person meetings. If you are connecting virtually, use the platform(s) that work best for the interviewee. Connecting by phone alone is discouraged because of the loss of body language for both speaking and listening.

## Decide who to interview

Who is most impacted by the issue you are investigating? Focus on the guiding principle: *partner with historically marginalized students*. This means you may want to consider:

- Demographic representation. Are we ensuring that we prioritize selecting people who are historically and currently marginalized by education systems?
- Relationships. Is it possible to interview someone with whom we already have a trusting relationship?
- Power dynamics. Have we considered how race, position, age, bias, or gender might play out in an empathy interview setting?
- Language needs. Do we have multilingual interviewers or translators?



Who will we interview? Why?

## Create an interview protocol

A typical empathy interview protocol has four to eight open-ended, story-based questions which translate into a 10-25 minute interview. Use question stems such as:

- Tell me about a time when \_\_\_\_.
- Tell me about the last time you \_\_\_\_.
- What are your best/worst experiences with \_\_\_\_?
- Can you share a story that would help me understand more about \_\_\_\_?

These questions should be followed by open-ended prompts like, “Tell me more,” “Why?” and, “What were you feeling then?”



What are our questions?

## Write and practice your interview introduction

An introduction to an empathy interview should include the following:

- Describes why we are conducting the interviews
- Explains how we will use the data
- Includes our confidentiality agreement
- States that the interview, and each question in the interview, is voluntary

Example: *Thank you so much for agreeing to talk with me today. We are trying to learn more about \_\_\_\_\_. Specifically, we want to find out \_\_\_\_\_. We will not be recording your name with your response. Our notes will help us look across responses from multiple interviews with people like you to see what we can learn and how to improve. I have only a few questions and most of them ask you to think of a specific example or story. Take as much time as you need before answering. Any question I ask is voluntary to answer and we can stop at any time. I will be taking a lot of notes, but it is important to do so to protect against any bias I may have in remembering what you said.*



What's our introduction?

## Create a data collection plan

Make sure interviewers can store their notes in a secure data portal and that names and identifying information are not recorded in the data set.

It is easy to build a simple data collection form in Google forms. Usually, you should put demographic questions at the end of the form, not the beginning. Include the interviewer's name, but make sure you do not have anyone write the interviewee's name, number, or address.



What's our data collection plan?

## Reflect and communicate throughout

Interviewers usually appreciate a chance to connect, reflect, and learn from one another. Create time to check in on what's going well, what might need more attention, and how interviewers are feeling about the experience. If certain questions are not working as well as expected, it is perfectly okay to modify the protocol.

## Analyze data

Your plan for analyzing data should consider the who, how, and when.

**Who:** Invite as many diverse perspectives as possible; multiple perspectives are one way to guard against bias. Consider whether the interviewees can also join the analysis.

**When:** Analyze data any time after the data set is complete. The amount of time you need depends on the number of interviewers and the number of people on the analysis team.

**How:** A common approach to analyzing data is called “headlining.” If you don’t have internal expertise for analyzing data, reach out to [Info@communitydesignpartners.com](mailto:Info@communitydesignpartners.com).



What’s our data analysis plan? Do we need outside expertise?

## Circle back

As part of being responsive to communities, it’s important to circle back to your interviewees with any summary or follow-up. Circling back to empathy interview participants you are showing that their stories and experiences matter.



What’s our plan to circle back?

Questions? Need help with training or analysis?

Contact Community Design Partners at [info@communitydesignpartners.com](mailto:info@communitydesignpartners.com)