> When…
> Who…
> Where…
> How…

How to Ask Open-Ended Questions

It's important to be open-minded and exploratory when you conduct user research. Often what you're really interested in is understanding your *participants'* perspective—you want to understand their actions, thoughts and motivations, and do so in a way that's as undisturbed by your own opinions as possible. It is therefore extremely important that you ask open-ended questions when you talk to your participants. Open-ended questions allow your participants to open up and expand on their motivations, behaviors and concerns, rather than just confirm or affirm the questions you ask (as is the case with closed-ended questions).

An Example of Closed-Ended vs. Open-Ended Questions

You interview a user about a message app you're convinced is extremely difficult to use.

A closed-ended question in this scenario would be: "Did you find the messenger app difficult to use?" This question leads your research participants to confirm your own opinion, and you won't gain any insight into what they find most important and/or frustrating about your app—your participants won't open up about their experience with the product.

On the other hand, open-ended questions could be: "Can you tell me about the last time you used the product?" or "Can you explain to me how the send functionality works?" These questions allow your participants to explain their experience with a focus on the aspects *they* find most important.

When are Open-Ended Questions Important?

You have to be particularly focused on asking open-ended questions when you do exploratory user research in the early stages of a project. This typically involves qualitative user research methods such as:

- User Interviews

- Field Studies

- Observations

- Any other user interviews

How to Ask Open-Ended Questions

So, how do you ask open-ended questions? The simple answer is to *never* ask questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no". You're not going to get your participants to open up if they can simply answer "yes" or "no"!

So, what can you do instead to get a good understanding of your participants' point of view? The secret is to be concrete whenever you want to:

- **Know how your participants feel about a product or feature.**
  - ✔ *Do* ask how they feel about…?
  - ✘ *Don't* ask whether or not they like…?

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- **Understand how your participants normally do something.**
  - ✔ *Do* use questions that start with "where…", "who…", "when…", "how…", etc.
  - ✘ *Don't* ask if they carry out the process in a certain way—i.e., "Like this...?"

- **Understand how your participants would use something.**
  - ✔ *Do* ask what situations they would use it in.
  - ✘ *Don't* ask when they would use it.

- **Understand your participants' past experience with a product.**
  - ✔ *Do* ask participants to recount emotional situations related to the topic you're interested in, such as a time they were annoyed with a product or found it really helpful. Generally, people have a good memory for the detail of emotional situations.
  - ✘ *Don't* simply ask if they've used the product before and whether they liked it.

- **Get your participants to elaborate on a topic.**
  - ✔ *Do* ask your participants to provide concrete examples to help expand on their answers.
  - ✘ *Don't* just accept answers which are brief and contain little detail.

- **Know how your participants understand a product.**
  - ✔ *Do* ask your participants to explain how they think the product works (or why it doesn't if that's the case).
  - ✘ *Don't* simply ask if they understand how to use the product.

Do you want to learn more?

Learn how to use this template to your best advantage in our online course **User Research – Methods and Best Practices**. Sign up for it today and learn how you can gain and apply user insights through qualitative research if you haven't already started the course.

User Research – Methods and Best Practices

◖▭▭ Beginner course

User experience (UX) design requires you to understand the pains and pleasures of your users—and user research is the way in which to do just that. In that sense, it's actually the largest part of the field... meaning it's essential for you to have the relevant skills and knowledge if you want to be competing with the best. In our course **User Research – Methods and Best Practices**, you'll learn the best practices for getting first-hand knowledge of your users, thus enabling you to design the optimal product—one that's truly relevant for your users and, subsequently, outperforms your competitors'. In the course you'll be equipped with templates that will give you pointers on how to effectively interview your users, conduct observations, and best present your findings to stakeholders. You've already downloaded one template, now take the next step and master the full range of user research techniques!
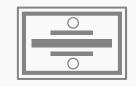
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