

Investigation Interviewing Techniques

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answers to build your case.*

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Learn about Investigation Interviewing Techniques

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Mistakes reveal the truth
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An investigation interview is a conversation designed to gather information and evidence that is accurate, relevant and complete from: subjects/suspects, victims, complainants, informants, witnesses.

Investigation interviews can also be used to:

- Impart information to interviewees
- Provide people with a chance to tell their side of a story
- Elicit formal, testimonial evidence
- Uncover facts crucial for making decisions



Effective investigation interviews are the basis of a good investigation.



Successful interviewing requires knowledge, skill and experience on the part of the interviewer.

Investigation Interview Preparation

A knowledgeable, skillful and experienced interviewer:

- Approaches the interview with an open mind
- Acts fairly and ethically
- Knows to sometimes dig deeper than the first answer
- Treats interviewees with respect and dignity

Preparing the Venue

Investigation interviews should be conducted in a place that is private, quiet and comfortable.

An interviewee who feels comfortable is more willing to talk freely. An interviewee who feels threatened or exposed may be less than forthcoming.



The interview room should contain as few distractions as possible.

The investigator should have a full view of the interviewee. This means that there should not be a table or other furniture between the two.

The investigator should also leave the impression that the interviewee is free to leave the room, so locking the door or sitting in a position that blocks the exit is always a bad idea.

A man with short dark hair and a beard, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and a dark red tie, is seated at a dark wooden desk. He is looking down intently at a white notepad, holding a red pen in his right hand and writing. A black wristwatch is visible on his left wrist. The background is a textured brick wall. The lighting is warm and focused on the man and his work.

Preparing the Questions

While an investigator should have an idea of the questions he or she plans to ask during the interview, writing out an exhaustive list of questions is never a good idea.

Interviews should flow and the investigator needs to have the flexibility to go with the flow of information.

A brief outline of the points to be covered is enough.

Interviewer Conduct

Every organization should have a policy and procedure that outlines the acceptable conduct of an interviewer. Interviewers brought in from outside the organization should read and familiarize themselves with the policy before the first investigation interview proceeds.

A policy might cover issues related to:

- Disclosing information to the interviewee
- Respectful treatment of interviewees
- Lying to elicit information in interviews
- Threatening or accusatory language
- Explaining the purpose of the interview





Establishing a Baseline

The first set of questions an investigator asks in an interview are basic, non-threatening questions to which the investigator knows the correct answers. This establishes a baseline for how the interviewee responds when telling the truth.

Baseline Questions

Baseline questions could include:

- Where do you live?
- How old are you?
- How long have you worked at this company?
- What is your job title in the company?



The investigator's job during this phase is to observe the way the person uses physical gestures, speech and eye contact while answering these non-threatening questions. This sets the baseline against which the investigator can assess and measure differences in behavior when asking more difficult questions, or those questions the interviewee might answer untruthfully.



Building Rapport

How the investigator comes across to the interviewee is the most important dynamic in the investigation interview process. Even when the approach is appropriate, if the relationship between the investigator and interviewee isn't ideal, the investigator has a limited chance of success. On the other hand, if a good relationship is established early on, even the wrong approach doesn't necessarily sink the investigator's chances of success.

3 Benefits of Establishing Rapport

Establishing rapport in an investigation interview achieves three objectives:

Engenders trust

When the interviewee trusts the investigator, information is more likely to flow freely.

Elicits desire to help

If the interviewee believes the investigator will help them (get their story told, save face, etc.) there's incentive to help the investigator.

Nurtures understanding

An interviewee is far more likely to share information with an investigator who understands him or her and can relate to the situation or motives for the actions being discussed.



Mirroring

Mirroring is an effective technique used to build rapport during investigation interviews. Mirroring refers to the tendency of two people to reflect each other's posture when they are relating well to each other or are in agreement. It's a simple method of shared rhythm that can be used both verbally and non-verbally, BUT it must be employed subtly. Copying someone's behavior and mannerisms can be detrimental to establishing rapport if the person notices that the investigator is doing it.

TIP: You can practice non-verbal mirroring by watching a television show and subtly mirroring the actions you see on the screen.

Non-verbal mirroring:

An investigator can establish rapport by mirroring the interviewee's posture, gestures and position. This makes interviewees aware of what they do implicitly and teaches them to do it explicitly. Once the interviewee starts to mirror the investigator, they have established rapport. (The investigator is then in a position to influence the interviewee's body language, and influence the outcome. For example, by adopting a position of confession, with head and body slumped, the investigator may be able to influence the interviewee to adopt the same posture, setting the stage for the investigator to ask an admission-seeking question.)

Verbal mirroring:

By adopting the interviewee's speaking style, use of language, cadence, etc., the investigator can subtly build rapport. Using words and language that connote understanding and agreement can give the interviewee a feeling of shared experiences and goals, and create a positive relationship between the interviewee and investigator.



Another method for building rapport is through shared experiences.

Shared Experiences

An investigator who can find some common ground with the interviewee is in a good position to establish a relationship that leads to open communication. This often begins in the baseline phase of the interview when the investigator is asking questions about the subject's home, family and job. Finding some common experiences to discuss, such as a child who plays baseball or a home undergoing renovations, is a great way to identify with the subject and establish rapport.

Detecting Deception

There are as many theories about detecting deception as there are deceivers, so it's important to read widely and apply the strategies wisely when attempting to spot lies in investigation interviews. The many possible signs of deception can be misinterpreted when taken on their own, when considered without considering the surrounding circumstances, or without taking cultural norms and individual baselines into account. But one thing is clear when it comes to detecting deception: the investigator needs to pay careful attention to the subject's verbal and non-verbal behavior and look for changes in both.



Clues to deception

Clues to deception are just that: clues. They should be seen as indications of where the investigator needs to probe further, rather than as outright evidence of deception. Signs of deception should also be considered more telling when they occur in clusters. One deception “tell” does not mean a person is lying. A cluster of them, on the other hand, may be a good indicator of an area that the investigator should question in more detail.

A man with a beard, wearing a tan trench coat and brown trousers, stands in front of a modern glass building. He is carrying a black and brown messenger bag. The background shows a clear sky and some greenery.

Types of Deception

There are many ways an interview subject can try to deceive an investigator.

Deception by concealment is one of the easiest for the subject, as he or she doesn't have to do anything. Everything they tell the investigator is the truth, it's just not the whole truth.

Deception by equivocation happens when a subject simply answers a question without actually answering the question. This is also known as "dodging the issue".

Deception by falsification is the most difficult type of deception for an interviewee to pull off. It requires creating fiction and it's hard work. It's also easier to make mistakes when inventing facts.

Deception Clues

Of the three types of deception, concealment and equivocation have little anxiety associated with them, but when someone is making false statements their anxiety level increases.

Since clues to deception in investigation interviews revolve around anxiety, it's the easiest way to detect falsification, but anxiety is not always a clear clue to deception. A person could simply be anxious because they are being interviewed.

Some signs of anxiety include:

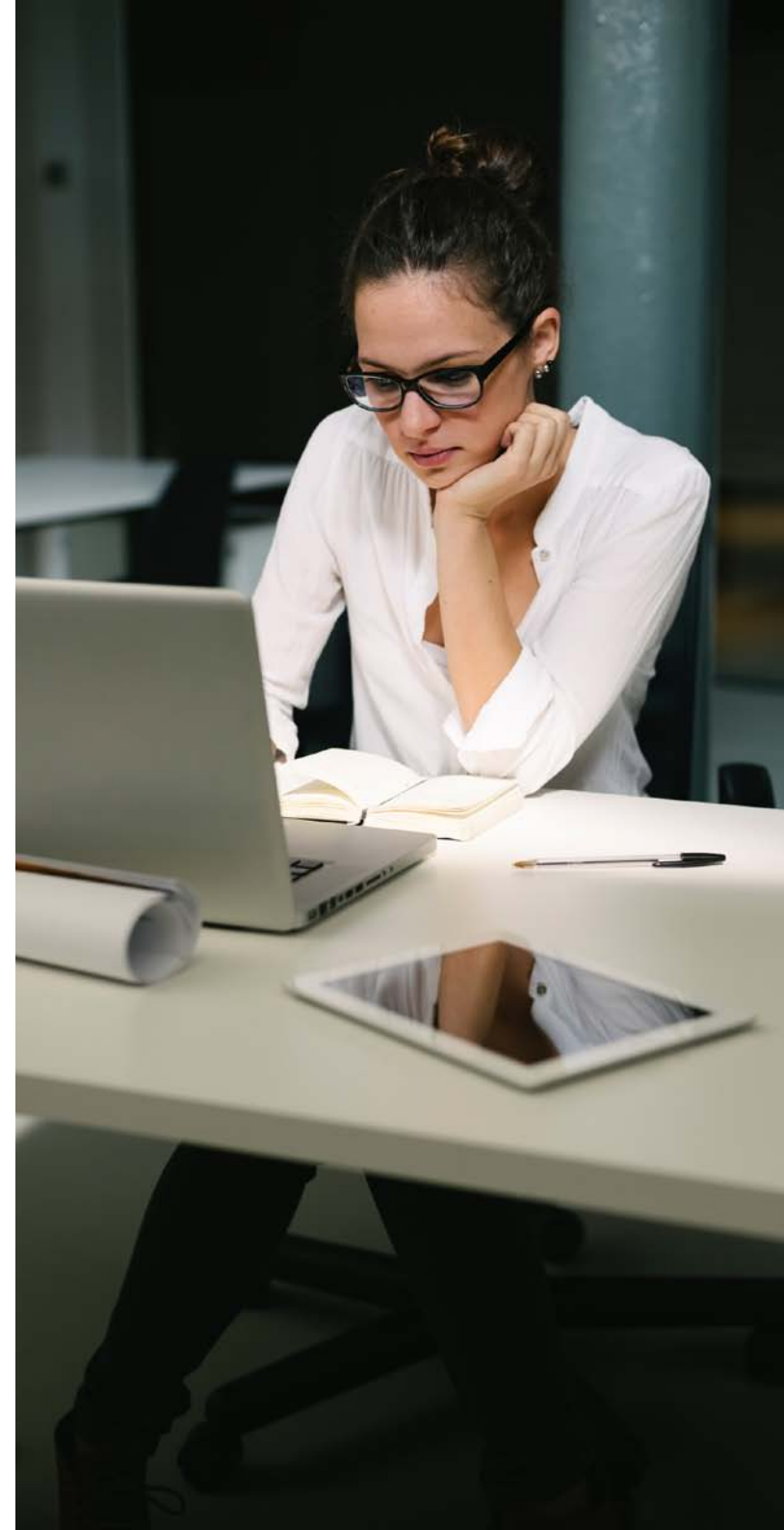
- Use of modifiers (usually, sort of, normally)
- Few factual statements
- Few details (because they have to remember the details of a lie)
- Moving from specificity to generalizations
- Use of passive voice
- Use of second-person pronouns
- Referring to past events less often (historical present)
- Change from longer answers to shorter ones
- Increased use of adaptors (such as hand gestures)
- Speech errors
- Increased response time

Mistakes reveal the truth. The next best thing to an admission is a mistake on the part of the interviewee.

Question Types and When to Use Them

There are five basic types of questions used in investigation interviews:

- Introductory questions are used to provide an introduction and get the interviewee to agree to cooperate in the interview.
- Informational questions are used for fact-gathering, and are either open, closed or leading.
- Closing questions are used to reconfirm facts, get additional information and gather any information the investigator may have missed.
- Assessment questions are generally hypothetical questions that the investigator can use to assess the interviewee's credibility.
- Admission-seeking questions are asked when an investigator is reasonably certain of the interviewee's guilt and are designed to elicit a confession or clear an innocent person of wrongdoing.





Interviewing Sequence

Investigators should always begin with general questions and move to more specific questions. One way to achieve this is to first ask questions that seek information you already know, then ask a question that follows, logically, from the preceding question.

Open, Closed and Leading

Questions fall into three categories: open, closed and leading. There are good reasons to use each of these question types in the investigation interview.

Open questions cannot be answered with a “yes” or “no” answer. An example is “Tell me about the process you use to record outgoing payments.” Open questions are used during the information gathering phase of the interview and at times when the investigator needs to open the conversation.

Closed questions require a “yes” or “no” answer. They are used to nail down the specific facts, often amounts or dates. They are rarely, if ever, used in the information gathering phase of the interview, and most often used in the closing questions phase of the interview.

Leading questions are used to confirm the facts that you already know. The answer is commonly contained as part of the question. A leading question makes an assumption that is not confirmed and normally produces the most honest answer because it is an unguarded response. An example is “You work in the accounting department, don’t you?... Ok, then tell me about the process you use for payables.”

Telephone Interviews

Telephone interviews can be tricky, but sometimes they are necessary. The subject may be in a different country, or it may be impossible to physically meet. In these cases, a telephone interview is better than no interview.

One of the biggest challenges for investigators when they can't conduct interviews face-to-face is establishing rapport. You may have to adjust your expectations for what you will get out of the interview. You are more likely to be successful at gathering information and confirming facts than detecting deception or gaining compliance.



Tips for Conducting Telephone Interviews

When considering whether to record telephone interviews investigators need to be aware of the laws in different states, including the state they are calling from and the one at the other end.

Tip: To practice listening skills, turn on a television news program and cover the screen. Listen and analyze the words.

- Since investigators cannot detect non-verbal cues in a telephone interview, it's best to focus on verbal and vocal cues.
- Listen for uncertainty and modifiers in responses, lack of factual statements, use of second person pronouns, short responses, speech errors and delayed responses.
- Listening skills are more important than ever in telephone interviews.
- Give the interviewee your full attention. Don't fool yourself into thinking you can check email and mobile devices while conducting an interview. You will miss valuable information, including vocal and verbal signs. Avoid smoking, eating, drinking and chewing gum.
- Use silence as a tool to elicit more information without having to ask questions. This works especially well on the telephone, when the subject cannot judge your reactions.
- Provide vocal feedback frequently to reassure the subject that you are listening and engaged.



The investigator may be required to produce an interview report after the interview. For this reason, it's important to write up interview notes immediately after the interview while the facts are still fresh.

After the Interview

Some companies require that the interviewee confirm the written notes and make any additional comments as necessary. Any disparity regarding the content is noted and the interviewee signs and dates the document.

There should be a policy in place governing what to do with handwritten notes after the interview. There are arguments for and against keeping handwritten notes after the interview report has been filed. Just keep in mind that these could be discoverable.



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Dawn Lomer is the Managing Editor at i-Sight and a Certified Fraud Examiner. She writes about workplace investigations, ethics and compliance, corporate security and fraud.

