

# THE FUNNEL APPROACH TO QUESTIONING AND ELICITING INFORMATION

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Elicitation can refer to many things for many people.

**B**roadly speaking, elicitation refers to procedures or techniques involving interacting with and communicating with others, formally or informally, that is designed to gather knowledge or inform.<sup>1</sup> Eliciting information from anyone who is uncooperative is a difficult task. Elicitation can occur in many different contexts, including very impromptu, informal situations such as everyday conversations and social interactions (e.g., a “chance” meeting at a cocktail party or other social gatherings) or very formal ones that are scheduled and occur in a predefined place (e.g., a job interview). In this article, we provide tips to eliciting information during relatively more formal interviews, which we define as an overt activity for the purpose of information gathering. That is, an interview is a conversation with a purpose.<sup>2</sup>

A list of questions by itself does not constitute an interview.<sup>3,4</sup> Instead, one should prepare for interviews by crafting relevant questions to address specific topics to explore with the subject prior to conducting an interview.<sup>5</sup> Preparation is essential to effective interviewing, including conducting and analyzing background reports, collating

corroborating or disconfirming information, interviewing other individuals, gathering relevant forensics and other physical evidence.

Even when it comes to the interview, there are many things to consider, and it is important to understand the interview within the broader context than just the interaction between interviewer and subject. Interviews occur in a certain place and time, between two or more individuals who often come from very different backgrounds, cultural perspectives and goals. Sometimes subjects (and interviewers) come to the interview with deep-seated hatred and disrespect for each other. In many instances subjects may be uncooperative or cooperative up to a point. Interviews take place in a specific setting and much consideration needs to be paid to configuring those settings to maximize the effectiveness of the interview.

Effective interviewers rarely just jump straight to the point of the interview at the outset by asking very direct questions about a very specific topic. Instead, effective interview strategies involve the development of some degree of rapport between the

interviewer and subject. The development and maintenance of rapport can be very tricky and demanding, especially with an initially uncooperative subject. Establishing rapport needs to be part of an effective interview strategy.

There are many different types of interview strategies and tactics. Below, we provide some broad-stroked tips based on our knowledge of the existing science relevant to interviewing as well as what has been vetted in the field with years of experience, which can be flexibly applied to a variety of settings.

## QUESTIONING STRATEGIES FOR INTERVIEWS – THE FUNNEL APPROACH

The skillful handling of questions can encourage subjects to participate in the interview process and provide more information. Ineffective questioning techniques can create barriers, stifle the flow of information and contaminate efforts to arrive at the truth.<sup>6</sup> Taking the time to prepare specific questions in advance of the interview will generally produce more effective outcomes. Although we fully realize and understand that time can often be

short and many interviews happen on the fly, investigators should strive to not “wing it.” Even when investigators have specific questions in mind, the danger is that they can pose those questions in a random and haphazard manner, giving little thought to the psychology behind eliciting the subject’s cooperation.

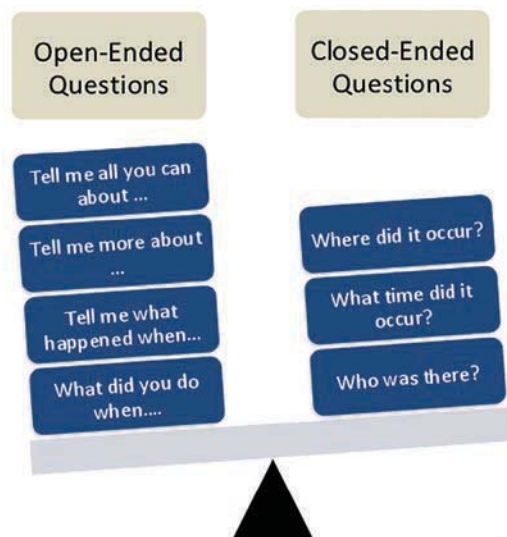
Although asking questions appears easy, doing so in a cohesive manner designed to arrive at the truth is a complex skill that requires study, effort, patience and coaching (and mistakes). Interviewers should avoid asking subjects a barrage of questions with little forethought to a deliberate order or purpose because these can confuse the subject or arouse emotions and cognitions in the subject that are superfluous to the interview. Moreover, random and off topic questions can provide subjects with the ability to take off on tangents and exert control over the interview process.

One effective approach involves thinking of the questioning process as a funnel, similar to a funnel used to pour a liquid.<sup>7</sup> In its design, a funnel is broad near the top and gradually narrows until it culminates in a very small opening at the bottom. Using this analogy and employing the categorization of questions as either closed or open-ended, interviewers should begin the information-gathering phase with broad, open-ended inquiries designed to obtain as much information as possible and culminate the process with very direct and specific closed questions (see Figure 1). The funnel approach as described is part of a system of strategies that more broadly comprise various cognitive interviewing techniques which are designed to enhance memory relevant to investigative interviewing.<sup>8</sup>

### OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Open-ended questions are those that cannot be answered with a single word (e.g., yes or no); require thought; and are designed to encourage full, meaningful answers using the subject’s knowledge, attitudes, opinions, beliefs or feelings. Open-ended questions minimize the risk of interviewers imposing their views or opinions of what happened on the subject or inadvertently leaking facts

## Balance between Open- and Closed-Ended Questions



**FIGURE 1**

about the topic of interest that only involved persons would know about. Possible answers are not suggested and subjects are allowed to answer the question in their own words, thereby giving them the feeling of control. They allow investigators to see how subjects make decisions about where to start and end, what to say and how to say it, all of which provide potentially valuable insights into the minds of subjects. Beginning with open-ended questions takes advantage of the psychology of active observation and listening as skills that encourage the use of broad inquiries to gather as much information as possible.

Consideration needs to be given to exactly *how* open-ended questions are asked. On one hand, an open-ended question, such as, “Tell me what happened” encourages the subject to provide a broad, amplified response. Other open-ended questions can begin with phrases such as “Tell me your side of the story,” “Explain to me,” “What happened when?” and “Describe the person.” On the other hand, an open-ended question like “Tell me what you did with the check” when no one has mentioned a check to begin with can bias the subject to focus unnecessarily on the check, arousing cognitions and emotions that may be irrelevant to the desired information. Although we have called these open-ended questions, they are really *requests*.

The advantage of open-ended questions

is that they are designed to encourage individuals to talk. As long as people keep talking, investigators can gain valuable insights about the personality, motivation and intentions of the subjects and establish concrete links and topic areas to explore more fully. Investigators can take advantage of these benefits by following up on open-ended questions in a more meaningful way that is directly relevant to the topic and goal of the interview in the first place. At the same time, the notion that “keeping individuals talking about *anything* is good” can be misleading because much can be said about things not relevant to the goal of the interview. Staying focused and on point to the goal of the interview is very important, even when asking open-ended questions and especially in the follow up.

### CLOSED-ENDED QUESTIONS

Closed-ended questions elicit simple, brief and often narrowly defined one-word responses. Examples of closed questions include: “Who was with you?” “What time was it?” “Where did you go?” and “When did this happen?” Closed-ended questions are simple and direct and by design, they limit the subject’s response. Closed-ended questions that prompt a yes or no response or any other kind of A or B response are referred to as bipolar questions inasmuch as these

**MUCH LIKE PEELING AWAY THE OUTER SKIN OF AN ONION, INVESTIGATORS SHOULD ENGAGE IN A SYSTEMATIC UNCOVERING OF INFORMATION BY GRADUALLY NARROWING THE FOCUS WITH QUESTIONS THAT ELICIT MORE SPECIFIC RESPONSES.**

represent the only two answers that the subject logically can provide.<sup>9</sup>

The advantage to closed-ended questions is that they ensure that interviewers elicit details from the subject. They help corroborate information and secure specific details. Often, as investigators prepare to document their interviews by reviewing their notes, they find that they neglected to obtain detailed and specific information. To alleviate this, they should bear in mind the importance of thoroughness, which includes obtaining answers to the basic questions of *who, what, when, where, why* and *how* concerning the target incident or information. By doing so, they stand a better chance of having acquired all the details. At the same time, closed-ended questions are generally not the most effective for obtaining information in the first place, considering the quantity of information collected.

### APPLYING A FUNNEL AND LAYERING APPROACH TO ASKING QUESTIONS

The use of open-ended questions is more likely to generate more complete, but potentially less accurate information than more direct, closed questions.<sup>10,11</sup> Being aware of this principle, investigators should avail themselves of both, but give strong consideration to using open-ended questions especially in obtaining an initial narrative response concerning the topic at hand.

There are multiple reasons for using open-

ended questions at the outset of an interview. Apart from the fact that open-ended questions serve the purpose of gathering more complete information, they allow investigators to identify meaningful content areas or topics to be explored later in the interview in more detail. This is particularly applicable when interviewing a subject who has reason to deceive either through omission or obfuscation. When a subject responds to an open-ended question investigators obtain not only information about what is said and how it is said, but also what is *not* said or expressed. Nonverbal expressions in face, voice, gesture and body posture that subjects produce when answering questions and even when silent give additional insights into subjects' minds, emotions, cognitions and cognitive processes.<sup>12</sup> Open-ended questions also help investigators assess subjects' baseline behaviors. If subjects do not perceive a question as a threat, they generally will respond in a manner that is consistent with their normal pattern of speaking and behaving. Experienced interviewers will pay close attention to verbal and nonverbal behaviors as subjects respond to seemingly innocuous open-ended questions and then contrast and compare their verbal and nonverbal behaviors when they respond to more direct closed-questions about the specific issue that is being investigated. For example, if subjects continue to provide explicit, unique sensory details in response

to questions about the specific issue under investigation, it could suggest that they are being forthright and truthful. If subjects deviate from providing detail and now provide vague responses characterized by equivocation and a surplus of verbal markers such as editing or intensifying adverbs, it could suggest that they are attempting to deceive by obfuscation or omission. A marked deviation from the subject's baseline behavior could suggest that the subject has something to hide about that specific issue.

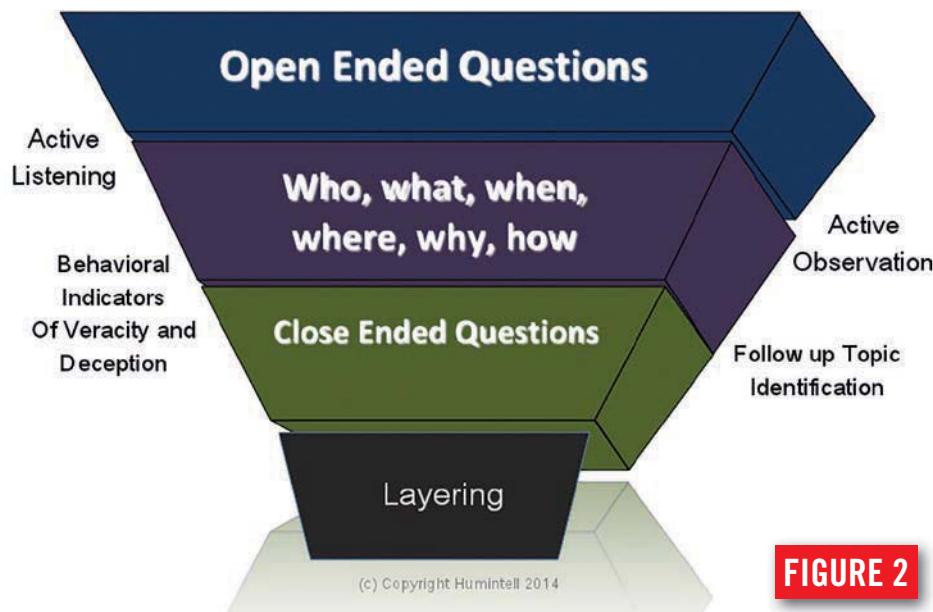
As investigators assess the initial response on the part of the subject, they need to consider how to ask follow-up questions. These questions do not necessarily need to be closed-ended; on the contrary, they can be more open-ended such as, "tell me more about ...". What should be of paramount consideration to investigators is to identify in their own minds which topics that the subject raised need to be followed up with additional questions and why. Consideration ought to be given to an interview process that is tactically driven by the verbal and nonverbal indicators of veracity and deception provided during the initial narrative.<sup>13</sup>

Once investigators identify potential topics of interest that they believe warrant further exploration during the interview, they need to prioritize these topics by engaging in a delicate balance of asking both open and closed-ended questions. Similar to a funnel that is broader at the outset, questions typically will become more narrow and closed as the investigator elicits more detailed information about the relevant topic. Much like peeling away the outer skin of an onion, investigators should engage in a systematic uncovering of information by gradually narrowing the focus with questions that elicit more specific responses (Figure 2). Once investigators believe that they have exhausted a topic and have a complete picture of what took place, they may then choose another topic to explore employing the same strategies as illustrated in the analogies of the funnel and layering. Throughout the process, investigators should remain flexible to maximize the fundamental value of open and closed-ended questions (Figure 3).

### BE CAREFUL OF HOW YOU WORD YOUR QUESTIONS

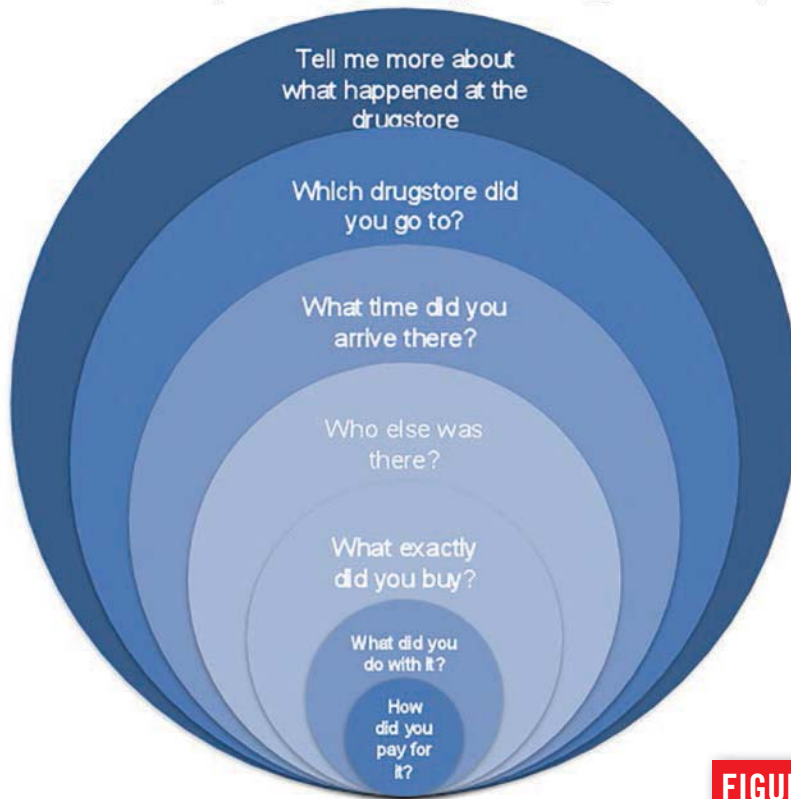
Interviewers can influence subjects by the words they use.<sup>14</sup> The precise questions

## The Funnel Approach to Questioning



**FIGURE 2**

# An Example of Layering a Topic



**FIGURE 3**

asked during an interview are crucial because even slight changes in wording can produce a different answer. Therefore during the information-gathering phase or when broad open-ended questions are being employed at the outset of the interview, careful consideration should be given to the choice of words, especially descriptive adjectives and action verbs. Investigators should refrain from using words that could lead a person in a specific direction. Through the use of

emotionally laden words, investigators can inadvertently contaminate an interview by suggesting to the subject the answer they want.<sup>15</sup>

## CONCLUSION

These tips are recommendations based on our knowledge of the relevant science and what has been vetted in the field. Refining the best approach for each interview and interviewer is important. There is much more

to conducting successful interviews than just these guidelines. Much consideration should be given to orchestrating the setting in which effective interviews can occur and how to develop and maintain rapport with the subject. Outside the interview proper, we need to consider investigative aids and procedures that support the interview and that can maximize the potential for interviews to be effective and successful. Cultural similarities and differences must be considered. The integration of the science of interviewing along with the art of the operator will determine the success of an interview for eliciting useful information. ✓

## BIOS

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**INVESTIGATORS SHOULD REFRAIN FROM USING WORDS THAT COULD LEAD A PERSON IN A SPECIFIC DIRECTION.** ←

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