

Preparing for and Conducting Interviews

Project Based Teaching Strategies Guide

Students conduct interviews as a part of many Project Based Learning experiences. In some cases, these interviews inform a design thinking process, in which students are working to identify the needs of a “client” or audience in order to inform a design, solution, or communication strategy. In other cases, students interview people (such as scientists, historians, immigrants, or activists) who have expertise or direct experience in the particular content or issue they are studying.

Why is it Useful?

In addition to helping them reach their goals for a project, learning to conduct effective interviews helps students develop key speaking and listening skills, build valuable social skills, and deepen empathy as they engage with people from a range of backgrounds. As students gain experience with interviews, they learn that people can serve as some of the most powerful “primary sources” for learning about the world.

What Do I Do?

Explicitly teach key interview strategies.

Take the time to teach students key practices that will help to maximize the effectiveness of their interviews. The practices you highlight might include the following:

- Identify your goals and determine what you want to learn.
- Do your homework/ know who you are interviewing.
- Ask people to discuss things they care about/have experienced.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- Ask follow-up questions to seek clarification and elaboration.
- Engage in active listening and be mindful of body language.
- Provide wait time/ leave space for silence.
- Take notes and/or record interviews.

Depending on the time available, the experience level of your students, and the context for student interviews, you may wish to teach these strategies via direct instruction, a shared analysis of sample “expert” video or print interviews by a journalist, a whole-group generative discussion, or an exploration of online or print resources about interviewing. Sample resources to explore with students might include:

- [d. school Empathy Field Guide](#)
- [Columbia Journalism Review: The Art of the Interview](#)
- [Scholastic: How to Conduct a Journalistic Interview](#)

Provide time and structure to prepare for interviews.

To help students get ready for interviews, have them work individually or in teams to clarify their goals, conduct background research, and generate questions. You may wish to provide them with graphic organizers, sample questions/ question stems, or resource lists to scaffold this process. Encourage students to use their project need to know question list to guide them as they generate questions for interviews.

Provide supported opportunities for practice and feedback.

Before students interview external partners, have them practice interviewing one another in pairs or small groups.

- If you are focusing on developing general interview skills, you might have students interview one another about topics they care about and their life experiences, then give one another feedback on the use of open-ended questions, body language, and active listening skills.
- If students are preparing for specific content-related interviews, you might have students role-play using the interview questions they have prepared, then share feedback on how well the interview questions align with student goals for the interviews.

Consider using a Fishbowl format (have a small group of students conduct an interview while a larger group observes them and takes notes) to structure feedback and reflection on interviews.

After interviews, have students debrief and reflect.

Once students have conducted their interviews, have them reflect on the process and identify what went well and what they might do differently in the future. If students used video or audio to record their interviews, have them reflect *after* they watch or listen to the recordings. Use the following questions to guide reflection:

- What were your goals for the interview? How well did the interview address these goals?
- What did you learn? What surprised you?
- What questions do you have that were not answered by this interview?
- What helped make this interview successful?
- What (if anything) do you wish you had done differently?
- How did the learning from this interview help you answer need to know questions related to this project? What new need to know questions do you have?

Primary Grades Considerations

To scaffold interviewing for younger students, provide sentence stems for questions and answers. You may wish to build short peer interview practice into daily routines such as Morning Meeting. For example, select one student to be the “star of the day” and interview that student as a class, or have students pair up and ask and answer one question about their lives, their interests, or the content they are learning about in school.

Troubleshooting Tips

Students ask limited or closed-ended questions.

Take time to explicitly teach the difference between open-ended and closed-ended questions. Use the [Question Formulation Technique](#) to help students practice generating and revising high-quality open-ended questions. You might also consider having students or teams share their draft questions with peers in a short feedback protocol.

Student questions are not appropriate for the interview audience.

When students are preparing for interviews, have them consider what they know about their audience. For example, if students are interviewing young children as part of a design thinking project, point out that they should use simple language and more direct questioning, while students who are interviewing an expert in a topic can use more technical terms, but should plan to ask follow-up questions for clarification if the expert introduces unfamiliar language or concepts.

The person being interviewed goes off-topic, speaks in a way that is not accessible to students, talks too long, etc.

Prepare students in advance by brainstorming possible challenges and discussing strategies for addressing them (e.g., asking clarifying questions, politely interrupting the interview subject, redirecting the conversation). You may wish to have students engage in role-play activities to address each of these scenarios, or to model intervention or redirection strategies within a fishbowl format.

Got Tech?

- If students are not able to connect in-person with interview subjects, have them use video chat tools such as Google Hangouts or FaceTime to conduct their interviews.
- Sites like [Nepris](#) can be great ways to help students locate industry professionals to interview about key content related to their projects.