Module 2. Focus Groups and Interviews

In this module, we review the steps involved in developing and conducting focus groups and interviews. Based on the question and data plan you developed in Module #1, your research and design process may call for you to conduct focus groups and interviews. If your questions and design plans are currently broad and exploratory, focus groups and interviews can allow you to gather the information necessary to arrive at a more refined and detailed set of research questions. This ongoing process of revision and refinement aligns with Carnegie's commitment to continuous improvement of school models. Focus groups and interviews often pave the way for developing a survey—a topic covered in the following module.

The value of focus groups and interviews lies in their depth and flexibility. The relatively loose structure of these modes of data collection affords invaluable insight into the varied questions you must answer to create and refine a school design grounded in the Carnegie design principles. Critically, gathering this insight will often allow you to engage student voice, encourage family participation, or integrate community members—all elements of the Carnegie design principle of positive youth development—into your research and design process.

The sequence of sections in this module appears below. The example we use in this section is grounded in the design principle of positive youth development. We focus specifically on a research question centered on caring, consistent student-adult relationships that communicate high expectations for student learning and behavior.

Initial Planning
1. Determine whether to conduct focus groups, interviews, or both

Focus Groups
2. Develop a focus group protocol
3. Plan a focus group
4. Tips for conducting focus groups
5. Preparing for data analysis

Interviews
6. Develop an interview protocol
7. Plan interviews
8. Tips for conducting interviews
9. Preparing for data analysis

Focus Groups

1. Determine Whether to Conduct Focus Groups, Interviews, or Both

Key Information

Explore broad questions with focus groups; explore specific questions with interviews. Oftentimes, when you first identify a research question, you have many different ideas of what you might learn and are interested in gathering new perspectives and insights. In such cases, focus groups or interviews are far more effective than surveys. At this stage, start by exploring your research question through conversations with your group of interest: whoever can most directly provide insight into your plans.

These conversations may take place in the form of focus groups, interviews, or focus groups followed by interviews. Focus groups are typically semi-structured facilitated discussions with four to eight people, while interviews are conducted one-on-one following a standardized set of questions.

When you are in an exploratory phase and are still unsure what your research will reveal, focus groups allow you to explore broad questions in rich detail. Interviews are better for comparing answers to specific questions (to determine, for example, whether the same answer pops up across people), or for exploring more controversial topics for which group discussion may prove uncomfortable.

Oftentimes, it is ideal to begin by conducting a focus group to design an interview protocol that ultimately leads to a survey. Conducting a focus group and then interviews allows you to revisit and refine your research questions to ensure you are gathering the data you need to inform your design. In addition, through interviews, you are able to determine whether the answer choices you expect to use in the survey emerge naturally through discussion.

Focus groups: potential benefits and drawbacks. The chart below provides more detail about the potential benefits and drawbacks of focus groups and interviews for this type of exploratory research:

	Potential Benefits	Potential Drawbacks
Focus groups	➢ Ideal for exploring a broad question about which you have limited information; groups are able to brainstorm more than individuals	➢ Social pressure may change results ➢ Participants may not feel comfortable discussing controversial topics in groups
Interviews	➢ Ideal for finding answers when you know what your specific questions are, but are not sure what answers will be ➢ Less likely to be influenced by social pressure ➢ Participants may feel more comfortable discussing sensitive topics	➢ May yield less information about exploratory questions because individuals cannot brainstorm as readily as groups ➢ Using standardized protocols, which are necessary to compare across responses, discourages probing into tangents.
Focus groups followed by interviews	➢ Findings from focus groups can be used to develop an interview protocol, which can then be used to design a survey	➢ Requires more time

Time: An additional consideration when planning whether to conduct focus groups, interviews, or both is time, as detailed in the matrix below.

Mode of Data Collection	# of Participants (Total)	Amount of Time per Question	# of Questions
Focus groups	4-8	7-10 minutes	Varies
Interviews	10 (1 at a time)	2-3 minutes	Varies

Consider who will participate in your focus group. In addition, before you can even begin considering questions for a focus group, it is critical to consider who will participate in the group. Who are the people who will be "users" of your design? Five typical sets of participants for a school design are:

- Students—the most common users to learn from
- Youth in other venues, where you might have access to youth with truancy problems, etc.
- Parents
- School staff (instructional, counseling/youth development, operational, etc.)
- Community members who employ youth or otherwise interact with them

Engaging these stakeholders in focus groups aligns with Carnegie design principle of positive youth development, which emphasizes the value of creating opportunities for student voice, encouraging family participation, and integrating community participation.

Consider how responses to your questions will likely vary across sub-groups. The second question to consider is whether there are particular sub-groups of interest. For instance, if you are considering how gender affects counseling relationships, you may want to have two single-gender focus groups of students. These considerations are explored further in the worksheets in the tools appendix.

Application to Example

To ensure students at their school are college and career-ready, the Lucretia Mott design team is investigating student experiences with the Carnegie design principles of positive youth development, especially caring, consistent student-adult relationships that communicate high expectations for student learning and behavior. At this point, they know that their group of interest is students and they want to better understand students' experiences with adults in their prior schools, including:

- The kinds of relationships students have had in their prior schools;
- Whether the relationships they have had at prior schools were caring, and how students feel they know that adults care about them;
- Whether the adults who they believe care about them also have high expectations for them;
- How students think about the relationship between adults who care about them and discipline.

While they have their own hypotheses about the answers to these questions, they are pretty uncertain about them and want to keep an open mind. Given this starting point, they decide to begin their research in the least-structured manner possible: the focus group.

2. Develop a Focus Group Protocol

Key Information

Protocols lay out the roadmap for your focus group. A focus group consists of about four to eight members of your group of interest, the people who will "use" what you are designing. They are brought together to discuss a series of questions you pose, and typically spend seven to ten minutes on each question. While focus groups are less structured than interviews or surveys, they still require significant planning to be successful. Your protocol—the script you use to structure your focus group—should include the following four elements, each of which is discussed in greater detail in the following section:

- A brief introduction;
- A review of ground rules/norms;
- A warm-up activity; and
- A series of questions.

Application to Example

The Lucretia Mott team's focus group will center on students' relationships with adults at their previous schools.

Introduction: Review the purpose, value, and details of your group. When the team develops an introduction for their focus group, They want to ensure participants feel comfortable speaking freely. They also want to make sure participants understand why their voice is valuable. With this in mind, their introduction needs to make clear:

- The purpose of the focus group;
- Who the design team is and why they care about the focus group's purpose;
- Why participation will prove beneficial to the school (and, ideally, to participants); and
- Whether participants' comments will be confidential and/or anonymous.

An example introduction appears below:

> Hi everyone, thank you for your time. We are working on designing a new school and we are trying to understand how middle school students think about their relationships with adults in their schools. We know that sometimes you have really great relationships with the adults in your school and sometimes you have really terrible relationships. We want to talk about all of those so that we can use what you know to help teachers and principals to support better relationships and help you succeed at school. You can speak freely, I will be audio recording only for my own records and all identifying information will be removed before I report what I find to your school or the larger district. No one else at your school will ever hear from me anything that you say today. We do that because we want you to be able to speak freely without worrying.

Ask Participants for Help!

One way to help students, in particular, understand the value of their participation the focus group is to ask them to be your partner in problem-solving. Phrases like "We need your help to figure this out" can help students see that their input is valuable and important.

Ground rules: Set norms for discussion. Before launching into the warm-up and focus group questions, you should review ground rules for the discussion. These ground rules tend to be fairly standard, but should be adjusted based on your knowledge of the group or the topic. Sample ground rules appear below:

- There are no bad ideas: share whatever you are thinking.
- Everyone gets a turn to speak.
- Silence is not a bad thing—it means people are taking time to think.
- Disagreement is how we discover the most interesting insights, but express your disagreement respectfully.

Warm-up: Create familiarity within the group. Warm-ups should be brief—no more than five to ten minutes—and allow participants to share their name and some thoughts on the focus group topic with the group. Oftentimes, it is beneficial to structure these activities as "think-pair-shares," in which participants take a moment to reflect, share their response with a partner, and then share with the whole group. Participants may feel more comfortable speaking to the whole group after sharing with a partner.

The question posed to the group should be easy to answer, yet reflective—designed to generate answers on the order of one or two sentences. Avoid questions that may feel judgmental and therefore discourage participants from sharing their opinions. An example warm-up activity appears below:

To get started today, I want everyone to start by thinking about the question: Who is the best teacher you ever had, and why? You might have a lot to say about "Why," but see if you can summarize the reason into one or two sentences. Once you've done that, turn to the person sitting next to you, and share your answers. Then, we'll come together as a full group and each person will quickly share their answer.

Questions: Progress through questions to prime reflection. When developing questions for your focus group, start by brainstorming all of the questions you might pose to the group. Then, narrow them down. Focus groups should last approximately 45 to 95 minutes, and you can expect the group to spend seven to ten minutes on each question that requires significant reflection. The goal of a focus group is to collect rich feedback and insight, so it is preferable to pose a few deep questions in the time available, rather than several shallow questions.

Once you have identified the questions you believe to be most critical, order the questions such that they progress from the least reflective (and controversial, if the topic is sensitive) to most reflective and/or controversial, then end with a less reflective question.

A sample series of focus group questions appears on the following page:

#	Mins	Question	Level of Reflection	Level of Controversy
1	3-5	Let's first make sure we're talking about the same thing. Tell me about the kind of adults that you interact with at school.	↓	↓
2	10	OK, so now that we have shared examples, let's identify the kind of person we are talking about. What, in your opinion, makes for a good relationship with these adults? You can	↑	←→

		tell me about a time that you had a great relationship with an adult, or just generally about what you liked.		
3	7-10	When you have a good relationship with an adult in a school, what do they do when someone is disrupting class or behaving poorly? What do you think they expect of you in terms of your school work or behavior?	↑	←→
4	10	Now, let's talk about the less good relationships you have had. What, in your opinion, makes for a bad relationship with these adults? You can tell me about a time that you had a bad relationship, or just generally about what you don't like.	↑	↑
5	7-10	When you have a bad relationship with an adult in a school, what do they do when someone is disrupting class or behaving poorly? What do you think they expect of you in terms of your school work or behavior?	↑	↑
6	10	If you could offer a piece of advice to an adult in your school about how to have a better relationship with students, what piece of advice would you offer?	↓	←→

The above questions began by asking a non-reflective question, in which students were asked to describe the adults they interact with at school (#1). They progressed to more reflective, but positive, questions about the characteristics of good relationships with adults (#2 and #3). Questions 4 and 5 delved into reflective, but potentially sensitive, questions about characteristics of negative relationships with adults. The final question demands that students do some reflection, but ends the focus group on a positive note.

3. Plan a Focus Group

Key Information

Carnegie design principles call for all elements of school design to be organized to maximize resources. Planning a focus group requires attention to logistics, from who will be invited to participate to where and when the focus group will take place. Most of these logistics are explored in the worksheet in the tools appendix.

Consider sub-groups when deciding how many focus groups to conduct. It will be helpful to you to hear from members of the different sub-groups of interest to your analysis. If possible, strive to conduct sufficient focus groups to allow you to hear from two to three people from each sub-group you believe will be relevant to your analysis.

Consider the implications of existing familiarity among participants. Note that, in considering who to invite to participate in a focus group, keep in mind whether participants know each other. If they do know each other, they will likely already have rapport—but they might also bring established power relationships or existing conflict into play. If they do not know each other, you may lose time while participants get used to speaking to and around each other. If time is of the essence for your focus groups, or, alternatively, you know that the participants you have in mind do not get along, take these considerations into account when considering who to invite to participate in your focus group.

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Consider having another person attend your focus group and take notes. Focus groups, unless you do more than one, do not typically require coding (which is the process of methodically examining the focus group transcript for themes and insights, described further in Module 4, Qualitative Data Analysis). Rather, it is best to have another person observe the focus group and also write up notes just after the group. You and your co-observer can then share notes and arrive at an agreement about the themes and ideas that were most salient.

4. Tips for Conducting Focus Groups

This tip sheet is a reference for conducting focus groups.

Open Participants' Minds

- Encourage participation through enthusiasm
  As participants respond to questions, especially questions that ask them to generate new ideas, such as advice, encourage them with phrases like "That's a great idea!" or "I'm going to pass that along." This enthusiasm encourages other participants to respond.

- Take care introducing ideas that don't emerge organically
  You will have particular interests and so will want to ask questions throughout the focus group to determine whether the responses you expected to hear line up with what participants actually think and feel. However, do not "plant" ideas that have not been introduced by the group. If there is something very specific that you really want to know, you can ask it at the very end but be careful that your question is very open, not leading. For example, a comment like, "Some students say they prefer teachers who are strict but caring. What do you think?" suggests to students they perhaps ought to endorse this opinion expressed by "other students." Instead, you should acknowledge the potential variability in responses by saying something like, "Some students say they prefer teachers who are strict but caring while other students prefer teachers who act like a friend, and are very approachable. What do you think?"

- With teens, avoid setting yourself up as the "cool facilitator"
  When facilitating a focus group with adolescent students, avoid the pitfall of trying to be the "cool facilitator." If students feel too comfortable, they may start revealing personal information in a group environment. Adopt a professional, friendly, and open demeanor, but maintain appropriate professional distance. Steer conversations away from personal disclosure, and allow students to joke around but do not participate or let it escalate. Let laughter die down and then refocus the conversation. This stance will allow students to find the appropriate level of disclosure and respect with each other. Treat the members of your focus group as respected colleagues and co-designers of your school.

Draw in Diverse Views

- Let participants talk to each other
  The richest dialogue will emerge from peer-to-peer discussion. Use prompts and questions to encourage participants to engage with each other, rather than with you, and to help draw out reactions and ideas. Such prompts might include: "You looked surprised when Joe said that, can you talk a little bit about why?" or "Answer Joe, not me."

- Create opportunities for reticent participants to speak

If some participants appear reluctant to share, create opportunities for them to speak without calling them out on their relative silence. Prompts like, "It looks like you've been thinking about what the group has been saying. What are your thoughts?" can help create space for quieter participants to share ideas.

- Ensure "talkers" do not take over the conversation
  In some cases, one or two participants may dominate the conversation, leaving little room for others to share opposing viewpoints. If you find that a person is talking too long, politely interject with a prompt like, "That's a really interesting point. I'm curious—what do other people in the group think?" Similarly, if you find that a participant routinely interrupts others, politely remind them of the ground rules with a comment like, "I want to make sure that everyone has a chance to speak, so let's hold off and let John finish."

- Create room for variation or disagreement
  Create room for other participants to express disagreement or different perspectives by asking questions like, "Does everyone agree with this?" or "Does anyone have a different take?"

Focus and Find Connections

- Re-route tangents
  If discussion gets caught up in a digression—this can often happen during discussions of emotionally-charged topics—bring participants back to the topic at hand either through relating their discussion back to the topic, or asking that they leave the discussion behind. For example, if students start to talk about negative experiences with a specific teacher, draw on their statements to redirect with a comment like, "So, I want to stay away from getting caught up talking about one specific person. But I'm hearing that the things you all are reacting to included unfair suspensions and yelling in class. Is that right? What are some other experiences you have had with discipline in school?"

  Similarly, if the conversation has drifted completely off-topic, use a verbal reminder to bring people back to the topic at hand, such as, "I want to bring us back to the topic—we were talking about experiences with adults at school. Who can tell me about a positive relationship they had at school?"

- Ask clarifying questions
  When someone shares a complex idea, confirm your understanding by paraphrasing what he or she shared with a phrase like, "So, if I'm understanding you correctly, you're saying that…" Similarly, oftentimes participants offer a single comment that suggests they have insight into the topic, but hesitate to offer more explanation (for example, "Well, I only like certain teachers who are respectful."). In these instances, it is helpful to push people to elaborate on their own ideas, whether through simple prompts ("Say more about that…") or explicitly asking for more information ("I'm going to push on that a little. Could you tell me more about why you think that?" "Can you give me a specific example?").

- Ask probing questions, but also note where the conversation naturally flows
  You will likely have ideas about how participants will respond to certain questions. For example, for the question, When you have a good relationship with an adult in a school, what do they do when someone is disrupting class or behaving poorly? you might expect to hear about a few different profiles: strict but caring teachers with high expectations, lenient teachers, teachers who feel like a "friend," etc.

  As stated above, while you should not plant ideas before they have been introduced by participants, you can

emphasize them afterward. As participants respond to the question, ask probing questions to determine whether the answers you expected align to what participants actually think and feel. For example, if a student describes a teacher who pushes students to do their best but also does not make exceptions for anyone, you might ask: "So, would you describe her as strict but caring? Or another way?" If you find that participants do not arrive at the answers you expect when you pose a broad question unless you pose probing questions, take note of this. This response pattern suggests that participants have different gut reactions or thoughts than you anticipated.

- Take visual notes
  As people respond to questions, take visible notes on chart paper or a whiteboard. (If you use a white board, make sure you take a picture before it is erased.) Visible note-taking provides a record of the conversation you can use as a reference during data analysis. It also demonstrates that you are actively listening to participants' comments and often enables you to avoid repetition or digressions. As you take notes, highlight connections among ideas visually; use colors or lines to connect related ideas.

5. Prepare for Data Analysis

Key Information

Mechanisms for data collection: recording, note-taking, and reflection. As described in our guide on data analysis, when analyzing data from focus groups, the tool for analysis is really the researcher's brain. With this in mind, you need not arrange for a full transcription of a focus group, but it is ideal to:

- Video- or audio-record the focus group;
- If recording is not feasible, arrange for a very fast typist to attempt to keep a running transcript of participants' ideas;
- Keep the chart paper/whiteboard notes generated during the session;
- After the session, immediately write down all of your thoughts and recollections about the session.

The matrix below lays out the options for collecting data from the focus group (with the assumption that, for every mode of data collection, you will also write up your thoughts and recollections immediately after the focus group):

Mode of Data Collection	# of people required	Other people able to review easily?	Time for review
Chart paper	1	No	Approximately half the length of focus group
Written transcript	2 (1 facilitator, 1 recorder)	Yes, but harder to grasp context and tone from transcript	Approximately equivalent to length of focus group
Video or audio	1 with time to set up	Yes	Approximately twice the length of the focus group

Interviews

6. Develop an Interview Protocol

Key Information

Conduct interviews to develop surveys, add detail, or investigate surprises. Interviews are more structured than focus groups, which are useful for gathering broad insights. They are less structured than surveys, which require that you have a clear sense of the information you are seeking and the options to consider. When you conduct an interview, you know what your questions are, but you are not sure what the answers will be. There are three general reasons you might conduct interviews in your research:

1. To develop a survey: In this case, the goal of interviews is to ensure that language used in questions is clear, and that expected answer choices emerge naturally from conversation. See the survey design module for a particular interview type called a coglab, which is utilized only to test the language of your survey. Here we describe a more exploratory process.

2. To add qualitative detail to survey findings: After administering a survey, you may find that there are certain responses for which you would like to gather deeper data. In these cases, interview questions might look like, "I see that you said that you could not think of any adult with whom you had a positive relationship at your old school. Could you tell me more about that?"

3. To investigate surprising survey findings: After analyzing your survey data, you may find a surprising result and want to figure out what happened. In this case, you will interview survey respondents who represent different perspectives and ask them about their responses.

This guide was developed with the assumption that your interviews will be used to develop and finalize a survey. Regardless of the goal of your interviews, interviews should be standardized. If you were conducting a research study, each interview would be administered in the same way so that responses could be compared across interviews. Since you are using interviews for design purposes, you may inject some variation into the questions as they are administered. Nonetheless, you want to minimize variation to arrive at the most meaningful results.

Introduction: Make participants feel comfortable and heard. The introduction for an interview should set up participants to feel comfortable sharing their honest thoughts with you, and to understand why their voice is valuable. Refer to the section on focus groups for more detail on the introduction.

Questions: Progress through targeted questions to prime reflection. Like focus group protocols, interview protocols include a series of questions progressing from least reflective and/or sensitive to most reflective and/or sensitive, ending with a less reflective and less controversial question. Based on your knowledge of the topic or what you learned during focus groups, interview questions should be more targeted and include more follow-up questions than the questions developed for a focus group.

When developing questions for your interview, start by looking at the questions you used for the focus group (or, if you did not conduct a group, start by brainstorming all of the questions you might have for a student on this topic and narrowing them down as described in Section 2). Based on what you learned from the focus group or what you already

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know about the group of interest, extrapolate on these questions to include both more targeted questions and specific follow-up questions.

Bear in mind that, for each interview, your introduction will probably take around two minutes, and each question will likely demand around three minutes. You should tailor the number of questions in the interview to the length of time available to speak with your respondents.

Application to Example

The interviews conducted by the design team will also center on students' relationships with adults at previous schools. They expect the interviews will help them develop a focused survey they can use with a larger sample. Their protocol takes the focus group questions developed in Section 3 and creates more targeted questions by asking students for examples or description to support a broader answer (see questions 3-5 and 7-9 below). They also ask students to compare their experiences across teachers.

1. Who are the adults that you interact with at school? Which adults do you interact with the most?

2. What, in your opinion, generally makes for a good relationship with the adults at school?

3. Think of an adult at school with whom you have a really great relationship. Tell me about that relationship
    a. What made the relationship so positive?
    b. Can you think of a specific time when [Adult] showed you [he/she] cared about you?

4. When you have a good relationship with an adult in a school, what do they do when students disrupt class or behave poorly?
    a. Can you think of a few examples of this type of response?
    b. Do they tend to be more or less strict than other teachers?

5. When you have a good relationship with an adult in a school, what do you think they expect from you in terms of your school work or behavior?
    a. How do you know that this is what they expect of you?
    b. Do you think they expect more or less of you than other teachers?

6. Now, let's talk about less positive relationships with adults at school. What, in your opinion, generally makes for a bad relationship with these adults?

7. Think of an adult at school with whom you did not have a very good relationship. Tell me about that relationship.
    a.   What made the relationship so negative?
    b. Can you think of a specific time where you and [Adult] had a conflict or other negative experience?

8. When you have a bad relationship with an adult in a school, what do they do when students disrupt class or behave poorly?
    a. Can you think of a few examples of this type of response?
    b. Do they tend to be more or less strict than other teachers?

9. When you have a bad relationship with an adult in a school, what do you think they expect from you in terms of your school work or behavior?
   a. How do you know that is what they expect of you?
   b. Do you think they expect more or less of you than other teachers?

10. If you could offer a piece of advice to an adult in your school about how to have a better relationship with students, what piece of advice would you offer?

7. Plan Interviews

Key Information

Plan carefully. Interviews are a tradeoff in terms of time: you can get through more questions in less time, because you are interviewing only one person, but you also have to do the same interview multiple times. By carefully planning interviews, your work aligns with Carnegie design principles of ensuring all elements of school design are organized to maximize resources.

Consider how responses will likely vary across sub-groups. As you did for focus groups, as you decide whom to invite to participate in interviews, consider whether the various sub-groups who will ultimately be of interest to your analysis are represented in the interview sample. Sub-group analysis can ultimately help you personalize student learning experiences at your school. When you think about the range of responses you expect to receive in your interviews, what factors or characteristics do you think will predict differences in answers? Have you invited students who represent those different factors or characteristics?

These considerations are explored in greater depth in the tools appendix.

8. Tips for Conducting Interviews

This tip sheet is a reference for conducting interviews.

Hew closely to the interview protocol.

> To compare interview responses, it is important that the same questions be asked from interview to interview. As such, you should closely follow the interview protocol. However, as described below, you can ask clarifying and probing questions to encourage participants to provide detailed answers.

Ask clarifying questions.

> If you find the ideas expressed by someone in the course of an interview confusing, confirm your understanding by paraphrasing what they shared with a phrase like, "So, if I'm understanding you correctly, you're saying that…"

Similarly, oftentimes, participants may offer a single comment that suggests they have insight into the question, but hesitate to offer more explanation (for example, "Well, I only like certain teachers who are respectful."). In these

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instances, it is helpful to push people to elaborate on their own ideas, whether through simple prompts ("Say more about that…") or explicitly asking for more information ("I'm going to push on that a little. Could you tell me more about why you think that?").

9. Prepare for Data Analysis

Key Information

Mechanisms for data collection: recording, transcription, and note-taking. Ideally, when conducting interviews, you will have the capacity audio-record interviews and arrange for recordings to be transcribed. This allows you to focus on asking questions during the interview, and to have access to an accurate record of the conversation for analysis.

If time or cost prevents transcription, the next best option would be to arrange for a very fast typist to sit in on and prepare a typewritten transcript of the conversation as it occurs. Some accuracy is lost here, but this approach saves time and oftentimes money.

Other, much less preferable options are to type notes yourself during the interview or to write up your recollections of responses after.