Interview-Based Research

Standard

Research activities that involve direct interaction to obtain opinions, experiences, or narratives—such as one-on-one interviews, group interviews or focus groups, ethnographic interviews, participant observation involving interviews, and mixed-methods protocols—fall under IRB jurisdiction when they involve human subjects as defined by the Common Rule. Flexibility is appropriate for qualitative designs (for example, when instruments evolve over time), but participant rights, informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, and risk minimization must remain paramount.

Procedures

Defining and Preparing for Interview-Based Research

An interview is a research activity in which a researcher directly interacts with a participant to gather information, perspectives, or experiences. Interviews may be conducted with individuals or small groups and can range from informal conversations to structured, pre-planned sessions.

Although the researcher will typically know the participant's identity, data collected during interviews can often be de-identified during analysis to reduce risk to participants. The level of identifiability and sensitivity should be considered early in study design, as these factors affect consent requirements and IRB review categories.

When preparing your IRB application, please be ready to explain the following:

- Where will the interviews take place? Will the setting allow for adequate privacy?
- Is the interview unstructured, semi-structured, structured, or a mix of approaches?
- How will you obtain consent? Will you use a written consent form, an oral consent script, or a study information sheet?
- How long will each interview last? Will participants take part in more than one session?
- What are the questions (and potential prompts) you plan to ask? Are any of them potentially sensitive?
- How will you respond if a participant becomes uncomfortable or discloses something unexpected, such as illegal activity?
- Will you conduct interviews in a language other than English? If so, do you speak that language, or will an interpreter be involved?

Not every question listed above will apply to every interview. However, all investigators are expected to demonstrate thoughtful planning around the interview process. It is important to consider not only the

questions you intend to ask, but also how the setting, participant population, and consent approach will affect risk, comfort, and data quality.

For example, if your interview involves sensitive topics or vulnerable populations, a private and quiet setting may be necessary. On the other hand, some interviews may take place in public or semi-public spaces and still qualify as minimal risk. Whether the interview qualifies for exempt review or requires expedited or full board review depends on these factors, as well as whether identifiable information is collected or recorded.

Your IRB submission should clearly outline the nature and type of interview, the consent process you will use, and any privacy or confidentiality protections you plan to put in place.

Types of Interview Research and Planning Considerations

Casual Interviews

Casual interviews involve short, informal conversations with individuals who are approached in a public or semi-public setting. They can be impromptu, e.g. polling. These interviews typically do not involve collecting identifiable information and are often used for exploratory or low-risk projects.

If you are conducting a casual interview, you must clearly identify yourself as a Longwood researcher and explain the purpose of the conversation. For example, you might say, “Hello, my name is [Your Name], and I’m a [student] researcher from Longwood University. I’m asking people a few brief questions about [topic] for my [class]. Would you be willing to participate?”

Casual interviews may qualify for exempt review when:

- No identifiers are collected;
- The questions involve minimal risk;
- No audio, video, or photographic recording is used.

If any of the following occur, the interview is no longer considered casual, and you should pause the interaction and transition to a more formal process with appropriate consent and documentation:

- You begin collecting identifying information;
- You plan to record the conversation using audio, video, or photography;
- The topics shift to sensitive or higher-risk content, such as illegal behavior or personal experiences that could place the participant at risk if disclosed.

In these cases, you must follow the procedures for formal interviews, including the appropriate consent process. Please also note that it is not appropriate to approach minors in casual interviews unless prior parental consent has been obtained.

Formal Interviews

Formal interviews are planned, often scheduled in advance, and may take place in private or semi-private settings. These interviews typically involve more detailed questions and may include the collection of identifiable information. Note that audio and/or video recordings are considered identifiable information. These interviews may be unstructured, semi-structured, and/or structured. If the interview will involve sensitive topics, vulnerable populations, or the use of recording devices, additional protections must be in place.

In formal interview studies, informed consent is required. This may take the form of a signed consent form or a documented oral consent process, depending on the nature of the study and the level of risk. The IRB must approve the consent process in advance.

If you plan to use audio, video, or other recording tools, you must:

- Describe this in your IRB application. Include the digital platform(s) you will use to record the interview;
- Describe how you will transcribe the interview in your IRB application, and include the digital platform(s) you will use to transcribe the interview (if applicable);
- Clearly explain the purpose of recording in your consent materials;
- Obtain the participant's permission before recording;
- Describe how recordings will be secured, de-identified, and destroyed (if applicable).

If your interview may involve topics such as illegal behavior or experiences that place participants at legal or reputational risk, your protocol must include a plan for how you will respond. If you do not have a Certificate of Confidentiality and your study does not involve that type of data, you should be prepared to redirect or end the interview if such topics arise unexpectedly.

Types of Interviews

Researchers conducting interview-based studies should describe the interview format they plan to use and attach supporting materials as part of their IRB application. This section outlines the most common interview formats and what should be submitted with each.

Unstructured Interviews

Unstructured interviews rely on open-ended conversation without a fixed set of questions. These are often used in exploratory or ethnographic research, where the participant's narrative guides the flow of the conversation.

- What to submit: Describe the overall topic or area of interest and include examples of the types of themes or questions you might explore. Note how you will guide the conversation while respecting participant comfort and boundaries.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews use a flexible question guide. The researcher prepares a list of open-ended questions in advance but may ask follow-up questions or prompts depending on what the participant shares.

- What to submit: Attach the interview guide, including both core questions and example follow-up prompts. Indicate which questions are essential and which may be adapted or omitted depending on the flow of the conversation.

Structured Interviews

Structured interviews follow a set list of questions asked in the same order for every participant. This format allows for consistency across interviews and is common in studies seeking to compare responses.

- What to submit: Provide the complete list of questions. If responses will be coded or quantified, describe your coding process or scoring approach briefly in the protocol or the attached list of questions.

Evolving Interview Structures in Longitudinal or Iterative Research

In some qualitative studies, the structure of the interview may change as data collection progresses. For example, early interviews may be unstructured or exploratory, while later interviews may become more semi-structured as themes emerge.

If you anticipate adjusting your interview format over time, include the following in your protocol:

- A description of how the structure may shift (e.g., starting open-ended, then refining to key questions);
- The rationale for this progression;
- A commitment to submit significant changes (amendments) to the IRB for review if new topics introduce additional risks or require updated consent materials.

This flexibility is appropriate for many qualitative designs but must be planned thoughtfully and explained clearly in your submission.

Focus Groups and Group Interviews

Focus groups and group interviews involve multiple participants and are typically used to gather perspectives on a shared topic. These sessions are inherently less private than individual interviews, so researchers should be thoughtful about participant comfort and data confidentiality.

Participants in a focus group or group interview must be informed, as part of the consent process, that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Other group members may hear and share what is said, even if asked not to.

If you plan to use audio, video, or other recording tool to record a focus group or group interview, you must:

- Describe this in your IRB application. Include the digital platform(s) you will use to record the focus group or group interview;
- Describe how you will transcribe the focus group or group interview in your IRB application, and include the digital platform(s) you will use to transcribe the interview (if applicable);
- Clearly explain the purpose of recording in your consent materials;
- An explanation of how you will handle participant withdrawal from the recording;
- Describe how recordings will be secured, de-identified, and destroyed (if applicable).

Field notes may be a preferred alternative to recording in some cases. Your IRB submission should explain your decision and outline steps taken to minimize risk.

Interviews Using Digital Platforms

Remote interviews conducted by video or phone follow the same ethical and procedural standards as in-person interviews. If you are using a digital platform such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or another platform, you are expected to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the conversation.

Consider the following:

- Use the platform's built-in security tools, such as meeting passwords or waiting rooms;
- State in your consent materials which platform you will use and how the interview will be transcribed;
- Ensure participants know whether the session is being recorded and how the recording will be used and protected.
- Describe how recordings will be secured, de-identified, and destroyed (if applicable).

Consent Procedures for Interview-Based and Qualitative Research

At Longwood, we expect researchers to obtain and document informed consent in all human subjects research, including projects that qualify for exempt review. For interview-based and qualitative studies, consent may be obtained in different ways depending on the nature of the study, the level of risk, and the needs of the participant population. All consent procedures must be described in the protocol and approved by the IRB before recruitment begins.

Oral or Verbal Consent

In some cases, a conversation between the researcher and participant is the most appropriate way to provide study information and obtain informed consent. This may apply when the study involves minimal risk, when literacy or cultural factors make written consent inappropriate, or when the research is conducted remotely.

The terms *oral consent* and *verbal consent* are used interchangeably. Regardless of the setting, the consent conversation must include all required elements of informed consent, such as:

- The purpose of the study;
- What participation involves, e.g. recording;
- Any potential risks or discomforts;
- How confidentiality will be maintained;
- How the interview will be transcribed;
- That participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time.

If you plan to use an oral or verbal consent process, describe this approach in your protocol and provide a rationale. ***You must also include a script or outline to ensure consistency in what participants are told.***

If your study is eligible for exempt review, the IRB may determine that a consent discussion, rather than a signed form, is sufficient. If your study is approved under expedited review, the IRB may waive the signature requirement if there is a strong justification. If your study involves more than minimal risk and is reviewed by the full board, a signed consent form will typically be required.

Consent Using a Study Information Sheet (No Signature)

This method provides participants with a written summary of the study, called a *Study Information Sheet*, but does not ask them to sign it. After reviewing the sheet, the researcher discusses the study with the participant, answers any questions, and asks whether the individual is willing to participate.

If the participant agrees, the researcher should document their verbal agreement either in their research notes or as part of a recording, depending on the study's privacy plan. Only the participant's subject number or pseudonym should be recorded in association with the consent unless the IRB has approved a different approach.

This method is commonly used for low-risk studies where obtaining a signature may not be necessary or culturally appropriate. If you plan to use this option, be sure to include it in your protocol and explain why it is appropriate for your participant population.

Fully Oral Consent (No Written Materials Provided)

In some cases, the researcher does not provide a written information sheet but instead communicates all required consent elements verbally. This approach may be used when participants are not expected to have access to email or printed materials, or when the study takes place entirely over the phone.

As with the other options, you must ensure that all elements of informed consent are communicated clearly and that participants are given an opportunity to ask questions. If the participant agrees to take part, their verbal consent should be documented in your notes or through a recording. Again, record only the participant's study ID or pseudonym unless your protocol specifies otherwise.

To support this process, the IRB provides sample oral consent scripts. If you choose this method, explain your rationale and include your script or talking points in the protocol.

Using Multiple Consent Methods

Depending on the structure of your project, you may need to use more than one type of consent process. For example, you might use written consent for in-person interviews and oral consent for remote sessions. If this is the case, be sure to clearly describe the different methods in your protocol and identify which one applies to each group of participants.

Consent for Recording

If you plan to record interviews using audio, video, or photography, this must be disclosed during the consent process—whether written or verbal. In your consent form or script, include:

- A statement that a recording device will be used;
- How long the recordings will be kept;
- Whether and how the recordings will be transcribed;
- Who will have access to the recordings;
- How the recordings will be secured, de-identified, and destroyed .

If a participant withdraws from the study, the recording should be deleted unless otherwise agreed upon. If you intend to use recordings for purposes beyond the research project (such as teaching or public presentation), you may need to use a ***Materials Release Form*** in addition to your standard consent process. See the IRB's Documents and Templates page for a template of this form. Refer to the ***Standards & Procedures for Use of Photography, Audio, and Video in Research*** for more detailed requirements.

Document Attributes

Last approved by IRB: 4/26