**HOW TO CONDUCT EMAIL INTERVIEWS**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

 Usually, researchers conduct interviews in person, over telephone, or over video-conference, such as Skype. Occasionally, however, researchers conduct interviews over email. Specifically, they might send each participant a series of 2 to 10 emails. During the first few emails, they might establish rapport and clarify the procedures. During the next few emails, they might ask questions or clarify answers before thanking participants. This document presents the benefits and drawbacks of email interviews—together with some practices you could apply to conduct email interviews most effectively.

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| **Benefits and drawbacks of email interviews** |

 The following table summarizes the benefits of drawbacks of email interviews. In general, as these considerations imply, whenever researchers are more interested in tangible information than subtle insights, email interviews are especially suitable. Likewise, email interviews might complement other interview formats.

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|  Benefits of email interviews | Drawbacks of email interviews |
| **Accessibility.** You can interview people who are too hard to contact at the same time—such as people in remote communities with unreliable internet access or people who often experience illness or communication problems.  | **Restricted to email users**. Some people are unable to utilize email; for example, they might not be able to access internet |
| **Costs and efficiency.** Email interviews reduces the cost of transcription and travel. The answers also tend to be more efficient rather than verbose.  | **Absence of social cues**. Without facial expressions, gestures, intonation, and other nonverbal cues, the questions of researchers and the answers of respondents might be ambiguous.  |
| **Personal comfort**. Some people might prefer to share private information over emails—because they feel more anonymous and can contemplate their answers carefully.  | **Delayed responses**. Because responses may be delayed, researchers cannot ascertain how people felt at a specific time very accurately |
| **Reflection**. The respondents may contemplate their answers carefully; and researchers can ask subsequent questions after careful thought as well.  | **Uncontrolled environment**. People may respond to email questions in distracting environments.  |
|   | **Limited rapport**. Over email, researchers cannot readily develop a rapport with their respondents. Without this rapport, respondents might not be as willing to answer very personal questions.  |

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| **Strategies to apply** |

 In general, the practices you need to apply to conduct email interviews are the same as the practices you need to apply to conduct other interviews. For example, you need to

* construct the plain language statement
* draft the initial set of questions
* decide how to recruit potential respondents

For example, you might construct a website that outlines the research. Participants could thus visit this website to understand your research better. You could then email relevant individuals or utilize social media and snowballing to recruit other respondents. However, the following table offers some insights on practices that are more specific to email interviews. The first column outlines these recommendations. The second column justifies or clarifies these recommendations.

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|  Outline of helpful practices | Justifications or details |
| Invitations |   |
| During the first email, indicate that you want to interview people over email. Then* specify the purpose of your research
* indicate why this research is important to you—including some of the challenges you are experiencing
* ask the person whether they are interested in an interview and whether they would like more information
 | The aim of these emails is partly to foster rapport. So, * answer their questions amicably
* perhaps highlight similarities between yourself and the potential respondents
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| Before you ask questions, offer an alternative avenue.  | In one of the earlier emails, you could write “Would prefer to speak in person, over the phone, or over the internet?” |
| Specify when you need the emails to be answered (Meho, 2006). Furthermore, Indicate the number of emails participants are likely to receive (Meho, 2006) | You could write * “If possible, we would like you to answer the first email within a week”.
* “After you respond to these questions, we might send between 2 and 5 additional emails, containing some clarifications or extra questions”.
* “You are welcome to withdraw from these email interviews at any time”.
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| Questions |   |
| After these initial emails—and once you have developed some rapport—send an email that includes the key questions you want to ask. Do not include too many questions | Embed the questions within the email rather than attach the questions in a document (see Dommeyer & Moriarty, 2000) |
| Begin with questions that are likely to be simple but broad, such as “Can you describe a time in which you…” | Once participants begin to respond, they are likely to answer other questions as well.  |
| After they respond, you might send another email of questions that are designed to clarify their answers, to demonstrate your understanding, or to explore other matters | Ensure the questions seem as enticing as possible. You could even highlight your fascination, with comments like “That’s really intriguing. Could you tell me more about how…”  |
| During one of these emails, clarify their demographics  | You could ask participants to indicate their age, education, and ethnicity if relevant to the study. Include these questions as soon as you have developed trust—and thus before participants might withdraw.  |
| End |   |
| After you feel you have sent enough emails, you should end the interviews and thank the participants  | You could write * “Thank you so much for your insights”
* “Let us know whether you would like a summary of your results and a summary of the overall results”.
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