



Qualitative E-Interview Tips

Informed Consent in E-Interview Research

What is informed consent?

Informed consent is the term given to the agreement between researcher and participant. Any interaction between researchers and participants that yields data, whether structured and formal or unstructured and conversational, should be preceded by a discussion of the research and expectations, and a signed letter of consent. All interview research and most observation



studies need to follow these protocols. Some online observations that do not collect personally-identifiable data may be able to proceed with permission of the site or online community manager. Exceptions for special cases aside, most ethical research practice points to the need for participants' informed consent.

Researchers seeking informed consent need to make clear to their participants what material they will collect and how material about them and/or from them will be used. The specific uses of material include the types of quotations or paraphrases might be drawn from the interview, as well as the kinds of publications or presentations the researcher intends to develop. Additionally, how participants' identities will be protected is a critical part of information they need to understand before signing an agreement.

The United States Code of Federal Regulations (e-CFR, 2008) mandates that researchers obtain informed consent to do the following:

- ◆ Protect human subjects/volunteers;
- ◆ Ensure that potential study subjects clearly understand the benefits and risks associated with their participation in a study; and
- ◆ Provide the potential study subjects with all information needed to reach a decision on whether or not to participate in a research study.

What should be included in the consent agreement?

Information on contents for the typical consent agreement contents is widely available. Online researchers may need to consider additional points in terms of the kinds of data to be collected from participants. If the research includes some kind of observation in addition to the interview, the researcher may want to spell out the kinds of data that can be collected for the study.



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When a researcher conducts an interview in a physical setting, some level of observation occurs. Would, for example, the researcher make note of the pictures on the participant's desk, books on the shelf, magazines on the coffee table? Such common objects may convey information about family or sexual orientation, hobbies or social memberships that may or may not be relevant to the study. If such observations were noted, would the researcher ask for the participant's agreement to use that information as data?

This question is even more intriguing online, since an individual may have a wide range of personal information in a profile, or in pages posted in social media sites. While information on a website or blog that is accessible without registration or membership may be considered public, the situation is less obvious in regard to information posted on social media sites or online communities where registration or membership *is* required. To err on the side of ethical research behavior, participants can be given the option to allow or disallow information from online profiles or social media pages to be used as data.

How can consent be obtained online?

When interviews are conducted online, researchers may look for alternatives to the paper and pen form of agreement. In the CITI module used to train US researchers in Internet research ethics protocols, the click-if-you-agree type of online form is noted as an acceptable approach (Hicks, 2011). Participants can be asked to indicate agreement with a check box ("I accept") in an e-mail returned online to the researcher or on a Web form posted on a research forum or site (Markham, Buchanan, & Committee, 2011). Naturally, some regulatory bodies or institutions may have their own requirements for a hard signature.

If an electronic form will work in your circumstances, one way of accomplishing it is by using an electronic survey tool such as SurveyMonkey. This informed consent [example](http://svy.mk/QgKfky) (see <http://svy.mk/QgKfky>) covers the main requirements of an informed consent agreement and can be adapted for your use. You can also provide the consent form as an e-mail attachment or download. Depending on institutional or other requirements, it may be necessary for the signed form is returned via surface mail, faxed to the researcher, or signed digitally and returned electronically.

Hicks, L. (2011). Internet research *Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative*. Miami: University of Miami.

Markham, A., Buchanan, E., and the AoIR Ethics Working Committee. Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: 2011.

Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee. (DRAFT Document). Available <http://aoirethics.iijre.net/>



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General Resources about Informed Consent

- Association of Internet Researchers: [Ethical decision-making and Internet research](#)
- [Generic Sample Informed Consent Form](#)
- "Informed Consent in Social Research: A Literature Review" by Rose Wiles, Sue Heath, Graham Crow & Vikki Charles <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/85/1/MethodsReviewPaperNCRM-001.pdf>
- "Informed consent in research based on primary data collection"
<http://www.port.ac.uk/departments/faculties/portsmouthbusinessschool/research/pbsethics/fitodownload,93117,en.pdf>
- [Policy & Guidance - U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#) and [Checklist](#)
- World Health Organization: [General Templates](#) and [Form For Research with Children](#)



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