1. **Should I conduct one or more interviews as part of my research?**

   Well, the answer to this question depends on a number of factors. Interviews tend to be good research tools in community-based research because they provide in-depth information from stakeholders. They can be used to shape the scope of your project, to assess the root causes of a community problem, or to determine how well an organization or agency is meeting its consumers’ needs, among many possible purposes.

   It is easier to consider why you would NOT want to interview people. If you want to get a lot of data, particularly quantitative data, from or about a large group of people, a survey might be a more effective tool. If you want to gather very sensitive information from people who might not want to be identified, a survey might also be preferable to an interview, even if your information would be more in-depth if you conducted an interview. If you want to get people to talk to one another about a topic to gather information from a particular group, and raise consciousness at the same time, a focus group or learning circle might work best.

   In addition, considering the group from whom you are trying to gather information is important. What are the group’s cultural norms? What are its customs? In what types of settings might its members be most comfortable? What is your relationship to its members; i.e., how comfortable might they feel talking one-on-one versus in a group? For example, if you are working with a group that is not typically comfortable in one-on-one situations but tends to solve problems collectively, for cultural reasons or because of differing power dynamics, a survey or focus group might work best.

   **NOTE:** IRB proposals require a clear methodology section that explains what methods you are using and why. If your study falls under the community-based research IRB that is coordinated by the Office of Community Engagement, you will want to make sure your methodology fits the guidelines of the IRB—that it will include fewer than 100 subjects and will not include any members of vulnerable populations, for instance.

2. **How do I figure out who should be interviewed?**

   Again, this depends. What are you trying to find out, and who might have that information? Do you want to interview people with a particular characteristic in order to determine how a problem affects them or how they respond to an idea you have? Do you want to interview people who belong to, work for or are served by a particular agency or group in order to better assess their needs or how well the agency is working? Do you need information from a particular type of person or agency? You will need to do some background research in order to put together a comprehensive list of whom you want to contact and how to best contact them. Often this requires background research about the social issue at the heart of the study and the community in which you are conducting the study. Sometimes web research...
(identifying relevant listserves, etc) is necessary. Sometimes, finding interviewees may even involve word of mouth.

**NOTE:** IRB proposals require a list of interviewees or the types of people to be interviewed and how you will find them. If your IRB study falls under the community-based research IRB that is coordinated by the Office of Community Engagement, you will want to make sure you are using passive recruitment methods—i.e., that nothing you do to gather a list of potential interviewees could be considered coercion.

3. **When and how do I create a consent form for the interview?**

   Like your list of interviewees and your methodology, you will need to submit a consent form with your IRB proposal. If your study falls under the community-based research IRB that is coordinated by the Office of Community Engagement, you are permitted to make changes to the consent form as long as the spirit of the form’s guidelines are clear.

   Your consent form must include the following information:
   --The IRB number under which the consent form falls.
   --An introductory section that accurately and concisely explains your research question or purpose and the procedures you are using to gather your information.
   --A section that explains how you will attempt to maintain confidentiality (or why you cannot), and any other aspects of the study that fall under the “respect for persons” principle in the Belmont Report. Be clear about how signed consent forms will be kept separate from the actual data, how data will be collected (whether you will be tape recording, taking notes, etc), how notes and tapes will be protected from being viewed/heard by those not involved in the study, and how the final report or presentation will protect identities.
   --A section addressing risks and benefits of the study, and any information that falls under the “beneficence” principle in the Belmont Report.
   --How subjects for the study were chosen, and why (this covers the “justice” principle in the Belmont Report and can be addressed in the introductory/background section).
   --The voluntary nature of the study (part of “respect for persons”). Be sure to clearly state that people are free to choose not to participate and to end their participation at any time. Also, make sure it is clear that there will be no negative repercussions if the person leaves or chooses not to participate in the study.
   --A contacts and questions section that includes both the person conducting the interview, the principal investigator on the study, and the U of M IRB contact information.
   --A statement of consent indicating that the research subject has read the document and understands it.
   --A signature line, or, if for some reason signed consent forms will be problematic, a clear statement like “when you begin the interview, you are consenting to the guidelines included here.”
4. **How do I contact people to request an interview?**

   For most research studies, you must employ passive methods. You can contact people via e-mail, and make follow-up phone calls, but you cannot pressure them to participate. I.e., you would not be permitted to talk with someone about your hope that s/he will participate in your study if you run into them at the grocery store (unless they bring it up), though if you are making a call that is expressly for the purpose of recruitment, this is acceptable. Even presenting the research study in person to a group of people could be considered coercive because you are present and those present may feel guilty for not helping you with your study.

   A recruitment e-mail should include your name and the purpose of your contact in the first paragraph. You should describe the purpose of the study and explain exactly what the subject will do if s/he consents to be a part of it. Be very clear about what kinds of questions you will ask and how long the interview is likely to take. Ask the interviewee to contact you if s/he is interested.

5. **How do I schedule and confirm an interview?**

   Once someone responds to your request for an interview, you should send, in writing, a confirmation of the date, time, and place. Ask the interviewee where s/he would like to be interviewed, keeping in mind that the space must be quiet and private, in most cases.

6. **What should I bring, and what should I wear, and how else should I prepare?**

   Get to the location five minutes early (at least). Wear what you think others in the setting will be wearing or what you think will make the interviewee most comfortable. Bring a tape recorder, a tape labeled with the date and time of the interview and the person being interviewed, extra batteries for the recorder, at least two writing utensils, a notebook, two copies of the interview questions, and two copies of the consent form (one to leave with the research subject and one for you to take home). Test the tape recorder and tape in advance.

7. **What do I say or do before asking questions?**

   Greet the interviewee in a culturally appropriate way. Remind him or her of the purpose of the study and the interview. Give him or her the consent form to read, and explain, in your own words, each section of the form. Once the interviewee has read it, ask if he or she has any questions and is willing to sign. Be sure both copies are signed and that you leave with one of the copies. If the interviewee asks for a copy of the questions, provide them.

   **NOTE:** You must submit interview questions to the IRB with your proposal, but you can revise them and ask follow-up questions as long as you stay close to the intent of the study. In the case of the community-based research IRB that is coordinated by the Office of Community Engagement, you are required to submit your questions to your professor and the PI before conducting your interviews.
8. **How many questions should I ask?**

This depends. Generally, interviews of 30 minutes include five questions, and interviews of one hour include about 10 questions. However, how long an interview will take will depend a great deal on how the questions are worded and the interviewee’s responses to the questions. It is important to be sure you are realistic about how long the interview will take and that your number of questions coincides with the length of time you requested for the appointment.

9. **What kinds of questions should I ask, and how should I word them?**

Be sure to ask **demographic questions**—i.e., to understand the role of the person you are interviewing in the social issue or question you are asking. If you leave an interview with a great deal of information about a person’s opinions on an agency’s work but aren’t clear about how that person was served by the agency, or what his/her relationship to the agency is, the information will be somewhat useless.

Most of your questions should **address the central question your research study is asking**, and should be aimed at the person you are interviewing. I.e., in some cases you will need to interview different types of people—for instance, service providers and consumers; people invested in the community organization and people hostile to it; etc. Be sure the questions fit the audience and the purpose of the study.

Consider how you will present your questions—i.e., what kind of background information or context your interviewee will need in order to answer honestly and thoroughly. **Provide a context** for questions that touch on controversial topics, and **be careful not to ask questions that might lead to a particular answer**. If you ask, why do you think there is there so much racism in this community?, you must first have established that there is racism—or else, this must be a follow-up question, asked only if the person him or herself said s/he thought there was racism. Otherwise, you will be digging for the answers you want rather than seeing what your interviewee really thinks.

Wording is as important as purpose and context. **Use open-ended questions**—questions that do not require yes or no answers. **Do not ask more than one question in a single question.** I.e., don’t ask, “Were you at the fundraiser, and if so, what did you like and dislike about it?” This is three questions, and you’re likely to miss something if you don’t ask each question separately. **Be sure you won’t stumble over the wording of your question.** Questions should be asked in your normal voice.

10. **In what order should my questions be asked?**

Early questions should be the least sensitive and the easiest to answer—but they must still be useful. If you spend too much time asking an interviewee about the weather, she will feel like her time is being wasted. On the other hand, if you ask her to describe what she does for her job (if this information is relevant to your study), she will feel comfortable and be able to
answer. Any challenging or potentially controversial questions should be saved until the end. At the end of the interview, ask if you missed anything, or if there is any additional information your interviewee would like to offer you.

11. What should I do during the interview?

Show you are listening in whatever ways are culturally appropriate. Take notes, even if you are sure the tape recorder is working. Your notes might include what you are hearing, ideas for follow-up or clarifying questions you would like to ask, and any observations of the interviewee’s body language. These notes will be invaluable in providing the entire story.

12. What should I do after the interview?

Thank the interviewee, and ask whether you can contact him or her with follow-up or clarifying questions, and if so, what the best way to make the contact would be. Then, get your notes and tape to a locked filing cabinet or a similarly secure place as quickly as possible. Make time soon after the interview to listen to the tape in a private place and type a transcript (preferable) or at least the answers to your questions in your own words. Make sure this data is on a password protected computer or system (netfiles will work).

13. How do I analyze interview data?

This depends on what you want to learn, but in general, you are looking for themes among interviews, and for reasons those themes emerged. You are also looking for potential reasons that people had very different responses or perceptions, and why this might have been the case. Work closely with a research mentor to determine a systematic way to analyze the data. If possible, have that mentor look at the data and conduct a partial analysis as well, then compare results; this will ensure that your process is working.

Sample Interview Questions: An Activity

How would you change this interview protocol? The research question is, “How well is the arts agency meeting its two goals: to enhance the feasibility of keeping local artists local by assisting them in their artistic pursuits and to promote the benefits of the arts and culture to a community.

1. What do you think are the social benefits of the arts and culture to a community? What about this community makes these benefits especially important to support?
2. Why do so few people support the arts here?
3. Describe your artist philosophy.
4. In what mediums do you work?
5. I was asked to do this study partly to determine the reasons for some negative perceptions of [the arts organization] in the community. What do you think those negative perceptions are? What can we do about them?
6. Has [the arts organization] helped you grow as an artist?
7. Has [the arts organization] helped you learn new skills?
8. Has [the arts organization] helped you get to know other artists? If so, how has this benefitted you?
9. Has [the arts organization] helped you network with people who might buy your work?
10. Has [the arts organization] made you feel more a part of this community?
11. How long have you been making art?
12. What training do you have, if any?
13. How has your art changed since you became involved in [the arts organization], if at all?
14. Have you ever collaborated with another member of [the arts organization]?
15. What is most valuable and leave valuable about your involvement?
16. What else do you think I should know, or what other information would you like to share with me?