JUX Journal of User Experience

Vol. 21, Issue 4, November 2026, pp. 5–26

An Empirical Study: Best Practices in UX Interviewing

Rolf Molich
DialogDesign
Skovkrogen 3
DK-3660 Stenlose
Denmark
molich@dialogdesign.dk

Gregory A Hamilton
644 Grove Street
Worcester, MA 01605
greghamiltonux@gmail.com

Melissa Paluch
Independent Research Consultant
6200 Wilson Blvd
Falls Church, VA 22044
mpaluch968@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examined how experienced UX professionals conduct semi-structured UX interviews in real-world settings. Our aim was to improve existing guidelines for UX interviewing. We analyzed a corpus of 20 interviews with front-end developers, each conducted by one of seven independent teams of experienced UX professionals.

After completing the interviews, we developed a set of guidelines from practitioner literature to benchmark our analysis of the interview transcripts. Seven foundational textbooks yielded 64 actionable guidelines, which we grouped into these categories: flow, structure, rapport, participant-centered focus, and eliciting rich data.

We then selected seven of the 20 interviews for an in-depth examination of how well they complied with the benchmark. The deviations highlighted many useful practices but also recurring tensions between prescriptive guidance and real-world interviewing. For example, some interviewers improvised exemplary follow-up questions, yet others changed correctly phrased interview questions into leading, compound, hypothetical, or long-winded questions that occasionally altered the interview's trajectory.

This study provides the UX community with evidence-based tips, 64 guidelines derived from recognized textbooks, and 15 new guidelines to support the training and professional development of UX interviewers.

Keywords

guidelines, interviewing, interview practices, user experience, front-end developer

Copyright © 2026-2027, User Experience Professionals Association and the authors. Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee. URL: http://www.upassoc.org.

Introduction

User interviews have become an increasingly important part of UX work. Therefore, UX professionals should consider how to maintain and improve their interview skills.

Common user research methods have included user interviews and surveys, usability evaluation, in particular usability testing, and prototyping (Farrell, 2017; Inal et al., 2022; Sauro et al., 2022). Originally, usability engineering mainly focused on fixing broken interfaces, reducing errors, and increasing task completion (Nielsen, 1993). This focus gradually shifted toward product discovery (Torres, 2021). As software quality improved, the discussion of risk shifted from "users can't use it" to "users don't want it" (Cagan, 2018). This shift required moving toward open-ended generative interviews to discover unmet needs before designing an interface and writing code. Several sources have reported interviews and usability testing being used with equal frequency. For example, Sauro et al. (2022) reported, "While usability testing was the most used UX method from 2011 to 2018, user research was the top method in 2022 (84%). Among our respondents, 84% reported doing user research (e.g., interviews and surveys) in 2022, making it statistically more popular compared to 2018 (76%)."

Many excellent textbooks have addressed interviews. For this study, we selected seven foundational texts that we have used as benchmarks: Charmaz (2006), Goodman et al. (2012), Portigal (2023), User Experience Qualification Board (2022), Weiss (1995), Wilson (2013), and Young (2015).

Although practitioner literature has prescribed a clear set of best practices for qualitative UX interviewing, few real-world examples show these principles being applied and adapted in professional practice. This study addressed this gap by systematically analyzing a corpus of 20 semi-structured interviews with front-end developers, conducted by seven independent teams of experienced UX professionals, from which we selected seven interviews for this study.

In contrast, we have not found any literature reporting the results of observing and analyzing real interviews conducted by experienced UX professionals.

Table 1. The Goals of This Study

Goal	Result
Create benchmark guidelines for UX interviews based on seven recognized textbooks.	Accomplished; see Appendix A.
Improve the textbook guidelines by adding insights gained from comparing UX professionals' interviews to the benchmark.	Accomplished; see the guidelines marked "new" in Appendix A.

Study Design

Our study aimed to conduct an exploratory qualitative analysis of how experienced UX professionals apply, adapt, and deviate from published interviewing guidance in real-world interviews. We aimed to identify recurring interviewing practices across a diverse set of experienced practitioners, rather than achieve statistical representativeness.

Planning and Conducting Interviews

In September 2023, the first author of this paper issued a call for participation through professional UX networks and UX practitioner discussion groups in Germany and the United States. Seven teams volunteered to conduct interviews. Participation was voluntary and unpaid.

The teams conducted the interviews independently. Two interview guides were developed: one for front-end developers (FEDs) who work independently of UX professionals (UXPs), and one for FEDs who collaborate with UXPs. The guides contained 32 and 47 questions, respectively. Sample questions are shown in Table 2. The interviewers refined the interview guides before conducting the interviews. However, the guides were neither tested in pilot interviews nor revised during the interviews.

Each team recruited two to three FEDs, resulting in a total of 20 interviews. Recruitment was unrestricted and included participants from both within and outside the interviewers' organizations. A UXP from each team conducted the interviews using the appropriate guide (Figure 1).

We conducted 19 interviews remotely and one in person. All interviews were audio-recorded; 17 were video-recorded. Participants provided informed consent.

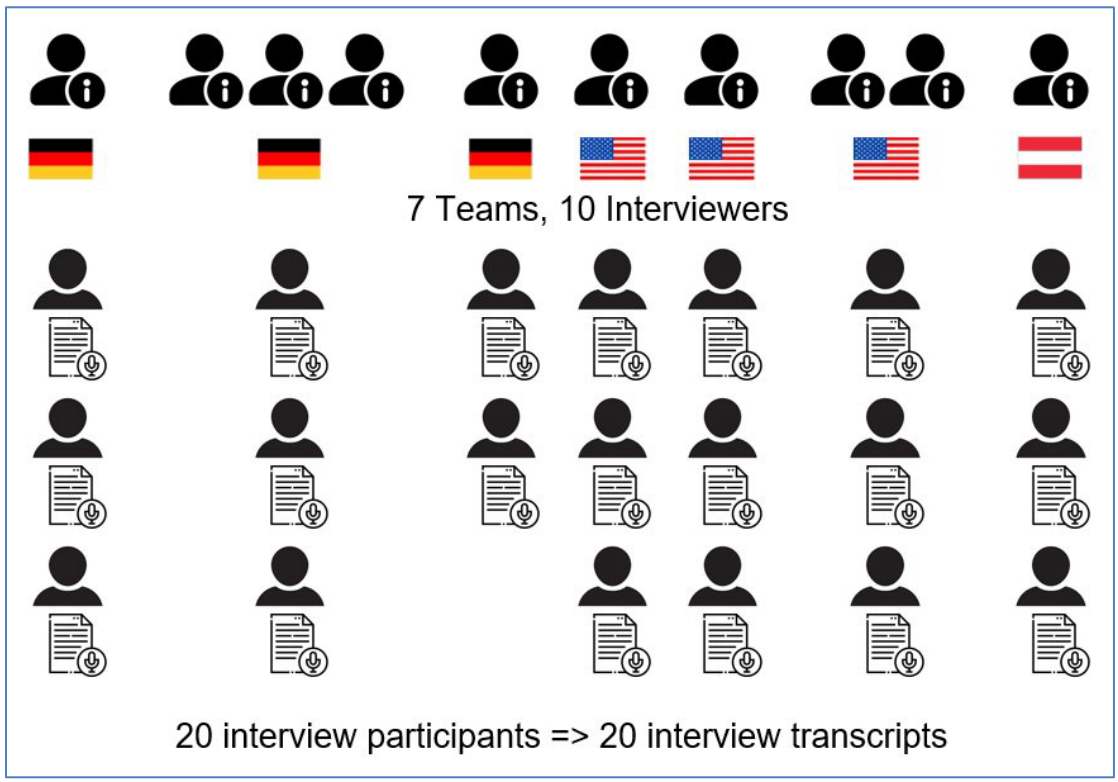


Figure 1. The process leading to the 20 transcripts (graphic developed with Flaticon™).

Details about the interviewers and the participants can be found in another paper by Molich and Kirakowski (2025).

Table 2. Sample Questions From the Interview Guides

FEDs Who Work Independently of UXPs	**FEDs Who Cooperate With UXPs**
A8. Whose job is it to ensure that users can use your front-end efficiently?	B5. Tell me about your cooperation with the UX professionals in your organization.
A14. What is the basis for writing user stories and user requirements?	B6. What deliverables do you routinely get from the UX professionals?
A18. What techniques do you use to visualize your UI designs?	B10. What do you consider the biggest weaknesses in this cooperation?
A23. How do you get user feedback on your product before it is released?	B20. What kind of descriptions of the users, their goals, and key tasks do you get from your UX professionals?

Note: Full interview guides are available from the first author.

Because of time constraints, interviewers did not ask all questions in the guide. For example, an interviewer asked 13 of 32 questions, and another asked 34 of 47 questions.

Interviews were transcribed using TranscribeMe™. Eight interviews were conducted in German and translated into English using DeepL™. The transcripts were automatically divided at natural breaks in the speech and were approximately 30 s. The segments served as the unit of analysis. The segmentation was generally appropriate and required no manual adjustment. In some cases, we duplicated segments because they contained several different incidents.

In another study, the 20 interview transcripts were used to analyze what FEDs expect from UXPs. The results were reported by Molich and Kirakowski (2025).

Results

Our results are in the following three sections.

The section "Good Interviews in Theory: Guidelines From UX Textbooks" describes how we created a benchmark for UX interviews by analyzing several recognized textbooks.

The section "Good Interviews in Practice: Examples and New Guidelines From Our Study" outlines how we expanded the existing guidelines from recognized textbooks by comparing interviews conducted by UX professionals using the established benchmark.

The section "Examples: Room for Improvement and Exemplary Approaches" contains examples from our transcripts that illustrated questionable and exemplary approaches to interviewing.

Good Interviews in Theory: Guidelines From UX Textbooks

After completing the interviews, four researchers, including the second and third authors, selected seven recognized textbooks dealing with interview techniques: Charmaz (2006), Goodman et al. (2012), Portigal (2023), User Experience Qualification Board (2022), Weiss (1995), Wilson (2013), and Young (2015). The researchers selected the books based on their personal experience and the general popularity of the books. The selected texts covered grounded theory, UX practice, certification curricula, and classic qualitative interviewing.

The four researchers extracted guidelines for good interviews from each textbook. They extracted 187 guidelines in total. The process is illustrated in the upper half of Figure 2.

After extracting the guidelines, they worked together to combine similar guidelines from different textbooks into a single guideline. Guidelines were considered different if an interviewer could violate a guideline without violating the other.

The set of guidelines contained 64 actionable guidelines grouped into these categories: flow, structure, rapport, participant-centered focus, and eliciting rich data. The categories and 64 resulting guidelines are listed in Appendix A, including 15 new guidelines developed from this study.

All four researchers participated as interviewers in the study. Two of the four researchers left this study after completing the set of guidelines because of time constraints.

Good Interviews in Practice: Examples and New Guidelines From Our Study

We (the authors) then selected one interview from each of the seven teams for a closer analysis. We limited ourselves to seven interviews because of time constraints and because we assumed that a single interview would provide good insights into any particular interviewer's style. We selected the most comprehensive interview from each team that best represented their style. We did not use other interviews from the same team to verify the representativeness of our selection.

We read the transcripts from each of the seven interviews independently, flagging segments in which the interviewer said something interesting and noting what made that interesting.

We looked for

- exemplary examples of compliance with the guidelines,
- illustrative examples of violations of the guidelines, and
- what we considered good practice.

The seven interviews comprised 670 segments. We flagged 262 of them.

We then open-coded the flagged segments to identify similar issues. We looked for issues that matched the previously developed benchmark guidelines. We discussed and grouped our individual findings. We then discussed coding discrepancies until we reached complete agreement regarding whether a rule was exemplified. This provides a limited but useful indication of coding reliability. All guidelines can be traced back to one or more sources. Intercoder reliability was not computed.

This coding produced 57 guidelines. Fifteen of these are new, and 42 appear in the benchmark guidelines. The rest of this paper describes the 15 new guidelines, as well as 8 existing ones. We describe the guidelines for which we have the most striking examples. Figure 2 shows the origin of the 20 transcripts.

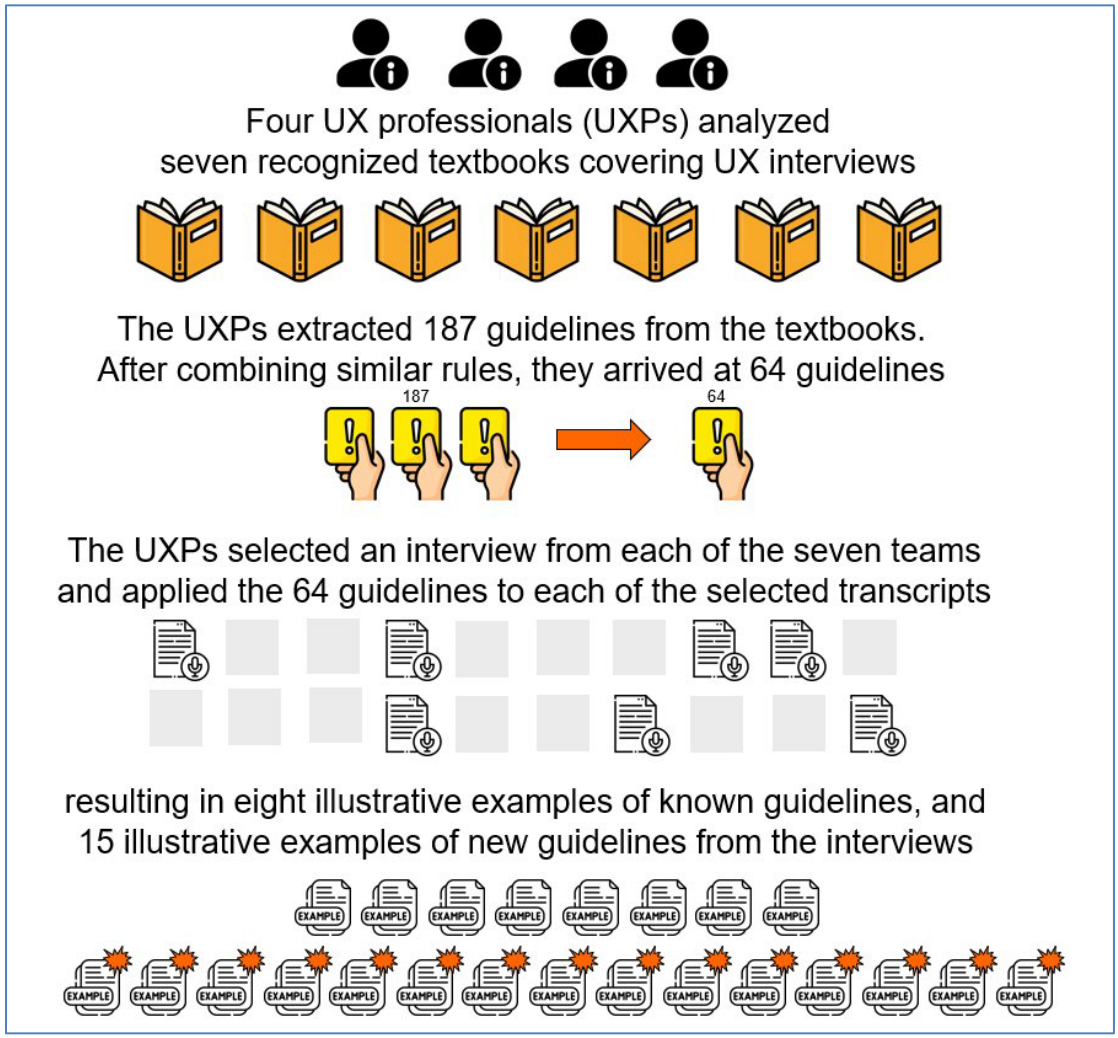


Figure 2. Our process leading to a set of guidelines (graphic developed with Flaticon.com).

Examples: Room for Improvement and Exemplary Approaches

The authors chose the following notable examples from the interviews to show topics that emerged during the open coding. In this paper, we describe one or more related violations of what we considered to be good practice and pair each with an example. Then, we list the new

guidelines (marked "new"), which we derived from our analysis. We also list the existing guidelines that we observed.

The examples illustrate adherence to and deviation from the benchmark guidelines, as well as good practices. Although many of the results highlight areas for improvement, we also included examples that we found instructive and commendable.

Pay Attention to the Interview Structure—Observe the Traditional Interview Format

Goodman et al. (2012) suggested that an interview should be divided into six specific phases (Table 3).

Table 3. The Six Phases of an Interview (Goodman et al., 2012)

Phase	Description	Observed in Our Study
Introduction (Briefing)	Interviewer welcomes participant. Participant and interviewer introduce themselves. Participant signs NDA. Interviewer explains purpose of interview.	Yes
Warm-Up	Interviewer asks questions to get the participant to step away from their regular lives and focus on the product.	No
General Issues	The initial product-specific round of questions concentrates on issues surrounding the product and how people use it.	No
Deep Focus	The interviewer introduces the product or product idea and the participant concentrates on the details of what it does, how it does it, whether they can use it, and what their immediate experience of it is.	Yes
Retrospective	The participant evaluates the product or idea in a broader light.	No
Wrap-Up (Debriefing)	The participant can ask any unanswered questions. The interviewer addresses final administrative topics and says goodbye.	Yes

Most interviewers failed to **obtain relevant information about the participant on video**, possibly because they had obtained the information prior to the start of the video recording. Important information about the FEDs' experience, job title, current work area, and formative training had to be obtained through other means. In some cases, the interviewer did not request the information and lacked the resources to contact the participant afterward. This meant that we were unable to obtain the information.

The interviewer must **guard the participants' anonymity**. In one interview, the participant's first name appeared in the lower left corner of the video throughout the interview. In at least five of the seven interviews, the interviewer or the participant mentioned the names of clients, companies that the interviewer or the participant worked for, the names of colleagues, or the name of the participant.

The interviewer is responsible to ensure that the recording remains anonymous. This can be achieved by explicitly informing participants of the need for anonymity before the interview and, if necessary, during it. The interview guide did not contain instructions about anonymity. This turned out to be a mistake, although perhaps it simply did not occur to the authors of the interview guide or the reviewers that experienced UX professionals needed to be reminded of the need for anonymity.

Although the interviewers received no explicit instructions about anonymity, we obtained anonymity during the editing process.

Exemplary Approaches

One interviewer explicitly informed the participant when they progressed from one section of the interview guide to the next. In this way, the interviewer provided a smooth transition to the next set of questions. In the wrap-up, some participants specifically appreciated this.

For the wrap-up, our interview guide suggested the following 2 questions, which requested the **participant's feedback on the interview and the interviewer**. These questions were proposed by the interviewers during the review of the interview guide:

- I'm looking for user feedback here—from you! What do you think were good points during this interview, and what do you think I could improve on?
- How did you feel during the interview? Why?

No interviewers skipped these questions, and the questions generated valuable insights, often in the form of a diplomatically phrased criticism of the interviewer.

For example, a participant noticed leading questions:

> *P: Maybe [you asked questions] a bit like an aunt who asks, who's your favorite family member? And then you kind of say, yes, my niece, my sister. Yes, and who else?*

Another participant felt that the interviewer had not understood them and that the interviewer did not ask clarifying questions:

> *P: And sometimes I do get also very technical or, you know, because it's my world. So, I don't know if you like the API, like… getting the data from Yes. I'm not sure if you understand. I'm not sure of getting too technical. And I think sometimes you were confused.*

A participant appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their role as an FED:

> *P: I think as the interview went on, it made me really realize how far away we are from design.*

As a result, we have suggested the following guidelines for successful interviews:

- Guard the participant's anonymity, particularly on video (guideline 2.07, new).
- As part of the wrap-up, ask for the participant's feedback on you and the interview (guideline 2.08, new).
- Watch out for polite criticism from the participant during the wrap-up (guideline 2.09, new).
- Keep in mind that the client may see participants' frank feedback, which could bring risk (guideline 2.10, new).
- Offer instructions about anonymity as part of the introduction if the interview is video recorded or observed by others (guideline 2.11, new).

Manage Interview Time Effectively

The call for participation stated: "Each interview should last 30 to 50 minutes; interviews that last more than 50 minutes will not be accepted because of the time effort involved in analyzing long videos." The interviews lasted 26–58 min, as shown in Table 4. Despite the rule for 50 min, we accepted seven interviews that exceeded 50 min.

Table 4. Length of Each Interview

Interview	Length		Interview	Length		Interview	Length	
I-1-1	52:53	*	I-3-2	43:26		I-7-1	49:55	
I-1-2	42:07		I-4-1	56:45	*	I-7-2	26:13	*
I-1-3	57:47		I-4-2	36:22		I-7-3	49:33	
I-2-1	46:20	*	I-4-3	41:07		I-8-1	50:22	

Interview	Length		Interview	Length		Interview	Length	
I-2-2	52:05		I-6-1	38:45	*	I-8-2	47:44	
I-2-3	44:45		I-6-2	48:25		I-8-3	53:44	*
I-3-1	51:15	*	I-6-3	31:04				

Note: The interview code I-3-1 indicates Team 3, interview 1. Interviews marked with an asterisk are the interviews we analyzed in detail. Team 5 signed up for the study but dropped out for personal reasons before completing any interviews.

Table 4 shows that effective time management can be challenging, even for experienced UXPs. Four interviews exceeded the prescribed time limit by 2 min or more. Eight interviews finished in under 45 min, well before the agreed limit of 50 min.

Another aspect of effective time management was reflected in guideline 1.09, which stated, "Don't truncate the interview to end on time." The authors of this paper interpreted this guideline differently, revealing an unresolved ethical tension.

Some authors have argued that following up on an interesting story matters more than finishing on time. Others argued that interviewers are responsible to adhere to the time limit, even if that means omitting questions. It may be unethical to ask the participant to stay for longer than agreed, as the moderator holds power over the participant. Our study showed that some moderators were unaware of this power.

If an interview finished well before the agreed time limit, the interviewer did not obtain the optimal amount of information from the participant. For example, an interviewer asked all 32 A-questions, excluding A9 (which was irrelevant) and A14, in just 26 min. Yet the interviewer failed to follow up on several important issues the participant raised.

As a result, we have suggested the following guidelines for successful interviews:

- Respect the participants' time by observing the agreed time for the interview (guideline 2.12, new).
- Use the entire time allotted for the interview (guideline 2.13, new).
- Don't rush through the interview guide (guideline 2.14, new).

Improvise With Care

Although the literature evidenced a strong theoretical basis for improvisation and high flexibility in interview moderation, our analysis of interviews revealed that, in practice, improvisation is often unsuccessful. The authors hold varying opinions on the ideal amount of improvisation. However, we agreed that the instances of moderator improvisation that occurred in our dataset were often unnecessary and more often detracted from interview quality rather than enhanced it.

The authors of the interview guide carefully phrased all interview questions in an open, neutral way. Several interviewers improvised in ways that violated best practices. For example, some interviewers rephrased the prepared questions in the interview guide ad hoc. The resulting questions were often:

- closed
- leading
- compound
- hypothetical
- long-winded

In many, but not all, cases, the participants provided valuable explanatory responses despite the rewordings.

Rephrasing open questions from the interview guide as **closed questions** sometimes resulted in binary yes/no responses, which risked the opportunity to collect rich narrative.

> *Question A18 in the interview guide: What techniques do you use to visualize your UI designs?*

> *I [rephrased A18 as a closed question]: But do you go through any process of visualizing as part of your development work, like creating visualizations?*
>
> *P: No. Not really.*

Leading questions suggest a correct or assumed answer.

> *I: In your opinion, what are the major strengths of this collaboration [between FEDs and UXPs in your organization]?*
>
> *P: It's good to have the other disciplines so close to you.*
>
> *I [asked a closed and leading question]: Exactly, these short official channels, does that also mean for you that there is simply a slightly lower inhibition threshold, so to speak, to simply ask about smaller things again, to inform?*
>
> *P: Yes, yes, that's certainly the case, that you don't have to make a big deal out of it.*

At least three interviewers asked **compound questions**, combining up to 3 of the questions from the interview guide. In the following example, the interviewer asked a question that was not in the interview guide and then immediately asked question B11 from the interview guide:

> *Question B11 in the interview guide: How does your team ensure the user experience of your user interfaces?*
>
> *P: ...[helpful response]*
>
> *I: Yes, okay. [First question, open and neutral:] And how is it in other projects? You also mentioned this when I asked, yes, how is user experience, good user experience, ensured? You also talked about methods such as user surveys, for example. [Second question, closed and neutral:] Have you been involved in something like that in your project or in the past, in the recent past?*

Some interviewers asked **opinion-based** or **hypothetical questions** that distorted a question in the interview guide:

> *I: Are your products usability tested?*
>
> *P: I don't know.*
>
> *I [asked an opinion-based question; from the previous answer, the interviewer knew that the answer would not be based on experience]: In your opinion, what is a usability test?*
>
> *P: So I don't really know what a usability test is, but if I had to make an educated guess, it sounds very similar to the types of interviews that UX researchers conduct, where they have someone, maybe it's a new user, maybe it's someone who's already familiar with the platform, and then maybe they just have a list of things that they ask them to do, and they just observe the person using the product.*
>
> *I [asked a hypothetical question; the answer had no real value]: So hypothetically, what would be your role in the usability test?*
>
> *P: I don't think I would have a role in it. It seems like that would be something as a part of the responsibility of a different role, not engineering.*

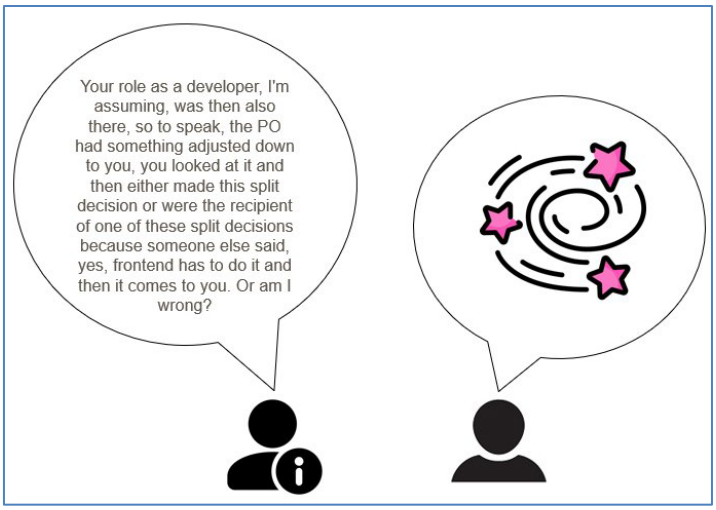


Figure 3. One of our new guidelines is that interviewers should avoid compound, long-winded questions.

Some interviewers rephrased some interview questions into unnecessarily **long-winded questions**, which may have overcomplicated the question.

> *Question A9 in the interview guide: What is YOUR role in this? [ensuring that users can use the front-end efficiently]*
>
> *I [rephrased A9]: Your role as a developer, I'm assuming, was then also there, so to speak; the PO had something adjusted down to you, you looked at it, and then either made this split decision or were the recipient of one of these split decisions because someone else said, yes, front-end has to do it, and then it comes to you. Or am I wrong?*

Subtle changes to a question in the interview guide, which the experienced interviewers in our study made easily, could have ruined the intent of the question.

> *Question A20 in the interview guide: How do you get user feedback on the visualizations?*
>
> *I: So, on the visualizations that you've done, you know, how do you get feedback on those visualizations?*

We considered the difference between "feedback" and "user feedback" important.

Exemplary Approaches

We observed several instances in which **improvisation was helpful**. In these instances, the moderator improvised to address a gap between the interview guide and the participant's world.

Some interviewers improvised by **chasing interesting topics**. They obtained relevant data that the original script could not have anticipated by being curious (guideline 5.01), which was exemplary:

> *Question A22 in the interview guide: Do you get user feedback on your product?*
>
> *I [rephrased A22 slightly]: Were there any other feedback channels? So, how did you get feedback on the designs?*
>
> *P: ...We also had a beta test once that we carried out with 10 or 15 users.*
>
> *I [improvised, chased the topic "beta test"]: A beta test, okay.*
>
> *P: Yes. A test run of the application, so to speak. Of course, we also received feedback on the interface and usability.*

> *I [continued to chase the topic]: What did that look like? How should I imagine this test run? So, 10 users were sitting there somehow?*

Instead of moving to the next question in the interview guide, the moderator responded to the mention of "beta test" by asking, "What did that look like?" to elicit a rich description of a simulation in which users were given a specific challenge, rather than a generic yes or no question about whether they got user feedback.

Some interviewers successfully **increased participant comprehension** by adjusting terminology to match the participant's mental model.

> *I: ...You have said that the UX professional is talking to the customer, and then the UX professional is talking to the developer. And it must be assured that if the UX professional says A, also the developer understands A and not something else.*
>
> *P: Yeah. Like basically, they are on the same page. And because every time when someone is [an] intermediary step, that someone is a bridge. And when you enter the bridge with the hope that you will end up in, let's say, Budapest, but you end up in Vienna, that's not good.*
>
> *That's what [is] in here; [the] UX person is, I think, the bridge.*
>
> *I [used the participant's term "bridge" in an exemplary way]: And do you think this bridge is needed, or could the developer also talk to the customer?*
>
> *P: Yeah. That depends on the use cases.*

As a result, we have suggested the following guidelines for successful interviews:

- Do not rephrase questions in the interview guide (guideline 1.10, new).
- Avoid closed and leading questions when you ask questions (guidelines 5.08 and 5.09).
- Avoid compound, hypothetical, and long-winded questions when you ask improvised questions (guideline 5.11, new).

Curiously Follow Up if a Participant Offers You a Story

Sometimes, participants hinted at stories that sounded worth exploring, but the interviewer did not follow up.

> *I: But whose job is it to ensure that users can use the front-ends efficiently that you work on?*
>
> *P: Oh, it's like no one's job....It's like the job of a couple people in India to say whether it meets the ticket. Usually, that's how it goes....*
>
> *I: And when you said that there are a couple of folks who would check off the ticket, say it's good, is that going to be QA folks?*
>
> *P: Yes.*

The interviewer did not pursue "...a couple people in India." They disregarded guideline 5.01, which states, "Be curious/remain curious."

Guideline 5.02 goes into some more detail: Ask participants to elaborate, clarify, or give examples.

> *P: But I do know that product generally sits in customer calls and gets feedback that way.*
>
> *I [continues with question A23]: Do you get any user feedback on the product before it's released?*

The interviewer did not follow up with clarifying probes, for example: What is "product?" What are "customer calls?" Are "customer calls" the same as Support? How do your UXPs collect user feedback?

A bit later, the same interviewer correctly followed up:

> *I: Do you get anything after [the product is] released?*

> *P: Sometimes. It depends.*
>
> *I: Can you tell me a little bit more about that?*
>
> *P: So, for example, a couple of months ago, I worked on kind of like a one-off feature for my company because one of our bigger customers was requesting it. And apparently, they had been requesting it for a really long time. So after it got released, I was told that that work was shared with them and that they were really happy to have that new functionality.*

Participants were not asked by any interviewer to share examples of things like user stories, annotations, or acceptance criteria in the tools that they used. This may have been due to concerns about privacy and nondisclosure. This might have been added as a note in the interview guide.

Some interviewers asked, "Can you give me an example?" or similar, in response to generalizations. Two interviewers did so but did not get an example, just more generalizations. A third interviewer got a reasonable example.

As a result, we have suggested the following guidelines for successful interviews:

- Curiously follow up if the participant hints at a story that may be worth exploring (guideline 5.04, new).
- Follow up if the participant's answer is insufficient (guideline 5.03).
- Ask for specific examples (guideline 5.02).

Speak the Participants' Language

We observed mismatches in vocabulary and metaphors between participants and interviewers. Neither the interview guide nor any of our interviewers initially asked about the participant's understanding of key terms like persona, user requirement, user interface specification, or usability test.

Participants' understanding must be probed diplomatically in order not to violate guideline 3.09, "Do not test participants on their understanding of terms."

Vocabulary mismatches happened naturally because the interviewer was not aware that they were using terms that were not generally known.

> *I: The products that you've worked on, you know, have they been usability tested?*
>
> *P: I want to say no. Not officially. No. [pause] I mean, accessibility. I mean, what do you mean by usability testing?*

Later in the interview, it turned out the participant thought accessibility inspection was a usability test.

A participant did not understand "user interface specification." The interviewer asked the question in accordance with the interview guide.

> *I: How useful are user interface specifications for your work?*
>
> *P: Okay. I'm not sure, what do you mean about user interface specifications. Can you give me an example?*

We noticed a few examples of **conceptual contamination** (Danielson et al., 2024), like introducing the moderator's own metaphors or concepts rather than relying on the participant's language. In the following example, the moderator introduced a complex metaphor ("pop versus jazz") to describe a text field, potentially confusing the participant or forcing them to agree to a comparison they didn't make:

> *P: Exactly, so it wasn't a large format, it was basically just free text.*
>
> *M: So, no pop music with predefined scenarios, more like jazz. You can choose and do it yourself.*

As a result, we have suggested the following guidelines for successful interviews:

- When needed, diplomatically probe participants' understanding of key terms (guideline 5.15, new).
- Do not ask a question containing a term that you know from their previous answers is unknown to the participant (guideline 5.16, new).
- Define terms you use (guideline 5.14).

Avoid Premature Interpretation

We observed that interviewers frequently paraphrased participant statements and asked confirmation questions to avoid misinterpretation. Some interviewers engaged in premature interpretation and self-disclosure that occasionally derailed focus. They clarified, summarized, or co-theorized mid-conversation. This practice risks leading participants.

The interviewer may develop the participant's thought further and ask for confirmation. Some praise this approach because it helps deepen understanding; others criticize it because it may lead to ill-considered and worthless confirmations.

In the following example, the interviewer summarized what the participant had said, which we considered helpful. The summary ended with a closed confirmation question.

> *I: And so, just to paraphrase and tell me if I've got this right. A lot of your development work is implementing on frameworks that exist. And you're also working in e-commerce. And so there are existing standards of design. It's not building from scratch. And so I think what I've heard from you is that the need for sort of usability testing and user research feels different because you're working in a space where maybe the problems have been sort of solved or patterns have been established and can be reused.*
>
> *I: Is that true or not really?*
>
> *P: To an extent. I think that there are places in the sites that probably could use [usability testing] because there's differences in the mini cart [feature]; especially where I'm talking about...the primary area that I work on—in firefighting things—is checkouts.*

An interviewer, at least three times, provided extensive summaries of what the participant had said without a confirmation question. When we discussed this with the interviewer, they said that they needed to do this in the complex medical contexts they often work in. They said that a summary might be less appropriate in the FED context.

A few interviewers used **interpretive paraphrasing**. They provided summaries that included concepts the participants did not mention. This prompted the participants to adjust their responses to align with the researchers' hypotheses.

> *P: [The tool] goes through your code and you can be like, "Can you check all the code and tell us what are the potential accessibility, usability problem[s] that you may have that you can fix because there's probably so many." So I try to run that.*
>
> *I: Is that pretty common to have access to this tool? What is it called again?*
>
> *P: I think it's Lighthouse. Lighthouse. I think you can run it on anything. There's also other plug-in[s]. I don't remember. I feel like I should know. But yeah, there's different tools that you can use to make sure that usability is...*
>
> *I [uses the term "serviceable" which the participant never used]: Wonderful. Yeah. I mean, that's wonderful because I can imagine you know getting code that makes it, you know, it's serviceable, but is it usable? You know it works, but it's not, yeah, the best thing.*

As a result, we have suggested the following guidelines for successful interviews:

- Do not include additional information if you summarize what a participant has said (guideline 5.12, new).
- Let participants' own words express their perspective (guideline 4.02).

Strike the Right Balance Between Attentive Silence and Active Engagement

Some interviewers talked a lot during the interviews. To quantify this, we counted the number of words spoken by the participant and by the interviewer during three interviews, according to the transcripts. The counts include filler words like "yeah" and "I mean." The results are shown in Table 5. Note the considerable differences in the ratios P/I between the number of words spoken by the participant (P) and the number of words spoken by the interviewer (I). The higher the P/I ratio, the better.

Table 5. Number of Words Spoken by the Participant (P) and the Interviewer (I) in Selected Interviews With Different Interviewers

Interview	Total # Words	Participant (P)	Interviewer (I)	Ratio P/I
I-1-1	7,745	5,009	2,736	1.8
I-6-1	5,586	4,043	1,543	2.6
I-8-3	6,012	4,826	1,186	4.1

An interviewer frequently used "yeah" and "right" as validation tokens, which indicates cooperative interruption and conversational overlap. This demonstrated engagement, but it conflicted with guideline 4.05, "Try not to show agreement." Although it did not take up any time, it sometimes made it difficult to understand what the participant was saying in the video.

As a result, we have suggested the following guidelines for successful interviews:

- Do not talk too much (guideline 1.02).
- Don't compete for the floor with the participant or talk over them (guideline 1.04).
- Measure and try to improve your participant/interviewer speaking ratio (guideline 1.03, new).

Summary and Discussion

Building a benchmark was not originally part of our study, so it was built after the interviews had been completed. The authors acknowledge that this introduced the possibility of confirmation bias, as the researchers had already formed impressions of the transcripts when selecting and synthesizing the textbook guidelines.

Additional bias may have been introduced by having researchers rate their own interviews. However, all interviews were rated by at least two independent researchers. This is an unfortunate consequence of the study relying solely on experienced UXPs.

Our study observed 42 of the 64 guidelines from the textbooks and identified 15 new ones. Twenty-two of the guidelines were not observed; 15 of them did not appear in our interviews, and 7 were irrelevant to our study. See Figure 4 and Appendix A.

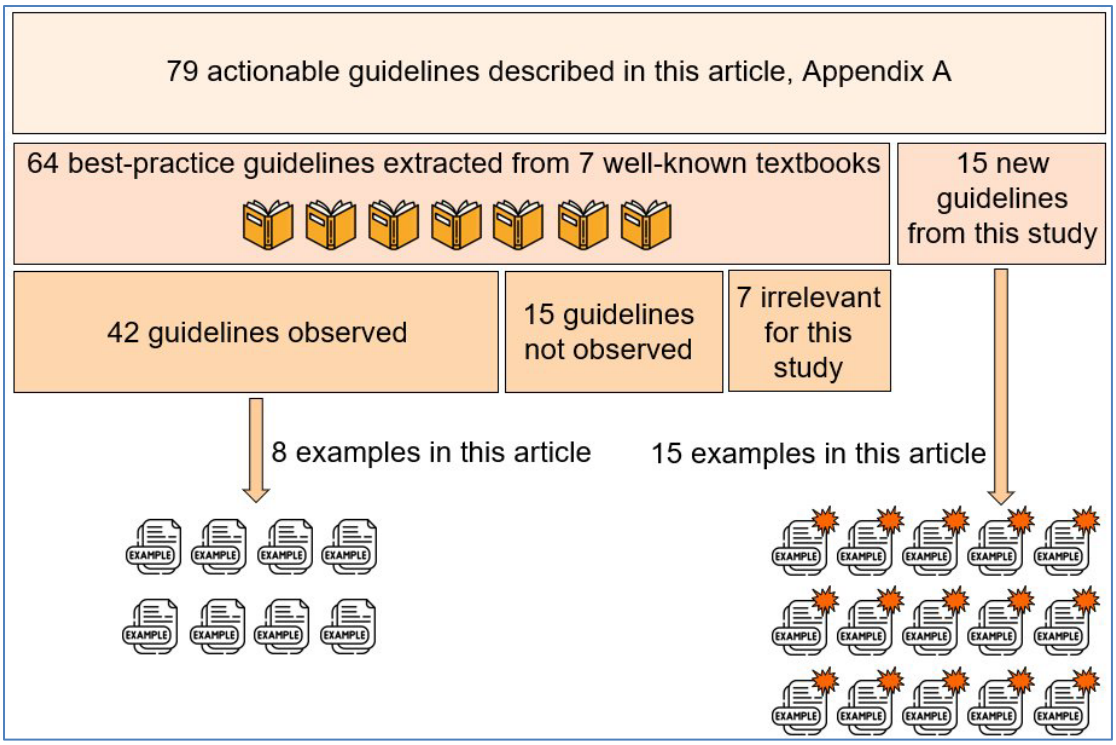


Figure 4. The distribution and origin of the guidelines and examples. Our coding identified 57 guidelines, that is, 15 new guidelines plus 42 that appeared in the benchmark guidelines.

This paper provides examples of each of the 15 new guidelines and 8 observed guidelines. Because of space limitations, we refrained from providing examples of the remaining 34 observed guidelines.

In addition to the 64 and 15 guidelines suggested in this paper, there may be more. It may be surprising that the seven textbooks can be summarized into just 64 guidelines. At a detailed level, one would expect more guidelines; but, at a general level, fewer would be expected.

Some of the new guidelines resemble existing guidelines. For example, guideline 5.01, "Be curious/remain curious," and the new guideline 5.04, "Curiously follow up if the participant hints at a story that may be worth exploring," look similar. We consider the explicit mention of "hints at a story" sufficiently important to justify the new guideline 5.04.

Regarding the selection of participants, we might have obtained different results if our UXPs had interviewed end users rather than FEDs. UXPs are more familiar with interviewing end users than they are with interviewing FEDs.

What may appear to be a mistake in an interview at first glance may in fact be a valid situational choice. Interviewers may have good reasons for deviating from the guidelines. When our analysis was complete several months after the interviews, the interviewers were too busy to address this issue.

Both interview guides were quite extensive. In an interview that is 50 min, it is challenging to ask 32 or 47 questions, plus reasonable, unscripted probing questions. We were pleased to see that many of our experienced UXPs prepared so well for their interviews that they were able to address the most relevant questions in the allotted time.

Several interviewers repeatedly failed to be curious and follow up on incomplete answers. One reason for this may be that they are accustomed to following a structured approach to data collection, typically covering task success and task time. This approach is supported by standardized procedures for delivering task prompts and help interventions. In the context of

usability testing (Dumas & Loring, 2008; Rubin & Chisnell, 2008; Goodman et al., 2012), rigidity serves a valid purpose: moderators are trained to strictly avoid influencing the user to preserve the validity of task metrics. Standard manuals instruct that the golden rule of moderation is absolute neutrality, that is, to never influence the user's path. However, it's not appropriate to transfer these rigid constraints wholly to interviewing.

The number of interview participants and the sample per geographical region are too small to derive generally valid statements about the new guidelines. These constraints mean the findings are more illustrative than definitive.

Recommendations

Our recommendations for further work are these:

- Test whether the guidelines actually lead to better interviews by asking UXPs to follow them in a series of interviews of end-users.
- Explore adjacent disciplines that have mature or innovative interview practices and suggest what UX professionals can learn from them.
- Explore power dynamics in interviewing (Charmaz, 2006). The section "Manage Interview Time Effectively" describes an example of power dynamics in interviews.

Tips for User Experience Practitioners

We observed seven teams of UXPs doing interviews. We offer the following advice to UXPs who want to improve their interview skills.

1. **Pay attention to the interview structure—observe the traditional interview format.**

   Record information about the participant on video; during wrap-up, ask for the participant's feedback on you and the interview; watch out for polite criticism during the wrap-up.

2. **Manage interview time effectively.**

   Carefully observe the agreed time for the interview; use the entire time allotted for the interview; don't rush through the interview guide.

3. **Improvise with care.**

   Stick to the carefully prepared interview guide as much as possible. When you must improvise to chase a topic, avoid leading, hypothetical, or long-winded questions.

4. **Curiously follow up if a participant offers you a story.**

   Show particular interest in stories; be curious; follow up if the participant's answer is insufficient; and ask for specific examples.

5. **Speak the participants' language.**

   Probe the participant's understanding of key terms; skip any questions that contain a term that the participant did not understand in an earlier answer; and define terms you use.

6. **Avoid premature interpretation.**

   Do not include additional information if you summarize what a participant has said; let participants' own words express their perspective.

7. **Strike the right balance between attentive silence and active engagement.**

   Do not talk too much; don't compete for the floor with the participant or talk over them; measure and try to improve your participant/interviewer speaking ratio.

Each of these tips is discussed in detail in the previous section "Examples of Room for Improvement and Exemplary Approaches." Our list of guidelines appears in Appendix A.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge strong contributions to this study from the 10 interviewers and the 20 FEDs. Without their generosity, the study would not have been possible. Details about the interviewers and the participants can be found in another paper by Molich and Kirakowski (2025).

Thanks to our colleagues Anker Helms Jørgensen, Jan Clausen, Peter Carstensen, Jurek Kirakowski, and the anonymous reviewers for their extensive and very helpful comments on early drafts of this paper. Andrew Maier and Beth Martin made significant contributions to the extraction of guidelines from the textbooks.

References

Cagan, M. (2018). *Inspired: How to create tech products customers love* (2nd ed.). Wiley.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage.

Danielson, R. W., Heddy, B. C., Ramazan, O., Jin, G., Gill, K. S., & Berry, D. N. (2025). Conceptual contamination: Investigating the impact of misinformation on conceptual change and inoculation strategies. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 62*(3), 629–654. https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.21963

Dumas, J., & Loring, B. (2008). *Moderating usability tests: Principles and practices for interacting*. Morgan Kaufmann.

Farrell, S. (2017, February 12). *UX research cheat sheet*. Nielsen Norman Group. https://www.nngroup.com/articles/ux-research-cheat-sheet/

Goodman, E., Kuniavsky, M., & Moed, A. (2012). *Observing the user experience: A practitioner's guide to user research* (2nd ed.). Morgan Kaufmann.

Inal, Y., Clemmensen, T., Rajanen, D., Iivari, N., Rızvanoğlu, K., & Sivaji, A. (2020). Positive developments but challenges still ahead: A survey study on UX professionals' work practices. *Journal of Usability Studies*, *15*(4), 210–246. https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.5555/3532713.3532716

Molich, R. & Kirakowski, J. (2025). A study of front-end developers' views of UX professionals: Usability tests are like unicorns. *Journal of User Experience*, *21*(1). https://uxpajournal.org/index.php/jux/article/view/3

Nielsen, J. (1993). *Usability engineering*. Morgan Kaufmann.

Portigal, S. (2023). *Interviewing users: How to uncover compelling insights* (2nd ed.). Rosenfeld Media.

Rubin, J., & Chisnell, D. (2008). *Handbook of usability testing: How to plan, design, and conduct effective tests* (2nd ed.). Wiley.

Sauro, J., Short, E., & Lewis, J. R. (2022, July 12). *The methods UX professionals use*. MeasuringU. https://measuringu.com/ux-methods-2022/

Torres, T. (2021). *Continuous discovery habits: Discover products that create customer value and business value*. Product Talk.

User Experience Qualification Board. (2022). *CPUX-F curriculum: Certified professional for usability and user experience—Foundation Level* (Version 4.01). https://uxqb.org/public/documents/CPUX-F_EN_Curriculum.pdf

Weiss, R. S. (1995). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies*. Free Press.

Wilson, C. (2013). *Interview techniques for UX practitioners: A user-centered design method*. Morgan Kaufmann.

Young, I. (2015). *Practical empathy: For collaboration and creativity in your work*. Rosenfeld Media.

About the Authors



Rolf Molich
Rolf Molich has been an independent usability consultant since 1993. He is a founding member and former VP of the User Experience Qualification Board, UXQB. Rolf received lifetime achievement awards from both the UXPA and the German UPA for his work on heuristics and the Comparative Usability Evaluation (CUE) studies.



Gregory A. Hamilton
Greg Hamilton has served as Research Director at BORN, Mad*Pow, and Tech Mahindra, specializing in human factors engineering and service design. A member of HFES, UXPA, and EPIC, he chaired the HFES Digital Therapeutics track. He holds an MS in Human Factors in Information Design from Bentley University.



Melissa Paluch
Melissa Paluch is a research contractor specializing in quantitative and qualitative research, survey design, and program evaluation. She holds an MA in Sociology from George Mason University and graduate certificates from George Washington University and Portland State University. Her work supports public, nonprofit, and academic organizations through evidence-based research.

Appendix A. Guidelines for Interviews Derived From Textbooks and This Study

The guidelines are listed in an order that reflects our subjective assessment of their importance.

We have annotated each guideline to our study:

- Observed: We saw examples of this behavior in our study (42 guidelines).
- New: A new guideline suggested by our study (15 guidelines).
- No examples: We didn't notice any examples of this behavior in our study, and we didn't notice any situations in which this behavior would have been appropriate (15 guidelines).
- Not relevant for this study: This guideline is not relevant for this study because of the approach we used (7 guidelines).

1. Flow

1.01) Encourage the participant to talk. (observed)

1.02) Do not talk too much. (observed)

1.03) Measure and try to improve your participant/interviewer speaking ratio. (new)

1.04) Do not interrupt the participant. In most cases, if the participant wants to say something, let them say it; don't compete for the floor with participant or talk over them. (observed)

1.05) Prevent the participant from speaking at great length on topics of no value to the study. (observed)

1.06) Make notes during the session about things to come back to. (observed)

1.07) Do not use the interview guide to steer the interview but let the participant address issues in the way they prefer. (observed)

1.08) Use generic and bland conversational cues to keep things flowing. (observed)

1.09) Don't truncate the interview to end on time. (observed)

1.10) Do not rephrase questions in the interview guide. (new)

1.11) Revise questions that don't work. (not relevant for this study)

1.12) Refrain from any note-taking that distracts from the interview. (no examples)

1.13) Provide cues for when taking the interview in a different direction. (no examples)

1.14) Use intro words — "So, to start..." — to transition to the interview itself. (no examples)

1.15) Remain silent after asking a question. (no examples)

2. Structure

2.01) Provide the participant with an overview of the session. (observed)

2.02) Gather some background on the participants to understand the context in which they are using a product or service at the beginning of the interview. (observed)

2.03) Explain how the information will be used and shared. (observed)

2.04) Leave participants feeling positive about interview and about self. (observed)

2.05) [If you plan to record:] Obtain their explicit permission to record the conversation. (observed)

2.06) Confirm the participant has signed non-disclosure or consent agreements. (observed)

2.07) Guard the participant's anonymity, particularly on video. (new)

2.08) As part of the wrap-up, ask for the participant's feedback on you and the interview. (new)

2.09) Watch out for polite criticism from the participant during the wrap-up. (new)

2.10) Keep in mind that the client may see participants' frank feedback, which could bring risk; to avoid this risk, stop the recording during wrap-up. (new)

2.11) Offer instructions about anonymity as part of the introduction if the interview is video recorded or observed by others. (new)

2.12) Respect the participants' time by observing the agreed time for the interview. (new)

2.13) Use the entire time allotted for the interview. (new)

2.14) Don't rush through the interview guide. (new)

2.15) Accept any gifts, drinks, etc., offered by the participant to put them at ease. (not relevant for this study)

2.16) Explain the limits of your ability to help the participant or give them solutions or advice during the interview. (not relevant for this study)

3. Rapport

3.01) Put participants at ease; make them feel comfortable in your presence. (observed)

3.02) Be respectful. (observed)

3.03) Resist the urge to demonstrate how smart you are. (observed)

3.04) Show engagement nonverbally (leaning in, nodding). (observed)

3.05) Carefully consider your body language during interviews. (observed)

3.06) Express your appreciation for the opportunity to speak with them. (observed)

3.07) Soften questions that might feel awkward or confrontational. (observed)

3.08) [In remote studies:] Stare at the camera instead of the person on the screen. (observed)

3.09) Do not test participants on their understanding of terms. (observed)

3.10) Break rules when needed to create comfort and rapport. (observed)

3.11) Respond to signs of discomfort, antagonism, or boredom. (no examples)

3.12) Do not correct participants, even if they're wrong. (no examples)

3.13) Don't judge your participants. Don't make them wrong. (no examples)

3.14) Don't expect your participant to answer questions you would be unwilling to answer. (not relevant for this study)

3.15) Check with participant before asking questions that could be intrusive and open space for them to decline. (not relevant for this study)

3.16) Express positive affect and enthusiasm about anything not related to research to aid rapport and comfort. (no examples)

3.17) "Why" is taken as hostile in many cultures. So don't ask "why" in these cultures. (not relevant for this study)

4. Participant-Centric Focus

4.01) Always consider yourself a novice and the participant an expert (master-student, master-apprentice). (observed)

4.02) Try to understand the described events, beliefs, and feelings from the participant's perspective rather than your own. (observed)

4.03) Minimize the interviewer perspective. Try not to say I. (observed)

4.04) Mimic the language used by the participant. (observed)

4.05) Try not to show agreement [to comments related to the research]. Don't behave encouragingly, for example, by responding with "cool." (observed)

5. Eliciting Rich Data

5.01) Be curious/remain curious. (observed)

5.02) Ask participants to elaborate, clarify, or give examples. (observed)

5.03) Continue until you've gotten to the participant's deeper reasoning. (observed)

5.04) Curiously follow up if the participant hints at a story that may be worth exploring. (new)

5.05) Modify questions depending on the participant's responses. (observed)

5.06) When the participant answers a different question than asked, try again. (observed)

5.07) Start with general questions and then follow up with more specific questions. (observed)

5.08) Ask open-ended questions that encourage the subject to talk. Avoid closed questions. (observed)

5.09) Use neutral questions. Avoid leading questions. (observed)

5.10) Focus questions on a single topic/avoid double-barreled questions. (observed)

5.11) Avoid compound, hypothetical, and long-winded questions when you ask improvised questions. (new)

5.12) Do not include additional information if you summarize what a participant has said. (new)

5.13) Never ask anyone what they want. (observed)

5.14) Define terms you use. (observed)

5.15) When needed, diplomatically probe participants' understanding of key terms. (new)

5.16) Do not ask a question containing a term that you know from their previous answers is unknown to the participant. (new)

5.17) Restate answers. (observed)

5.18) Ask participants to define terms they use. (observed)

5.19) Answer questions with questions. (no examples)

5.20) Don't force opinions. (no examples)

5.21) Ask participants to show, rather than tell. (no examples)

5.22) Ask participants to discuss their behaviors. (no examples)

5.23) Inquire about the meaning behind their behaviors. (no examples)

5.24) Encourage participants to state things in their own terms. (no examples)

5.25) Watch for cues of a gap between what is said and believed. (no examples)

5.26) Use artifacts to keep people focused on the present. (not relevant for this study)