



# Story-Based Interview Guide

How discovery helps you build the right product

Story-based interviews get people to tell you what they actually do — not what they think they'll do or what they assume you want to hear. Use this guide before, during, and after an interview.

## Before the Interview

Answer these questions to focus your preparation:

Why am I doing this interview? (Check all that apply)

- I don't know what this product/report/system is actually used for
- People have stopped using something that was supposed to be critical
- I suspect the current solution is inefficient but nobody has said so directly
- We're about to build something new and I want to understand the underlying problem
- I need to support a new business process and want to understand the current one

Who should I interview?

- People who recently started using the product (what prompted them?)
- People who recently stopped using it (what did they switch to?)
- People who use it but have workarounds (what are they working around?)
- People who use it in unusual or unexpected ways (what job are they hiring it for?)

My interview focus (complete before each interview):

<b>Interviewee name/role</b>	
<b>Purpose of this interview</b>	
<b>Behavior I want to understand</b>	



## Set the Stage

Start every interview by orienting the person. Say something like:

"I'm not here to evaluate your performance or audit anything. I want to understand how you actually work — specifically around [topic]. The best thing you can do is tell me real stories about specific times things happened, not what you think you should be doing or what you usually do in general."

## Core Questions

These questions surface the moments that matter most — when someone started, stopped, or changed how they do something.

Question	Why it works
Tell me about the last time you had to [do the task]. Walk me through exactly what happened.	Anchors to a real event. Forces a story instead of a policy answer.
Before you started using [product/process], how did you handle this?	Reveals the before state and what prompted the switch.
When did you realize the old way wasn't working?	Surfaces the triggering event — often the real problem.
Was there a deadline or specific event that forced you to change? If not, what finally made you change?	Distinguishes acute pain from slow-burn frustration.
What alternatives did you consider? What was good or bad about each?	Reveals what you're actually competing with.
With [current solution], what can you do that you couldn't before?	Identifies the job the product is being hired to do.
What's the hardest part of figuring out how to do this?	Often surfaces the real friction that no one has named.
Was there any point where you got stuck?	Exposes workflow gaps and workarounds.
Did you make this decision yourself, or was someone else involved?	Reveals decision authority and social dynamics.

## Redirect Phases

Use these when the interviewee starts answering with hypotheticals or generalizations:

- "That's helpful context. Can you think of a specific time that happened? Tell me about that."
- "You said you usually do X. Tell me about the last time you actually did that."
- "Forget what you think you should do. Tell me what you actually did."



## AFTER THE INTERVIEW — WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Review your notes looking for:

<b>Jobs</b>	What was the person actually trying to accomplish? Not the task — the underlying goal.
<b>Behavior changes</b>	When did they start or stop doing something? What caused it?
<b>Workarounds</b>	What do they do when the official process or system fails them?
<b>Emotional signals</b>	What made them frustrated? What made them feel relief?
<b>Competing solutions</b>	What else are they using? Excel? Email? Asking a colleague?

### My Interview Notes

Key stories and observations:

*Record specific stories — what happened, when, what changed*

Jobs I heard (what were people really trying to accomplish?):

*List the underlying goals, not the features requested*

Workarounds or friction points I noticed:

*What are people doing that they shouldn't have to?*

Hypotheses I want to validate next:

*What do I now suspect is the real problem?*