My name is John Liebhardt.

Before I became a Librarian a few years ago, I spent eight years as a reporter. I worked mainly outside the United States, working five years in Burkina Faso (West Africa) and three years in Fiji, where I mostly covered bloggers.

During my time in West Africa, I interviewed a variety of people, from local journalists to cotton farmers to street kids selling wares on the side of the road. Today, I continue to dabble in journalism, writing stories for local media.

I really enjoy leveraging my experience interviewing by talking to my present Library patrons, better understanding what they want and expect.

I received a MS in Journalism and Communications from the University of Oregon.
At Libraries, we often speak to our patrons. We check out their books and other items, we answer their questions, we help them find information. However, do we really understand our patrons? Do we know what they want and need from an information provider?

There are lots of places to find information on user behavior and needs: Pew Center Reports, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation reports, news sources like LJ INFOdocket and blogs Stephen’s Lighthouse.

While those sources (and many others) are insightful, they only talk in generalities. 18 to 34 year olds. College freshman from 11 major universities. People who earn less than $49,000 per year. These great resources don’t say anything directly about YOUR patrons. The best way to find out what your patrons need and want from their library is to ask them. The best way to do that is to interview them.
The full quote should read: Interview: A focused conversation between two or more persons to gather information on behalf of an unseen audience.

Many different disciplines use interviews. Journalists, of course, are the most notable practitioners -- mostly because their work takes place in public.

Therapists use a form of interview to help people, from understanding a patient’s personality to diagnosing mental health issues. Social scientists often use interviews, and they spend a fair deal of time thinking about interviews. Marketers and product developers utilize interview techniques to better understand consumer behaviors.

In Listening In Everyday Life: A Personal & Professional Approach, Michael Purdy and Deborah Borisoff write Interviews are often seen as the interchange of ideas. They are conversations with structure and purpose. In the chapter called In-Depth Interviewing, from the book Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method, John M. Johnson argues that interviews much have an interactive quality between speaker and listener.

In The Art of the Interview: Lessons from a Master of the Craft, by Lawrence Grobel writes interviews are like open conversations, but with one distinct leader: the interviewer. This person needs to know how to lead a conversation, how to push it forward and how to react and ad lib.

Photo Credit: Easter Island Ahu Tongariki by Nicolas de Camaret
The full quote reads: “Interviewing is about people. They’re not chemical compounds, and they don't always act predictably. But there is a predictable part.”

It is from John Sawatsky, one of journalism’s most prolific thinkers on how to conduct a successful interview. (He now coaches reporters at ESPN).

Interviews are the easiest and most effective ways to understand what people want. It is a great way to reach into other peoples’ worlds.

Interviews are the only way to know detailed information about other people, writes John M. Johnson in In-Depth Interviewing (in the book Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method). No amount of book research can do that for you.

Interviewing also provides a window into peoples’ interior lives.

“Interviewing gives us access to the observations of others,” writes Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein in the SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft. “If we had the right informants, we can learn about the quality of neighborhoods or what happens in families or how organizations set their goals.”

Photo credit is CBP Seizes Hazardous Toy Dolls by US Customs and Border Protection.
Interviews are no longer merely an instrument of collecting data – they are an integral part of our society. It is normal to ask people questions, writes Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein in the SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft.

Think Larry King or Oprah Winfrey and the rise of the confessional interview. And, let’s not forget the voyeuristic aspects of reading or listening to interviews. As audience members, we want to know. That is why interviews should be considered neither art or science. Think of them as more of a social talent, writes Lawrence Grobel in The Art of the Interview: Lessons from a Master of the Craft.

In the book Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data, Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, argue that people like to talk about themselves. They are pleased when other people are interested in them.

Interviewers should use this to their advantage. Don’t be shy. Showing interest in other people is more than half the work to getting someone to agree to speak to you. One of the most important lessons I learned in journalism school is that there is no such thing as a reluctant interviewee. Whether it is pride, vanity or the hope to get a message across, we all have reasons to submit to interviews. (You’ve seen this many times before – especially on television.)

Photo Credit: Microphone head by sparetomato.
John M. Johnson wrote these words regarding interviewing in the chapter In-Depth Interviewing from the book Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method.

Because interviews are so ingrained in our society, most people understand their basic rules. People have also answered questions in a formal setting before. When you ask people questions in a formal setting, it’s best not to confuse them, Johnson writes. Start slowly with a little bit of informal talk. Some interviewers start by throwing a few easy, soft-ball questions, just to get them used to speaking to you.

Think of an interview as a collaboration, which means you have to build up trust with the interviewee. Don’t let people be too self-conscious.

"Putting together a good interview involves many skills: One must be able to converse like a talk-show host, think like a writer, understand subtext like a psychiatrist, have an ear like a musician, be able to select the best parts like a book editor, and know how to piece it together dramatically like a play right."

The Art of the Interview: Lessons from a Master of the Craft, by Lawrence Grobel.

Bill Gillham, in his book Research Interviewing: A Range of Techniques, compares interviews to questionnaires. But his definition is also a good way to look at interviews as a whole. Interviews are inherently more flexible than surveys. You can just 'listen in' and ask questions, to conduct a full-scale research interview with recording products.

Interviews provide a lot of give and take – the relationship between interviewer and interviewee is interactive. You can respond to questions and answers, you can adjust, prod for deeper answers or just ask for a clarification.

Photo Credit: story of my day by Michael Pollak.
If you get anything out of this talk, this is probably the most important part: How to ask questions from a journalistic standpoint. The underlying goal of an interview is to gain information. You won’t get good information without asking the right questions. While many disciplines conduct interviews, journalists (I think) have the most developed sense of what makes a good question. (At least some journalists do.)

Journalism is inherently adversarial, (though not necessarily antagonistic), so Librarians and information professionals can’t use the entire journalistic toolbox. Here’s a few pointers on how to ask proper questions from John Sawatsky, a leading figure in the field.

• It is most important to learn information; not prove a point.
• Use open ended questions: Who, what, where, when, why, how
• Important question (for journalists): How do you know that?
• Close-ended questions are good for clarification (Do you write all your papers on an iPad?)
• Shorter questions generally bring out longer responses than longer ones
• Only ask about one topic per question. Don’t overload questions. Don’t put two questions together, like: What do you think of our new website? It’s very easy to use, isn’t it?
  - In fact, use only neutral words when asking questions. Don’t add your opinion or commentary to any questions.
  - Sawatsky also says: Listens to answers and build new questions from there.
  -- At bottom, remain neutral to the subject. Don’t engage emotionally with them. Don’t prod with ‘gotcha’ questions. (This is still pretty controversial with some journalists.)

Here’s a good primer on Sawatsky (pdf):

Photo Credit: Hammer by David Blaine.
A word about customer needs.

There are two types of organizations: Those that create products to meet customer needs and those that build products that create new needs. The second type is much harder to carry off. But these people will be the first people to say that understanding customer needs are worthless. Customers don't know what they want. (Steve Jobs often said this.)

I don't agree. Anytime you can talk to people about their perceptions -- especially in our chaotic information environment -- it’s a good thing. It helps us hone our products and services. However, patrons do have a hard time explaining their needs. They may not possess the right vocabulary. Few people think about underlying needs (which is why marketers call them 'latent needs'). And, you – not the customer – are the expert of what your organization stands for and its mission.

When putting together interview questions, it’s best to stay in the world of the concrete. What do people think about your specific product or service: How do you find our Ebook rental system? How would you like to receive communications from the Library? It's very difficult for people to answer truthfully about hypothetical problems or situations.

Even with the best questions, consumers express their needs and wants in vague, general terms. Your job is to connect the dots and translate these vague needs. But once you've spoken to enough customers, you can start to understand some of your patrons' latent needs. This is much more art than science, but it will lead to deeper understanding of your patron base. This could make it easier create new products or services down the road.

Photo Credit: NASA
Interview preparation has two parts: The first is preparing your interview project. Preparing for these projects can be very time consuming. Don’t come with just some questions. Think about what information you want to get before you begin interviewing. For Librarians, perhaps you want to know opinions on a specific product or service. Or, perhaps you’d like to perform a general user needs interview: How do you use our Library and how can we do better?

Some people like to get their courage up and rush ahead and start talking to people. This is not the best idea. You should have a set of questions ready to go before you do any interviews. That means people you speak to are basically answering the same questions.

Because I am more informal, I don’t mind if interviews veer off target (I’ll take any information I can get). However, if you’re in an academic setting (with human subject responsibility), you may be forced to ask the same questions of each participant. (More on this later.)

Nonetheless, you want people answering the same basic questions so you can make comparisons and pull together similarities and differences.

Part two is about preparing to interview individual people: Once you’ve figured a list of topics you’d like to discuss, you should learn about each person you want to interview. Some say you should try to know too much about your subject. "I embark on interviews to validate my observations." Writes Carol A.B. Warren in the SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft.

However, Lawrence Grobel in The Art of the Interview: Lessons from a Master of the Craft argues don’t prepare too much. You may end in awe of the subject.

John M. Johnson, in In-Depth Interviewing from the book Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method, argues if you are ignorant on the subject, you are not the correct person to partake in the interview.
As you become more experienced as an interviewer, you will become more economical with the number of questions you ask.

This is also true as you make your way through your specific research project. At the beginning of the project, you may be intent to let interviewees speak at length. However, after you’ve interviewed a number of people, you begin to ask questions that ties directly to the research.

Writing questions for an interview can be quite difficult. Write specific questions that answer your research need. Then group the questions into topics, getting rid of the redundancies. Try to find a method to make the topics and questions naturally lead from one to another.

When writing questions, boil them down to use the fewest words. (Extraneous adjectives and qualifiers can confuse people and they are methods to sneak in biases.) Balance word economy with making the questions natural sounding, which means you have to practice asking them.

It is best to ask the questions to a few people – not connected directly to your project – to make sure you are getting the information you want to get.

I generally type all the questions up and print out the paper. This is especially important if you want to be sure to ask the same question to every interviewee.

Photo Credit: Any Questions? By Michael Janssen
Like I pointed out before – most people like to be interviewed. And, in terms of these type of interviews, most people like to be helpful. (Especially for their Library.)

Asking people to speak to you is quite easy. You can ask them in person – especially if they don’t look busy. Tell them who you are, what you’d like to do and how much time it will take. I generally say 15-20 minutes for a more general interview, mostly because it seems like an innocuous amount of time.

However, I was talking to people during the day about the library they used for work. A person browsing shelves in a public library may not want to give up 20 minutes. So, you can either shorten the amount of time for an interview (and gain less knowledge) or find other ways to find people to talk.

Email is also a good way to do this, especially if you are in a special library or an academic library, where it’s not uncommon for people to receive communication from their library. Make the email short and to the point. And let them know you can work around their schedule.

Here’s a pretty successful sample email I wrote to researchers:

My name is [your name here] and I am [your title here]. I am interested in speaking with you briefly about how you conduct research and how [name of library here] can better meet your needs.

I understand you are extremely busy, but I don’t think the conversation will last more than 20 minutes.

My schedule is fairly flexible, so I can work around your schedule.

Thank you in advance for your time,

[name]

Photo Credit: Wes Jumping In Lake by Martin Cathrae
When the interview begins, it’s best to start with a few introductions. Tell them again who you are (if they don’t know), what you are doing and what you are asking them to do. This may be a good time to go over why you want this information. You should also reiterate the amount of time you intend to take. Please be respectful of schedules. If you go over the time frame, make it sound like it’s their idea.

Journalists argue when is the best time to pull out your notebook. Some do so after the small talk part is over, claiming it signals to the person that we are here for business. Others pull it out right away, disclaiming any arguments that notebooks make people nervous.

Whenever you decide to pull out your notebook, always make sure the interviewee understands that you are recording this with either your notes or their voice (if using a voice recorder, like an iPhone). Recorders can make people freeze up and put a stop to the interview. (You also have to transcribe conversations from voice.) If the person wants to stop the interview, you can ask them to reconsider. Perhaps they don’t like something about the interview – say, the tape recorder. You may have to reschedule. But stay patient, says Lawrence Grobel in the Art of the Interview: Lessons from a Master of the Craft. Lot’s of people have

If they hesitate, you can explain to them the rules of anonymity for your study. Even if you are recording the interview, it’s always best to take a few notes. This allows you to find important parts of your tape.

After the interview, write out your notes immediately. Not two hours later. Or, three days later. You’ll forget important parts unless you write it down immediately.

Photo: Musée école Nancy garden chair via Wikipedia.
In the book Listening In Everyday Life: A Personal & Professional Approach, Michael Purdy and Deborah Borisoff write that most people listen to non-authority figures passively.

Interviewers cannot do that. Listening is an active process, and interviewers cannot understand people without fully hearing them. Listening can be a learned skill. You have to want to do it, though. It is becoming an active participant in the conversation and (as an interviewer) thinking about the speaker’s message and its context. You must be mentally alert while interviewing, writes Lawrence Grobel in The Art of the Interview: Lessons from a Master of the Craft. You have to be ready to challenge the interviewee’s thoughts and to be challenged in return.

Many interviewers worry so much about their next question, they don’t really hear what the person is saying. Be aware of letting your mind wander. One way to do this is to use verbal cues: “uh huh” or “yes” or “go on.” This validation will let the speaker continue talking and it keeps your mind focused.

It’s best to be curious about peoples’ lives and perceptions and understand you use interviews as a learning tool. You also should try not to be judgmental and learn how to empathize with people. Your questions may not sound difficult to you, but you have been thinking about this issue for a long time. If you catch a person off guard, he may have a hard time answering. While it may sound nice to have people ask you questions, it can be nerve wracking.

Photo Credits: Listen to Me! By Jonathan Powell
Because interviewing involves a power structure (I ask the questions and you answer them), ethical considerations are paramount.

People have given you their time and are expressing their opinions, the least you can do is make sure their information is kept safely.

Here are a few things to consider:

• Always ID yourself, never begin asking questions without telling people who you are and what you will do with the information.
• Provide informed consent: Perhaps you can write something up about the research and give it to them.
• Have a plan to store the data securely.
• Have a plan to anonymize the results. You can label results in cohorts: College freshman or community member from 23rd Ward, etc.
• Will you give the interviewees the right to read the transcript of the interview? (Allowing people to read their library interviews never bothered me. I also sent them any reports or documentation I created when finished with a group of interviews.)
• Don’t forget to take into account differences in social class, race, etc. It may not matter to your subject, but it is inherent to some topics.

Interviews can be very personal conversations (even if you’re just talking about search strategies). You may build up a mutual amicability between your interviewee. Even friendships have occurred because of interviews. However, John M. Johnson warns you must inform the interviewee that you will be using this information for other, professional purposes.

Photo: Hong Kong Central Library Interior Bookcase Interior, via Wikipedia.
Here's a nice checklist from a social science interview practitioner, Bill Gillham, in his book Research Interviewing: The Range of Techniques:

• Do you give enough attention to 'settling in' the interviewee?
• Do you explain the purpose of the interview?
• Do you explain how you are going to organize the interview?
• Do you give the impression of being organized and in control?
• Do you frame the questions?
• Do you come across as patient and attentive?
• Do you rush in with supplementary questions or suggest answers?
• Do you miss cues for probing?

Photo credit: Mind Mapping by INIVIC Family
One reason people may be reluctant to interview patrons is that it will give people a soapbox to complain about library services or just about anything else. That is a legitimate worry. An interviewer must remain in control of the process. One way to circumvent the soapbox is to make sure your questions guide the discussion.

This means if the person starts to drift off topic, you have to nudge them back. This may sound difficult, but chances are you’ve done this in a professional situation before: Letting the person have his say then simply restating the question or asking them the same question using different words.

If people use particularly positive or negative adjectives, ask them to provide examples. If people start to speak in general terms, also ask them to provide examples. This is a good rule of thumb for most examples: The better the anecdotes, the more you’ll understand the person and their needs.

One counterintuitive point: Embrace silence during the interview. Let a person think over your question or think over their answer. Don’t rush in and try to fill space. Let silence build up even past a few beats. Some people need 15 to 20 seconds to think through their answer; or, maybe they’re trying to remember something. Don’t be embarrassed. The interviewee will speak up eventually.

Photo Credit: Dial (Colorized) by Adam Rubock
A single interview generally comes to an end when you have no more questions to ask or no more statements to clarify. Time may have something to do with that, too.

Interview projects are a little different. Abbie Griffin in a chapter called Obtaining Customer Needs for Product Development (from the book The PDMA Handbook of New Product Development) says that speaking to 20 customers will provide product designers with enough information for 90 percent of customer needs.

Depending on your research project, you’ll most likely know when you’re finished with interviewing patrons, writes John M. Johnson in In-Depth Interviewing (in the book Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method).

He calls it the saturation point: The answers will become very stable and no one seems to be shedding any new light. It’s this time, though, that you must remain vigilant against letting your mind drift. Instead of being reminded of the sameness of answers, look for deviations. They could be present and will be very important when you put your findings together.

Photo Credit: Water Splash by Andy Rogers
“Anything else to add?” Is the best final question. It puts a stamp of finality on your interview, which can be a very personal process.

Also, beware that people may perk up once you put your notebook away. If they are saying something important, keep the notebook closed (and/or tape recorder off) and let them say their piece. You may be able to put it together after you’ve left.

Photo Credit: Stars by robin_24