

Exploration Methods Overview

Below are some common research methods used in design thinking. As you build your exploration plan, we suggest using a mix of methods so you can listen to what people think as well as see what they do. Try a few different ones to get a sense of the value each provides.

Please note that we did not include surveys in our methods guide. They can be used as a supplement to some of these other methods, but in general, they don't provide the quality and depth of information that foster breakthroughs in insight.

Individual interviews

Engaging people one-on-one for in-depth conversations.
Good for:

- Discovering the thoughts, feelings, emotions, attitudes, motivations, and aspirations of each person
- Establishing a rapport with the person to gain more open, honest perspectives



Group interviews

Engaging multiple people around a topic. Good for:

- Learning about a culture of a group through their interpersonal dynamics
- Providing a platform for many voices to be heard



Expert interviews

Engaging those who already have deep knowledge about the subject. Good for:

- Building context around how a system works, the history around your topic, cultural or sociological implications, regulatory implications, or new technologies
- Helping stakeholders feel like they are part of the process
- Enhancing other empathic approaches



Observation

Observing people in context. Good for:

- Getting an unbiased view into what people actually do, rather than what they say they do
- Seeing how people “work around” a challenge
- Gaining insight into the flow of activity within a setting, such as such as mapping the path of children at an amusement park, or observing people’s use of technology in a coffee shop



Shadowing

Gaining perspective by following people through their day-to-day lives. Good for:

- Blending the values of observation and interview
- Gaining insight into the motives guiding certain decisions or behaviors as they are happening



Participant self-documentation (Collaging, journaling)

Letting people frame and record their own experiences for you. Good for:

- Learning from people when you can’t interview or observe them directly
- Giving people valuable prep-work for an interview
- Tracking patterns in habits, such as journaling about an experience over a period of time (i.e., daily diary of adapting a lesson plan)
- Having a collection of a person’s experience (photos, videos, notes) without having to intrude
- Gaining insight into deep-seated attitudes, motivations, or beliefs through projective techniques (i.e., having a teenager create a collage that reflects her self-image)

