Concrete Examples and Critical Incidents

When you conduct user interviews, you want to get descriptions that are as accurate as possible. Generally, people are not good at recollecting if you give them abstract questions. There's a big difference between trying to get behind people's thought processes for the actions they take—whether mundane or not—and asking them just to give an account from a recent experience of theirs. Thus, you will get many more details if you ask them for *concrete* examples. Here are two good ways to elicit detailed and accurate descriptions from your interview participants.

Concrete Examples

If you want to understand how your interview participants normally do something, ask for concrete examples rather than an abstract overview. Here's an example of two different ways to ask questions if you want to understand how people go grocery shopping:

ABSTRACT
How do you normally go grocery shopping?

vs.

CONCRETE
Describe what you did the last time you went shopping.

If you ask participants for concrete examples, you are likely to get many more details, especially if you ask follow-up questions about anything in a participant's description that first strikes you as vague or unclear.

Critical/Memorable Incidents

If you ask about incidents that are rich in emotional content, people are likely to remember a lot more details.

You could ask about a memorable incident—or a critical incident if you know you are mostly interested in negative examples. For example:

> Tell me about a memorable incident you had when using your digital diary.

Often, people will describe the incident in a way that tells you about things that *don't* work or work *particularly well* in a design. You should also follow up with questions that allow you to follow the course of the incident and ask the participant how technology might have worked better.

When you follow up on answers, your questions will be free-form and situated, but keep in mind what you want to get out of the interview and steer your follow-up questions in that direction at all times.