CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE ON SECURITY THREATS

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GENERAL

# Getting Information Quickly: The Time Critical Questioning (TCQ) Protocol

A new rapport-based interviewing protocol designed to enable emergency and other operational responders to obtain key information efficiently in time-limited contexts and urgent incidents.

> **Wasting time with unproductive or inadequate questioning approaches may place people in danger**

## INTRODUCTION

Getting information quickly is crucial in law enforcement and operational security contexts. Consider an active shooter incident involving witnesses or hostages who manage to flee the scene. Capturing information about perpetrators, weapons, locations, or escape routes as rapidly as possible is essential. Wasting time with unproductive or inadequate questioning approaches may place people in danger. In other contexts, handlers or other practitioners in security critical roles may only have limited time to obtain critical intelligence information from sources or other individuals due to either hostile environments or circumstances in which engaging in an extended interaction with the individual is not feasible for security reasons. Again, ad hoc questioning approaches are unlikely to be optimal in such time-sensitive scenarios.

Given an absence of science-based techniques for use in such contexts, Lorraine Hope and team developed the Time Critical Questioning (TCQ) protocol (Hope et al., 2025) to support information gathering when limited time is available and the reporting of target or actionable information is a priority. The initial study used a novel immersive research method whereby participants completed a challenging Escape Room and were afterwards interviewed individually to find out key information about how they escaped. Participants interviewed using the TCQ protocol provided significantly more correct actionable information about 'how to escape' than participants in the control group (modelled on a direct approach).

This initial research provided the first empirical evidence that a rapport-based orienting instruction,

focused on aligning the roles, goals, and expectations of interviewer and interviewee delivered at the outset of a brief interview, significantly and positively impacts the information provided by a cooperative interviewee under time-sensitive conditions (Hope et al., 2025). Specifically, the data show that use of the TCQ protocol facilitated the reporting of more actionable information than a commonly used approach in practice, at no cost to accuracy, in a time-limited interview.

## WHAT IS THE TIME CRITICAL QUESTIONING (TCQ) PROTOCOL?

The TCQ is a rapport-based interviewing protocol designed to facilitate reporting of target information by cooperative interviewees in situations where (i) information needs to be accessed quickly due to the nature of the incident, or (ii) there is limited time available for the interview or debriefing due to operational constraints. Drawing on existing best practice in investigative interviewing and clinical contexts, the TCQ protocol comprises the I-RELATE instruction and effective follow-up questioning.

**I-RELATE** is an acronym for the steps the interviewer takes to frame the interview at outset.

Specifically, the interviewer **introduces (I)** themselves and establishes the **role (R)** of the interviewee as the generator of information thereby transferring control of the interview to the interviewee. The interviewer details their **expectations (E)** relevant to the specific context of the interaction, while working to **line (L) up the goals** of both parties in the interaction. The next step involves mapping the **agenda (A)** for the interaction and providing priority **topic (T) cues** to facilitate reporting of relevant information by the interviewee. Finally, the interviewer provides an **explanation (E)** about the procedure, which ensures the interviewee knows what to do and expect.

- **I**NTRODUCION from the interviewer
- **R**OLE of the interviewee
- **E**XPECTATIONS of the interaction
- **L**INE-UP the goals
- **A**GENDA for the interaction
- **T**OPIC cues
- **E**XPLANATION about the procedure

This initial instruction is followed by high quality questioning practice to obtain the initial report and access further detail.

Whilst the initial research methodology enabled interviews of people who had engaged in an immersive experience (rather than passively viewing an act), the latest research has enhanced the ecological validity of the paradigm even more. Hope and her team developed a (mock) terrorist attack plot role-play methodology using XR technology to empirically test the efficacy of the TCQ protocol for the reporting of priority, actionable information relevant for security contexts.

## SECURITY RELEVANT INFORMATION

Participants were exposed to key intelligence information in overheard conversations plotting an imminent terrorist attack. Next, participants had the opportunity to verify this information by searching an immersive 360 virtual environment where materials relevant to the plot were in evidence. The priority intelligence information presented would enable authorities to (i) foil the attack (location/date/time/targets); (ii) identify the specific nature of the threat (bomb), and (iii) identify the perpetrators at the scene (description of accessories; getaway vehicle). Lastly, participants engaged in an urgent phone call to report this suspicious activity to the authorities, at which point they were interviewed for 10 minutes using either the TCQ protocol or a control interview.

**Participants interviewed using the TCQ protocol provided significantly more plot relevant details than those interviewed using a control interview.**

Participants interviewed using the TCQ protocol provided significantly more plot relevant details than those interviewed using a direct control interview. Accuracy rates for the information reported were also significantly higher in the TCQ condition. The interview data was coded using PLATCOM detail categories (person, location, action, time, capability, opportunity and motivation), and participants interviewed using the TCQ protocol provided significantly more correct information in every category (except opportunity) than participants interviewed using the control interview.

## WHAT ABOUT REMOTE TIME-SENSITIVE INTERACTIONS?

The initial research testing of the TCQ was conducted using face-to-face interviews, however, in many security contexts, time-sensitive interactions to obtain intelligence information are conducted remotely as a matter of necessity. Usually, these interactions take place via mobile phone. As such, the team tested whether the absence of nonverbal cues and physical presence affected rapport-building or had any other negative impact on the efficacy of the TCQ protocol by conducting the interviews remotely (tested via audio only calls). The original TCQ was tailored for remote interactions by adding verbal 'check-ins' with the interviewee to ensure engagement and understanding and to facilitate a smoother remote interaction.

The results confirmed that the benefits of the TCQ protocol for interviewing in time-sensitive contexts extend to interviews conducted remotely as well as face-to-face. Furthermore, this effective adaptation demonstrates the plasticity of the TCQ protocol as a flexible tool for interviewers which can be tailored to specific operational needs.

## IS IT BEST TO DO A HOT DEBRIEF NOW OR HOLD OUT FOR A LONGER INTERVIEW LATER?

Sometimes, practitioners have a choice on whether to interview someone for a short time immediately (i.e. a hot debrief, as soon as possible after the individual has obtained the information), or whether to wait to conduct a longer interview when time allows.

Hope and team therefore investigated whether the conduct of an immediate remote time-limited interview using the TCQ protocol could adversely affect the outcomes of subsequent interviews relative to a control initial interview or when there is no immediate interview at all. After a delay of 48–72 hours, all participants were interviewed remotely (via an audio-only call), using an open-ended interview approach with no time restriction.

There was no negative impact of the TCQ protocol interview on the quantity or the quality of the information in a delayed interview. Thus, having an initial TCQ interview (in the form of a hot debrief) as soon as information is available did not adversely affect having a long-format comprehensive interview afterwards. In fact, this was true across conditions – there was no difference in the amount of information provided in the delayed interview.

Participants initially interviewed with a control interview could, theoretically, have provided more information (i.e., they had more information to provide but this was not obtained by interviewers in the control interview condition). This also highlights the benefits of gathering more accurate and actionable information in an immediate interview using the TCQ protocol, especially in time-sensitive security contexts.

**“There was no negative impact of the TCQ protocol interview on the quantity or the quality of the information in a delayed interview.”**

# SUMMARY

## THE TCQ PROTOCOL IS EFFECTIVE FOR USE IN REMOTE INTERVIEWS

Interviewers using the TCQ protocol to obtain time-sensitive information about a (mock) terrorist plot in urgent 10-minutes audio-only interviews obtained significantly more plot relevant information from interviewees than those using a control interview which did not include the rapport-rapport-based I-RELATE instruction, with a large effect size.

There is no detrimental effect of using the TCQ protocol in an immediate interview on the amount or accuracy of information obtained in a later longer interview.

From a methodological perspective, this research also successfully developed an innovative experimental paradigm. This innovation used a complex virtual environment in which to immerse participants and, importantly, served to generate a rich encoding environment from which priority information could be extracted by the interviewer. This paradigm represents a move towards more immersive and engaging scenarios in which to examine reporting behaviour while retaining control to facilitate meaningful comparisons between experimental groups to test science-based interviewing tools that can inform practice in security contexts.

In conclusion, the current research replicates our previous findings and confirms the TCQ protocol as a promising innovation designed to address a longstanding gap in the investigative interviewing literature: how to best obtain information under time-sensitive or time-limited conditions from cooperative interviewees. Through use of the I-RELATE instruction, the TCQ protocol provides a useful structure for framing the interaction that is aligned with existing best-practice and evidence-based interviewing techniques.

In situations involving collapsing timelines, where failure to gather critical intelligence during an ongoing or unfolding event may have serious consequences, the current findings suggest that the TCQ protocol – even if used remotely by phone – could be a useful option for accessing priority information under time-sensitive conditions.

# READ MORE

**READ MORE**

- Hope, L., Kontogianni, F., Thomas, W. et al. Development and testing of a Time-Critical Questioning protocol for eliciting information in time-sensitive contexts. *Sci Rep* 15, 14855 (2025). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-96792-z
- https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cre90wg7wp2o

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### About the project

This CREST Briefing was produced from the Developing Best Practices for Online Elicitation. This project aims to identify the best elicitation techniques for use online, with a focus on building rapport and communication strategies.

*Study design, data analysis and findings were completed independently by the research team and should not be taken as representative of views held by those who fund CREST.*