



# THE TIMELINE TECHNIQUE

This technique uses a 'timeline' to provide a structure for remembering and reporting recently experienced events. In doing so it aids recall and elicits more detail.

5 MINUTE READ

INTERVIEWERS



## HOW DOES IT WORK

**“ The Timeline Technique helps interviewees recall and report events from a particular time period in sequence, identify individuals involved, and link those individuals with their actions. ”**

We use our 'working memory' to temporarily store and manage the information required to carry out complex cognitive tasks such as reasoning, decision-making, and organising recalled information.

Working memory has a limited capacity and can easily become overloaded. Recalling details about complex events that happened over a period of time is difficult for most people because it places a lot of demands on cognitive processing, including working memory. The Timeline Technique helps interviewees by giving them an intuitive way of organising their recall and reporting, which makes it easier to organise their thoughts and reduces demands on cognitive processing.

The Timeline Technique helps the interviewee to organise and report their recollections of the main events occurring over an extended period, place events in the order or sequence in which they

occurred, and identify key individuals encountered and the contexts in which they were encountered. Compared to a 'free recall' technique (e.g., "tell me everything you can remember about the events"), the Timeline Technique:

- is easier for the interviewee because it supports the remembering process
- typically yields more detail about descriptions of people, actions they took, sequences, and verbatim quotes
- enables the interviewer to access a detailed initial understanding of the interviewee's experiences over the relevant time period

As the method is largely self-administered, the interviewee is also less likely to encounter leading or suggestive questions that may influence or distort their account.

## WHEN CAN IT BE USED?

The Timeline Technique can be used, with a cooperative interviewee, in any debrief or interview where the goal is to elicit information that the interviewee may have come by over a period of time (days, weeks, or even longer).

It can be used:

- for a comprehensive 'download' of information, perhaps over several sessions
- for an initial offload of information, to give the interviewer an overview of the entire event or sequence of events. They can then focus on specific areas of interest in follow-up interviews.



## WHEN IS IT MOST USEFUL?

The Timeline Technique is most useful at an early stage in debriefs, for instance, during the first debrief after the events in question.



## DECEPTIVE INTERVIEWEES

### CAN YOU USE THE TIMELINE TECHNIQUE WITH A POTENTIALLY DECEPTIVE INTERVIEWEE?

The ability to detect deception using this technique has not yet been proven in research. However, there is reason to believe that it may be helpful in situations where an interviewee is being wholly or partially deceptive, or deliberately omitting information.

Reporting using a timeline format in an initial interview commits the interviewee to a particular (written) version of events. If this version of events represents a true account, it should not be difficult for interviewees to remember, and indeed expand on, the information originally provided in follow up interviews (when their initial account should be no longer visible).

If, however, the initial account is deliberately inaccurate or has deceptive elements, the interviewee must remember what exactly they reported initially and ensure they are consistent subsequently to avoid further investigation of these points.

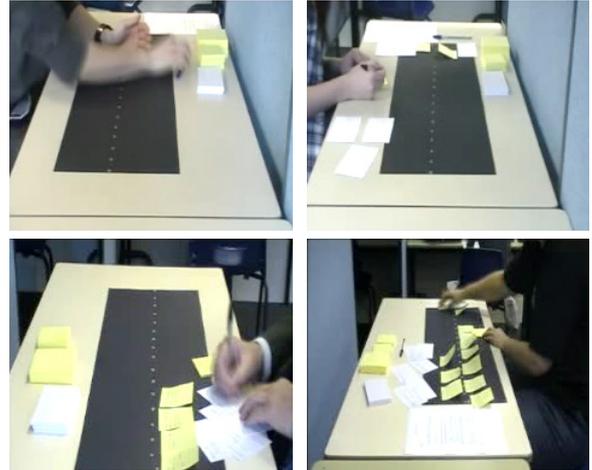
Having all the recalled events laid out along a timeline also helps the interviewer to spot any gaps and other weaknesses in the account (e.g. inconsistency, deliberate omissions or 'glossing over') and explore these weaknesses robustly via direct questions later.

## HOW TO USE IT

In a complex interview or debrief, timelines can be completed in a hierarchical order.

First, interviewees might complete a 'Scoping Timeline' which will establish the order of activities across the entire time period of interest.

Then interviewees could complete separate timeline(s) for specified periods, depending on the nature of activities reported in the Scoping Timeline.



### STEP ONE

Choose a location where you will not be disturbed for some time. You will need physical space (a large table or floor space) to map out the timeline.

### STEP TWO

Gather your materials. Ideally, you should have:

- a. Something on which to draw physical 'timeline', which represents the temporal space along which the to-be-remembered events 'took place', from start to finish. A roll of paper or strip of card, for instance.
- b. A set of index cards or post-it notes. These will be used for two types of information:
  - i. Person Description cards (for reporting details of people)
  - ii. Action Cards (for reporting details of actions taken by the interviewee and others)
- c. A set of coloured stickers to help the interviewee match particular people with particular actions, if identifying details, such as names, are not known.
- d. Something to write with (Sharpie-type markers are ideal)

### STEP THREE

Let the interviewee know what to expect and why you are using the technique. For example, you might say:

*"You have a lot to remember about the events we are discussing, so we are going to use a timeline to help you. The purpose of the timeline is to help you organise your memory of the event(s) you encountered. Importantly, it should help you put your account of the event(s) in the right order."*

### STEP FOUR

Talk them through adding detail to the timeline. You might say:

*"I'm going to ask you to complete a 'Scoping Timeline'. This will be an initial account of the period of time you spent in [the location], from the first day until [the last]. You're going to recall and report the activities you engaged in each day and when these took place. Also, I'd like you to identify people you interacted with during these activities."*

## STEP FIVE

Using the timeline you've prepared/drawn (step 2a), let the interviewee add to it using the cards and stickers (2b and 2c). Explain what the cards and stickers are for but let the interviewee fill them in and place them without your guidance or prompting. You might say:

*"Use the timeline to help you, and add cards and stickers:*

- a. *Use the Action cards [or post-its] for activities you observed or were involved in and when they occurred. Include details of who did what, and when.*
- b. *Use the Person cards [or post-its] to describe people you came into contact with. Include person descriptions and any other details you can remember. Use separate cards for different people.*
- c. *Link people to actions or events by placing them on the timeline, or using the coloured stickers to link key people to more than one action.*

*Use as many cards or materials as you need. Feel free to start anywhere on the timeline and re-arrange the cards if necessary to produce an accurate sequence of events."*

## STEP SIX

You now have a completed Scoping Timeline – an initial overview of the key events the interviewee has experienced. You can then drill down into Specified Time Periods that are of particular interest. You will again use timelines, but this time they will only cover the specific period. The interviewee will again use cards and stickers as in step 5.

To get even more detail you could use a 'context reinstatement' technique to get the interviewee to imagine themselves back in the situation. You might say:

*"I want you to take yourself back in time to when you were in [the location] and all the experiences and encounters you had there. I'd like you to use the timeline for this specific time period. For each incident you report, put yourself back in that situation. Think of your every thought and action [pause]. Think about how you were feeling [pause]. Who was with you [pause]? What could you see around you? Putting yourself back in the situation mentally will help you remember more about what you did, saw and heard."*



### BEAR IN MIND...

Interviewees vary in the ways they engage with and complete timelines. Some interviewees may take long pauses before commencing the task while they mentally retrieve details of the event before initiating the report.

Other interviewees will begin the task without delay and work to jot down key events or elements they want to make sure they remember to report. Some interviewees may take extended pauses when working through the task – or remove/destroy cards and replace them with others.

The kinds of processing pauses are an important part of the remembering process and should not be interrupted. Be patient! However, if the interviewee seems to really struggle to understand their task or gets distracted, then you might need to help them re-focus.

If the interviewee struggles with writing details you can write the cards for them, but be careful not to influence or bias their recollection – don't prompt or answer for them.

### READ MORE

Hope, L., Mullis, R. & Gabbert, F. (2013) Who? What? When? Using a timeline technique to facilitate recall of a complex event. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 2, 20-24.