

Types of Consent

Informed consent

“To be informed, consent must be given by persons who are competent to consent, have consented voluntarily, are fully informed about the research, and have comprehended what they have been told” (Chambliss and Schutt 2010, pp.57-8). Unless they are emancipated minors, individuals under 18 may never give consent. Also question the legal competence of people affected by mental illness, or institutionalized in the prison system. If a person is not legally competent to give consent, a parent or legal guardian has to give it. The participant may still give assent.

To guarantee that participants understand what they are consenting to, researchers should pay attention to the language they use. They should use the language that their target population will be most comfortable with. As a rule, they should refrain from using technical language and use an 8th grade level of English.

Depending on the methodology you are using, the population and topic you are studying, and the level of risk, informed consent may be implied or explicit, active or passive, and written or oral.

Implied consent

Participation in the study is proof of consent. This is acceptable for studies that provide anonymity, such as opinion surveys. A statement at the top of the instrument should clearly state that by filling it, the participant consents to participate, but does not waive any of their rights as research participant.

Projects using implied consent should use the [consent statement](#) template provided in this website, or a similar document, in their proposal. It provides active implied consent.

Explicit consent

Participants give consent by answering a specific question about their willingness to participate. This may be done in written (consent form) or oral form.

Active consent

Participants indicate their willingness to participate by agreeing to a specific statement, and then are included in the study. This is the most common, and recommended, form of consent for research.

Passive consent

Participants are informed of the study, and are considered to agree to participate unless they specifically decline to be included in the study. This procedure is often used in schools that send forms to parents asking them to allow their students to participate in various studies or activities. Although it yields high participation rates, it should be limited to completely innocuous research (typically not involving minors). It is acceptable for participant observation (ethnographic) projects.

Written

Participants give their consent by filling out a consent form. Written consent guarantees active and explicit consent, thus offering the highest guarantees to the participant. It is most appropriate in studies that contain some level of risk, but also in many studies with no risk above those of daily life, when participants disclose personal or sensitive information, when they are exposed to deception, or any experimental treatment. Experiments and in-depth interviews in particular should consider written consent.

Please use the template [informed consent form](#) provided in this site to obtain explicit, active written consent. If the participants are not considered legally competent, a parent or legal guardian has to give consent on their behalf. The form for [parental or legal guardian consent](#) gives explicit, active written consent for their charge to participate in research. Please be aware that once they become legal adults, children may revoke the consent given by a parent or legal guardian.

Some participants, although not legally competent, are able to make judgment about their participation themselves. This is the case for teenagers and some mentally impaired individuals, for instance. The [assent form](#) gives them an opportunity to express their agreement to participate in research in writing, beyond the consent given by a legal guardian or parent. Although the assent is not legally binding, and does not dispense a researcher from obtaining consent from a parent or legal guardian, it is advisable as sound ethical practice. It reinforces the voluntary nature of participation.

Separate consent forms have been designed to provide explicit, active written consent for photo, audio, and video recording. Capturing someone's image is more invasive than other forms of research. By signing the [photo, audio, video consent form](#), participants indicate that they are fully aware of the type of data that will be collected.

Oral

Oral consent should be considered when obtaining explicit, active consent is essential, but the risk or discomfort involved in the process is too great to make written consent a valid option. Some populations, such as criminals, undocumented immigrants, or the homeless, may be placed at legal risk, or be suspicious of leaving a written trace, and refuse to participate. Or, the topic of the research may be highly sensitive, because it concerns behavior and attitudes that, even though legal, are socially condemned. Should the records be exposed, or a criminal investigation take place, researchers themselves may become liable. Oral consent is also a valid option for participants that are uncomfortable reading and writing, and may be too embarrassed by the written consent process to participate in research. In that case, the researcher should record the reading of a consent statement, and the clear answers of the participants indicating willingness to participate. The recording verifies informed oral consent.

References

Chambliss, Daniel F., and Russell K. Schutt. 2010. *Making Sense of the Social World: Methods of Investigation* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: PineForge Press.