



DC STARTUP & TECH WEEK 2026 · TECH TRACK

Stop Guessing!

How to test your biggest startup assumptions

Javi Calderon · District Innovation

Hi, I'm Javi!



[linkedin.com/in/javi-calderon-dc/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/javi-calderon-dc/)

Designer, educator and founder of District Innovation. I help early-stage founders get clear on their product, their story and their brand.

15 years in startups. 7 years and 23 cohorts teaching UX at General Assembly. 130+ startup projects since 2018.





Today's Agenda

- **What are assumptions?**
- **User interviews**
- **Asking good questions**
- **Partner interviews**
- **Stop Guessing! Game**



**Who would you
rather?**

Who would you rather...



Land your plane in an emergency?

Army Ranger



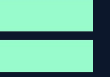
OR

John Travolta





Assumptions



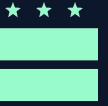
What is an assumption?





An **assumption is something that is taken for granted or accepted as true without proof.**

We make all kinds of assumptions...



Problem

"This is the real challenge our users are facing."

Solution

"This is the simplest and most effective way to solve our users' problem."

Customer

"People will pay money for this and use it regularly."

Resources

"We have the team, tools, and technology in place to make this happen."

Assumptions



We often make assumptions about:

- The demographics of our user base
- How they accomplish tasks
- Their needs
- Their behaviors, attitudes, frustrations

What questions might we ask to get insight into these topics?



**User research should be designed to
validate or invalidate the assumptions
you're making about your audience.**

Challenging assumptions



Step back and think... what assumptions are you making about the current situation you're in, or problem you're trying to solve? What are you **assuming** is true about the situation?

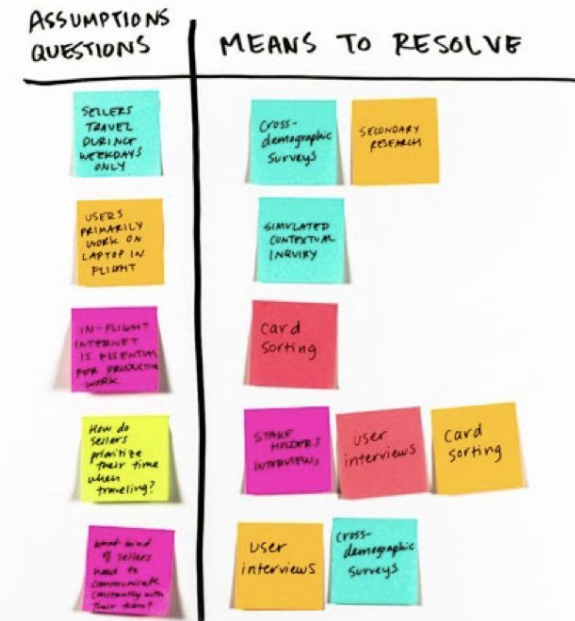
Example: if your assumption is that “our users primarily use a mobile phone for this activity”, maybe the question becomes “what tools do users use for this activity?”



Turn them into questions

List out as many assumptions as you can; then, try to think of questions you could ask to validate or invalidate each of those assumptions.

Example: if we assume that our users are mostly Mac users, we can ask a question about what type of devices they use.





The fastest way to test your assumptions
Go talk to the people you're building for.

Interviews

Who can we learn from?

Interviews are 1:1 conversations to help us gather information or empathize with our target audience.

Great interviews help us uncover motivations, frustrations, needs, behaviors and values.

Interviews are the backbone of keeping our process others-centered.



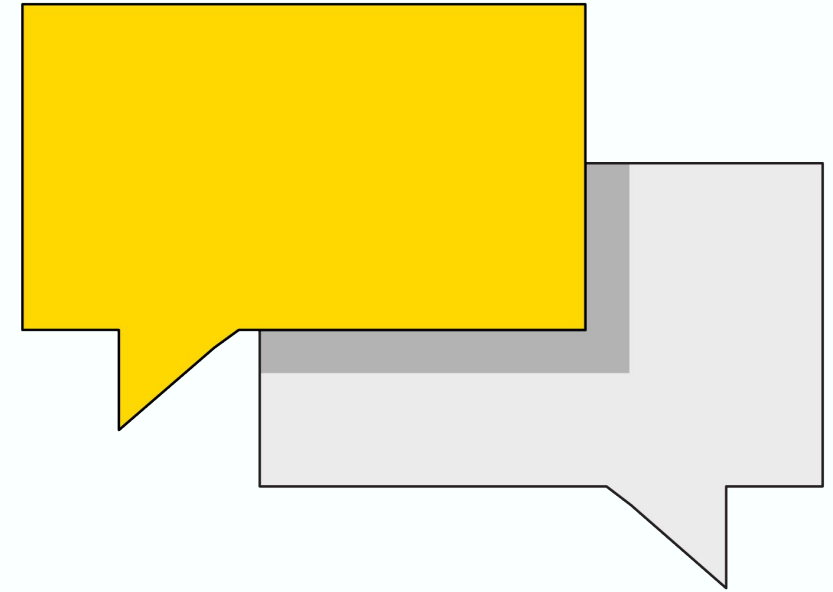


Asking good questions

Writing good interview questions



- Open-ended (not 'yes or no')
- Ask about actual behavior, not intent
- Avoid leading questions
- Avoid compound questions
- Avoid pointing out specific issues





let's try it!



Which is the better question?



Question 1

**Do you use a
budgeting app?**

OR

Question 2

**How do you keep
track of your
spending?**

Ask open-ended questions



Question 1

**Do you use a
budgeting app?**

OR

Question 2

**How do you keep
track of your
spending?**

Avoid yes or no questions

Which is the better question?



Question 1

**How many times did
you order takeout
last month?**

OR

Question 2

**How often do you
plan to order
takeout next year?**

Be specific, avoid hypotheticals



Question 1

**How many times did
you order takeout
last month?**

OR

Question 2

**How often do you
plan to order
takeout next year?**

Real behavior beats good intentions

Which is the better question?



Question 1

**How do you usually
pay for things?**

OR

Question 2

**Wouldn't you say
paying with your
phone is easier than
a card?**

Avoid leading questions



Question 1

**How do you usually
pay for things?**

OR

Question 2

**Wouldn't you say
paying with your
phone is easier than
a card?**

Don't put words in their mouth

How can we word this better?



Before

**A lot of people think
crypto is too risky.
What are your
thoughts on that?**



After

?

Remove the bias



Before

**A lot of people think
crypto is too risky.
What are your
thoughts on that?**



After

**How do you feel
about crypto as an
investment?**

Neutral, and still on topic



let's get started!





**Today, you'll interview each other to learn about
how DC's tech workers handle their money.**

Don't worry, nothing too personal ...

Write your assumptions

3 MINUTES



Write 5 assumptions about how DC tech workers manage their money.

Example: “Most people still pay with gold doubloons.”

Example: “People trust Venmo more than traditional banks.”

Use these to get you started:

Cash • Venmo • Bank • Online shopping • Amazon • Crypto • Investing • Financial advisor • Mortgage • Student loans • Credit cards • 401(k) • Saving • Retirement • Insurance • Rent • Tipping • Subscriptions • Debt • Budgeting

Write your questions

3 MINUTES



Turn each of your assumptions into a question.

Write 5–10 questions that could help prove your assumptions right or wrong. Follow the best practices in writing good questions that we talked about earlier.

Remember! Open-ended, about real behavior, and not leading.



Partner Interviewing

Interview a partner about how they manage their money for 9 minutes. Use your questions to test your assumptions.

- Interview each partner for 6 mins
- I will tell you when to switch!
- Follow the stories, not just the answers
- Pass on anything you don't want to answer



Check your assumptions

2 MINUTES



Of your 5 assumptions, how many held up?



Validated

Your assumption was **right**



Invalidated

Your assumption was **wrong**

Debrief!



So how'd it go?

01

How many held up? How many got busted?

02

What stood out?

03

What surprised you?

Your turn!

3 MINUTES



What's your biggest business assumption?

STEP 1

Write down the riskiest assumption you're making about your own business.

STEP 2

Write one interview question that would test it, using what we just practiced.

Takeaways



- ✓ Be wary of your assumptions
- ✓ You are not your user
- ✓ Talk to your target audience!
- ✓ Ask about what people did, not what they say they'll do
- ✓ Make decisions based on research not opinions



Questions?

More questions? Reach out!

Don't be shy!



Javi Calderon

DistrictInnovation.com

[linkedin.com/in/javi-calderon-dc/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/javi-calderon-dc/)





Thank You!

