

Mom Test Interview Script: 5 Questions for Past Behavior

BY JETTHOUGHTS TEAM - MAY 18, 2026 - 9 MIN READ

Template companion to the [Lesson 2.1 post](#). Open on a second screen during the call. Read questions verbatim.

Five questions that get the interviewee to tell you what they actually did, not what sounds polite.

The 5 Mom Test questions, in order:

Question	What it surfaces
Q1. Tell me about the last time [problem] happened. Walk me through what you did.	Anchors in a real episode - story over preference.
Q2. What did that cost you - in time, money, or sanity?	Quantifies the pain - an unquantified problem won't get paid for.
Q3. What have you tried already to fix this?	Surfaces existing workarounds - if they never tried anything, it never actually hurt.
Q4. On a scale of 1-10, how big a problem is this compared to everything else on your plate?	Calibrates urgency against the interviewee's whole problem stack - most "would be great if" problems land at 4.
Q5. Who else on your team feels this? How do they handle it?	Surfaces the buying committee and workarounds other people on the team already own.

Rob Fitzpatrick's book *The Mom Test* (2013) named the technique: ask about past behavior, not future intent. The questions on this page are the script. You keep them open on a second screen during the call, read them as written, and listen for emotional language while you take notes by hand.

How to use this

Open this page on a second screen during the call. Read the questions as written - small wording changes ("would you" instead of "did you") flip the answer from past behavior back into polite hypothetical, which is the exact failure mode you are trying to avoid.

Take notes by hand, not by typing. Hand-writing slows you down enough that you stop transcribing and start listening for the three emotional flags below. Score each call 1-10 at the end, using Q4 and the flag count together. By interview 10, you have a validation score, not 10 unsorted transcripts.

Time budget: 25 minutes for the questions, 5 minutes for scoring notes. Total 30 minutes booked, 20 minutes of real talking. Do not go over. Run 60 minutes and you start pitching your idea in minute 35 and contaminate the sample.

The 5 questions - copy and paste

Q1 - The last-time question

Anchors in a real episode - story over preference.

“Tell me about the last time [problem] happened. Walk me through what you did.”

Pass signal: A specific story with a date, a time of day, a tool they opened, a person they messaged. “Last Tuesday at 9pm I spent 40 minutes copying numbers from three spreadsheets into a slide for the board. I called my CFO and she pulled the numbers from QuickBooks for me.”

Fail signal: Vague generality. “Yeah, I usually struggle with reporting.” “It happens all the time.” No date. No mechanic. The interviewee never opens an actual memory.

Follow-up (excavate): “Walk me through that specific Tuesday again. What did you do first?” The first answer is always thin, so keep going: “Where were you? What happened right before? What did you do next?” Then stop and let the silence sit - people fill it with the detail they were about to skip.

Q2 - The cost question

Quantifies the pain - an unquantified problem won’t get paid for.

“What did that cost you - in time, money, or sanity?”

Pass signal: A specific number with a unit. “Two hours every Tuesday night for the last six months.” “My CFO bills \$200/hour and she spent four hours on it last week.” “I missed my daughter’s bedtime three Mondays in a row.”

Fail signal: “It costs us time.” “It’s frustrating.” “It’s a lot.” Unquantified. The interviewee is being polite about a problem they don’t actually feel.

Follow-up: “If you had to put a number on it - dollars, hours, or ‘I’d quit my job over this’ - what would the number be?”

Q3 - The workaround question

Surfaces existing workarounds - if they never tried anything, it never actually hurt.

"What have you tried already to fix this?"

Pass signal: A named tool, a hired person, a custom script, a workaround that took setup time. "I pay \$79/month for Zapier to copy QuickBooks to Google Sheets. It breaks every two weeks. I have a VA on Upwork who fixes it."

Fail signal: "Nothing yet." "We just deal with it." "I've been meaning to look into something." If they never tried anything, the problem never actually hurt. There are exceptions (regulated industries, security, etc.) but the default reading is: no workaround means no urgency.

Follow-up: "What broke about the workaround? Why are you still talking to me about this?"

Q4 - The priority question

Calibrates urgency against the interviewee's whole problem stack - most "would be great if" problems land at 4.

"On a scale of 1-10, how big a problem is this compared to everything else on your plate?"

Pass signal: A 7 or higher with a comparison. "This is an 8. The only thing higher is hiring my next engineer." A 9 or 10 is rare and a strong signal.

Fail signal: A 5 or 6 with a soft justification ("it's annoying but we cope"). A 7 or 8 with no comparison to anything else - that's the polite-default score, not real urgency.

Follow-up: "What's at 10 right now? What would have to happen for this problem to climb to that 10 spot?"

Q5 - The buying-committee question

Surfaces the buying committee and workarounds other people on the team already own.

"Who else on your team feels this? How do they handle it?"

Pass signal: Names a specific colleague and their workaround. "My ops manager Jess feels this worse than I do - she keeps a separate Google Sheet that mirrors the one finance uses, because she doesn't trust the finance numbers."

Fail signal: "I'm the only one who deals with this." "Everyone else is fine." Either the problem is local and small, or the interviewee doesn't know how their team operates. Both are weak signals.

Follow-up: "Could you introduce me to Jess? I'd like to hear how she built that workaround."

The 3 emotional-language flags

While you are reading the questions, listen for three patterns in their answers. These flags do more work than the words "yes" and "no."

Frustration language. "I hate this." "It drives me crazy." "Every single week." "I can't believe we still do it this way." If the interviewee uses words with feeling, the problem is felt. Polite interviewees suppress feeling, which is exactly why you ignore polite answers.

Workaround language. "I've been meaning to..." "We hacked together..." "I pay [tool] \$X for this." "My VA does it manually." Workarounds prove the problem is real because the interviewee already spent time or money on a solution that doesn't fully work. The workaround is the budget you can pitch into.

Urgency language. "Last week." "This morning." "I missed my kid's birthday because of this." A problem that happened today is felt more sharply than a problem that happens "sometimes." Time-anchored urgency is the strongest signal in the set.

A passing call has 3+ flags across the five answers. A failing call has 0-1 flags - the interviewee is being polite to you. Two flags is ambiguous; treat as a 5/10 score.

What good looks like vs what bad looks like

Q1 - Bad answer: "Yeah I usually struggle with reporting."

Q1 - Good answer: "Last Tuesday at 9pm I spent 40 minutes copying numbers from three spreadsheets into a slide for the board. I called my CFO. She had QuickBooks open, pulled the numbers in 90 seconds. I felt stupid."

The good answer has a date, a time, a tool, a person, a duration, and feeling. The bad answer is a polite generality. Same problem, same interviewee - the wording of the question and your willingness to wait for a real story is the difference.

Q4 - Bad answer: "Probably a 7."

Q4 - Good answer: "This is a 4. Hiring my next engineer is at 9, fundraising is at 8, payroll automation is at 5. Your thing would be useful but I am not going to pay to fix it this quarter."

The good answer is honest and ranks the problem against real competitors for the interviewee's attention. It might sting. That sting is the data. A polite 7 with no comparison is the most common failure - the interviewee is being kind because you are a real person who showed up to ask.

Closing - Bad: "So if I built this, would you pay \$49/month?"

Closing - Good: "Thank you. Two more questions: who else on your team should I talk to about this, and would you be willing to look at a 5-minute prototype in two weeks?" - then ask for the introduction and the calendar slot before you hang up.

The bad closing pulls them back into hypothetical preference and gives you a useless “I’d consider it.” The good closing converts the call into the next two assets: an introduction (Q5 working in production) and a commitment to look at a prototype (the asks-for-effort test from Fitzpatrick’s book).

What to do after the call

- **Score the call 1-10 within 5 minutes of hanging up.** Use Q4 plus your emotional-flag count. Write the score in your notes file. If you score later you will round up.
- **If 7 or more of your 10 interviews scored 7+:** the problem is validated - BUILD. Move to the [Mom Test Synthesis page](#) and the Validated Problem Statement template.
- **If 4 to 6 scored 7+:** PIVOT - re-evaluate the ICP, the problem framing, or the question wording, then book 5 sharper interviews with the narrower group. Sometimes Q1 is wrong (the problem context is too narrow) - retry with broader phrasing first.
- **If fewer than 4 scored 7+:** KILL - the problem is too weak for this customer. Return to Lesson 1.1 with a different [customer] or [problem] blank.
- **Forward the transcripts to your founder friend one step ahead, or a peer from any founder community** before you make the build/no-build call. Two readers catch what one misses.

Skip this script and run “feature interest” interviews (“would you pay for X?”) and you almost always launch into silence. The Mom Test isn’t a productivity trick. It is the only way to keep your interviewees from being polite while you are gambling six months of your life on what they said.

Built by [JetThoughts](#) as part of the [From Idea to First Paying Customer](#) curriculum.