



Documenting Consent: To Sign or Not To Sign?

Francisco Romero Pastrana, Privacy Officer at Utrecht University

Summary:

A signed consent form has traditionally been used to record and demonstrate that a participant has effectively provided their consent. While this is appropriate for projects where the participant's true identity is expected to be readily available (i.e., medical research), it is not appropriate for (social sciences & humanities) research projects where participants real identities are not expected to be included in the research data.

Issues with signed consent forms:

- A signature is meaningless if it cannot be authenticated – it is easy to fake.
- A signature can be highly identifiable – negates research promise of participant anonymity.
- A signature commonly signals a binding commitment – participants may feel a signed consent cannot be withdrawn.
- A signature reduces participation – people are understandably wary of signing documents.

What about the GDPR?

- Collecting signatures just to prove consent would be considered as an unnecessary processing of personal data – [Art. 11\(1\)](#).
- A signature is not needed to achieve the (scientific) goals of a project – [Art. 5\(1\)\(c\)](#).
- [Recital 32](#) states that consent can be documented by a 'written statement' (i.e., an email reply), 'electronic means (i.e., a checkbox), or by an oral statement.

Alternatives for documenting consent:

Interviews & focus groups: Consent is initially obtained when participants first accept the invitation (their response is a 'written statement') and confirmed orally in person (or online) before the start of the activity. This oral consent is then recorded by the researcher by drafting a statement (optionally dated and signed) where details like the participant's pseudonym, and the agreed terms (consented to participate, to audio recording, etc.) are properly documented. This document can optionally be dated and signed by the researcher, and shared with participants if requested.

Audio/video recordings: Consent is required *before* the recording can be started, so it cannot be recorded in the audio/video itself. It would also be meaningless to ask participants to repeat their consent just to have it audio/video recorded, as recordings are often erased after transcription.

The context is important: Documenting how consent is requested (by having copies of provided information like the invitation texts, information sheets and interview scripts/guides), can demonstrate that the consent was given *by a clear affirmative act establishing a freely given, specific, informed and unambiguous indication of the participant's agreement to the processing of their personal data*.

Ensure that consent is properly applied! Check our guidance for assessing consent: <https://geo-data-support.sites.uu.nl/personal-data/assessing-consent/> and conduct a Privacy Scan of your project before the start of data collection: <https://geo-data-support.sites.uu.nl/personal-data/privacy-review/>

