

Interviewing: The Art of Gathering Information

Five tips to conduct a better interview

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As journalists, it is our job to gather information and disperse it to our readers as quickly as possible. Anyone can tell you that stories just don't write themselves, and that the person writing the story doesn't know everything about the story either.

So, if we're not experts, what are we to do? Well, that's what interviewing is for. You can schedule an interview well in advance or one can just happen. Whether you are writing a features story or a hard news story, these tips might help you go a long way.

1.) Don't go into an interview with a long list of scripted questions. For a feature story, a script can take away the character from an individual. Keep the questions brief, and ask basic questions. For a news story, however, use a short list of questions that are extremely important to your story. You don't want to interview someone, and forget one question that your entire story was going to revolve around, do you?

2.) Features stories are not hard news stories! There is no need to have an extremely formal interview for a features story. When writing these types of stories don't think of it as an interview. Instead, you should view it as a great conversation. Give the person time to speak, and let them talk for as long time will allow both of you. Allowing someone this freedom will give you great insight to the person you are writing about.

3.) Never conduct an interview through e-mail unless it is absolutely unavoidable. It doesn't matter if it is an administrator, professor, or a student. The best way to use e-mail in this situation is to gain other contact information, such as a phone number. Also, let the person know what you need them for in the story. Try to get office hours for faculty and staff, and agree to meet at a time that is convenient for them.

4.) If you do have to conduct an interview through e-mail, be sure not to ask critical questions! E-mail gives the source a shield, preventing them from immediately answering a question. The source will have time to think about the answer, in order to formulate an answer. This can sometimes cause problems when writings stories concerning crimes, controversies, and major campus expansion. Also, you may not hear back for a while, and deadlines don't always change.

5.) In conclusion, remember that respect is important to all interviews that you conduct. By giving the interviewee the utmost respect, you are advancing your skills in the field of journalism. The person may be more inclined to talk to you in the future for other stories, and may be willing to recommend you to other potential sources.

Overcoming ‘Introverted-ness’

Asking the questions that count when they count

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One thing I’ve noticed about print journalists is our shyness. That shyness is probably the reason we chose print journalism rather than broadcast or radio.

But often, we do have to interact with the public and ask questions. Sometimes we’re asked questions by the general public. We’re the news people; we’re supposed to know everything, right? My first “real” assignment during my internship last year with a professional newspaper was to call people and find out about boating trends for the summer. Firstly, I don’t enjoy talking on the phone. Secondly, I have a bias against boaters because I participate in non-motorized water sports on the lake, and the boaters have a reputation for messing us up. Thirdly, I’m very shy with new people and I had no idea what to do. With shaking fingers, I dialed the first number. I ended up not being able to reach many people, and the story didn’t run, but I felt a little bit better and more assertive from that experience.

As I’ve done more stories with interviews, I have learned that my shyness does matter, but it’s not that big of a deal. I put on my journalist’s cap and go for it.

One thing that’s really helped me to overcome my introverted-ness is to focus the attention on the other person. Ask another question, probe a bit deeper into them, not me. Stories are also a lot easier when you’re hiding behind a big camera.

The major event in my journalism life that completely broke shyness for me was a sporting event. I was covering a hockey game for our campus newspaper. Hockey is a violent sport. There are no quiet, self-contained people who truly enjoy hockey. The fans bang on the Plexiglas separating us from the players. They yell and scream and it’s very loud. I had to interview people about the game. When I talked to them, I listened and took notes. Then, as if I was getting to know a character in a book, I asked another question, probing deeper, asking for clarification. I even interviewed two of the players, and they were really cool about it. It seems that people love to be interviewed and talk about themselves and how they feel and think about things.

That’s just fine with me because I do not, and I’m sure most print journalists can relate, open up quickly to strangers. Since then, I’ve become more confident in class and during debates (with the debate team on our campus). The confidence from speaking out in class or about what I believe in has made me a better journalist.

Now, since I’m the editor of the newspaper at a relatively small school, people talk to me a lot. They ask about ads, the paper, deadlines and letters to the editor, among other things. It can be overwhelming and from time to time I do want to run in the office and lock the door.

But I’m not a shy journalist any more. I smile, nod, act confident and ask a lot of questions about them.

Getting The Most From Your Interviews

*By Steve Buttry,
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1. Preparation

- Select the right person to interview. Early in your research on a story, you might need to talk to someone who can give you general background. Later, you might seek someone with a particular experience or viewpoint to fill your last hole or two. Use all the resources you can to find and connect with the right characters: Directories, colleagues, your own library, other sources, the Internet, Profnet. In particularly sensitive stories, a mutually trusted third party might help you connect with someone.
- Research before you interview. Learn as much as you can about the character and the topic before your interview. Be honest about what you don't know. You're talking to this person because you don't know everything. If you fake knowledge, you probably won't fool your character, and you will deprive yourself of a chance to learn from him.
- Plan your questions. An actual scripted list of questions is stilted. But you might benefit from rehearsing some questions in your head or even aloud in the car on your way to the interview. Consider in advance what follow-up questions you might ask, depending on how the character answers a question. It's a good idea to have a checklist of topics you want to ask about. Don't be a slave to the list during the interview, but glance at it toward the end, to see if you've overlooked something important. Use the elements of story as a checklist in planning your questions: What questions will help me understand the conflict? The character's motivation?
- Write what you can before the interview. If you write as you report, you will generate important, specific questions for later interviews. Your stronger sense of where your story is going will give a strong focus to subsequent interviews.

2. Rapport – Help the subject relax by addressing various elements of comfort:

- **Setting.** If possible, do the interview in the subject's environment: home, workplace, school, church, place of leisure or recreation. Allow

plenty of time and choose a time, if you can, that's convenient for the subject. A lunch or dinner interview works sometimes, but also has disadvantages: interruptions for food and service, subject talks so much she has little time to eat, it's more difficult to take notes. When you can, a moving interview is effective: Start out in the workplace, go out to eat, ride home in the character's vehicle, ask her to show you the house and the yard.

- **Honesty.** Tell the subject up front, when you arrange the interview and again when the interview starts, what you are working on. This doesn't mean you ask the tough questions first. But you tell the subject honestly what the story is about and what you will be asking about, so the tough questions don't feel like an ambush.

- **Complaints.** The person may have some gripes about how you personally, your paper or the media in general have covered something in the past. Listen to the complaints. Don't feel an obligation to respond specifically. If you do, don't respond defensively or argumentatively. Don't apologize if you're not sorry or if you were not responsible. The best way to handle most complaints is simply to listen and acknowledge, with brief explanations offered sparingly where appropriate.

- **Personal connection.** Seek ways to establish a personal connection with the character. Do you have a child the same age as one in the picture on the desk? Ask about his children and commiserate briefly about car seats or car pools or car insurance, whatever stage the children are. Is the diploma on the wall from your school? Chat briefly about professors you might have shared or how bad the football team is now or whatever interests you might share. Don't fake a connection or stretch for one, but be alert for genuine ways to make a connection. If you have little in common with the person, connect by showing genuine interest in the character beyond the narrow focus of your story.

- **Control.** Unless your character is used to being interviewed, she probably feels uncomfortable facing you and your notebook. Early in the interview and again toward the end, give her

some control. Sure, you're asking the questions, but answer her questions if she asks any. Listen politely as she wanders off the subject occasionally. People don't talk like we write. They might bury the lede (well, maybe they do talk like we write). Give her time to get around to it. Before you wrap up the interview, ask if there's anything else she'd like to add. In between, you will control the interview with some direct, tough questions. But if you share the control, your subject might feel comfortable enough to give you better answers.

3. Questions

- Start with broad open-ended questions or simply invitations to talk. "Tell me about that." "What was that like?" "Fill me in on . . ." These questions invite the character to tell you his story. They also give him a chance to tell you something you might not know enough to ask about specifically. And the general nature of the question gives the character a feeling of control as he answers.
- Move the interview along with responsive questions and statements that basically tell the character to keep talking: "Uh-huh." "Really?" "What happened next?" "How did you react?"
- Ask specific, direct questions to elicit the information you need that the open-ended questions don't produce. "How much did that cost?" "Why did you do that?"
- Ask brief questions. Save your toughest questions until near the end. This gives you a chance to develop some rapport before the tough questions. It lets you be sure of gathering the easy information if the tough questions prompt the character to cut off the interview.
- Remember the elements of story. Observe, take notes and ask questions about the setting. A photograph or award or piece of art may lead the subject to an interesting anecdote or revelation. Ask the character to demonstrate how she did something or show you where something happened or recall specific dialogue for you.
- Ask for documentation. Be careful not to ask in a challenging way (unless you are indeed challenging). Just ask in a curious way. Letters or a journal may reveal some deeper emotion than your interview brought out at a more detached date. Legal or financial documents may provide exact dates or amounts where the character was estimating in the interview. A police report may provide detail that a crime victim may not want to talk about. A resume may provide details that a modest character might not disclose without prompting.

- Close with another open-ended question or a few: "Is there anything else you'd like to add?" "Whom would you suggest that I talk to?" "Are there any other stories you think my paper should look into?"

4. Listening – Listening is an essential element of building rapport, and more important to the success of your interview than the questions. You're not getting any information when you're talking. You should talk only to build rapport and to steer the interview where you need it to go. Impress the character with your listening, rather than with your talking.

- Don't feel the need to fill the long, awkward pause. It's a natural urge, and the subject is feeling the same thing. The pause may draw out the answer your question didn't. You want thoughtful answers, so give the character time to think. This is not a stubborn staredown. You casually take a few moments to catch up on your notes, to take a few notes about the setting or your subject's appearance and mannerisms. Just shut up and listen.
- Listen for the surprise in the interview: the offhand remark that contradicts what you (or your editors) thought you knew; the iceberg tip that's an invitation for you to extract a Poe-like confession; the hint at a much better story; the secondary interest that might lead you to a completely unrelated story.

5. Follow-Up

- Re-interview when possible, with a follow-up phone call, a second face-to-face interview or just an e-mail. You'll think of a few more questions, but your character may also have thought of a few more answers. Sometimes you get the better interview the second time around because your questions the first time provoked a few days of thinking, bringing back some old memories and sending someone to the telephone or the scrapbook for answers you didn't get the first time. Or maybe you ask better questions the second time, because you've been thinking or learning since the first interview.
- Write as soon as possible after the interview. It's best to write the story itself right away, even though you may be far from finished with the reporting. If you know the interview will provide only a few paragraphs for the final story, write those paragraphs. At least go through your notes and write, in paragraph form, what you might use in the story, including your notes on mannerisms, setting, and emotions.

A SHORT COURSE IN INTERVIEWING

*By Mark Witherspoon
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How to Screw Up:

1. Turn off the source; being ill prepared; asking questions you should have looked up; being fearful; being argumentative; carelessness of appearance.
2. Not defining your purpose before you go, resulting in an aimless interview.
3. Asking yes-no questions, vague questions.
4. Not listening; filibustering.
5. Failure to probe, to ask why and how.

Background to the Interview:

1. Be sure you understand your assignment. From that, define the purpose of the interview.
2. Conduct a background search. Remember, you'll get out of an interview what you put into it. Surprise the interviewee with your knowledge of him and/or his field. Be prepared to make him think.
3. Request an interview appointment. Ask in a way that appeals to their self-interest, strokes their ego, excites their curiosity. Tell the interviewee what you're working on and how he fits into the picture. Tell them about how much time you'll need. Give them some time parameters, if possible, and then let them set the exact time (My story is due Wednesday, so I'll need to interview you on Tuesday. I am free beginning at 11 a.m. When would be convenient for us to get together?)

The Questions:

1. Try to get a least 10 good questions before you go to your interview. These 10 questions should lead you to your ultimate interview goal. But be prepared to take the interview off in another direction if you need to. This ability will come from your preliminary research.
2. Use the GOSS formula –
 - Goal Revealing Questions, such as “What are you trying to accomplish?” or “What’s the real purpose of your organization?”
 - Obstacle Revealing Questions, such as “What problems did you face?”
 - Solution Revealing Questions, such as “How did you handle the problem?” or “What plans do you have for resolving the conflict?”
 - Start Revealing Questions, such as “When did the program have its beginning?” or “Whose idea was it?”

3. After each answer, is how or why in order?
4. Don't forget the routine factual questions – who, what, when, where, how, why.
5. Use numerically defining questions:
 - how many students have you flunked over the past 20 years?
 - how many miles has this postman walked?
 - how many hours do you practice a day?
6. Ask your subject to define terms in his own words.
7. Use the translation level frequently: “Are you saying that.....?”
8. Ask for chronology.
9. Prospect for anecdotes. Ask them to give you an example, or tell you exactly what happened on that day. You'll have to help them flesh things out by asking what time they got up, or what they were wearing, or how fast they drove in what make and model car, or what they ate, or how it smelled or looked or tasted or felt, etc. Also you can ask:
 - what's the funniest thing that ever happened...
 - what one incident do you remember most...
 - who made the biggest impression on you and why? Then describe him or her
 - tell me about a typical day in the life of...
10. Try to get inside their heads...not just their opinions and their words, but also their feelings:
 - how do you feel when...
 - what was going through your mind when...
11. To expand answers:
 - use silence creatively
 - ask why or how
 - have them define jargon or other terms
 - restate the answer
 - ask for an example
12. At the end, try some devil's advocate questions:
 - Some people might say that your football program is just using young athletes to raise big money for the school without allowing them to get a good education. What would you say to those critics?

Beginning the Interview:

1. Be there on time, dressed appropriately.
2. Begin with icebreakers:
 - stuff in the room

- something they're wearing
- use his/her name; pronounce it right
- current events in his area of interest
- mutual acquaintances

3. Your goal is to put the interviewee at ease and cause him to like you and trust you.

4. Gently work into the interview after no more than five minutes of small talk. Your goal is for the interviewee not to realize when the visiting ended and the interview began.

5. As you ease into the interview, pull out your notebook or turn on the recorder. But don't announce that the interview has begun. One reporter said: "Flipping out the notebook the minute you flush the quarry has never worked too well for me. It scares some subjects. The best excuse I find for breaking out the pad is a big gush of blue-eyes admiration for some happy observation they've just made. I may try, 'Say, that's good. I want to be sure I get that down just right.' And write. The notebook now spells reassurance."

6. Especially as a college student, you must impress the source. How? The way you're dressed, your professional attitude, your knowledge of him or his subject matter, your lack of fear. This gives him a sense of trust in you that will prompt openness.

Taking Notes:

1. Don't worry if you continue writing after he finishes talking.

2. Sit where the source can't see your writing.

3. You can largely control the interviewee by the way you use your pencil. If you stop writing, he'll stop talking. If you want to keep him talking on an area, but you know you'll not use it, takes notes anyway-this'll keep him going.

Concluding the Interview:

1. Request documents.

2. Ask if he has any final thoughts. Ask if there's a question he expected but you didn't ask.

3. Ask if you can call back.

4. Stroke him; thank him; if you know when it'll run, tell him.

5 Be alert for post-interview quotes.

6. Divert any requests to see the article. It's against the paper's policy.

WHO, WHAT, WHEN, VHERE, WHY & HOW

A Reporters Check List

By Donald M. Murray

(Reminders of the questions you should have asked.)

WHO

Full name correctly spelled
Age
Address
Job and title
Name and address where employed
Sex
Height
Weight
Hair color
Distinguished physical features
How dress
How speak
How move
How behave
What believe
Who friends
Who enemies
What special skills
Who is responsible
Who isn't here
Who is affected

WHEN

Hour and minute - and, perhaps, second
Day
Month
Year
How long since last time
How long til next time
How frequently
How infrequently
How long did it take
How short did it take
How long does it usually take
How early
How late
Time of day as told by weather: sky, sunrise, sunset, etc.
Sounds: commuter traffic in morning and night etc.

WHAT

What happened in specific, accurate detail
What came before
What came after
What was seen
What was heard
What was felt
What was the smell
What was the taste
What was said
What was the central act
What was the central reaction
What is the context

WHERE

Country
State
County
City, town or village
Street
Building
Room
Size
Shape
Light (or dark)
Color
Sound
Smell
Taste
Feel
Atmosphere (in specific terms)
Typicalness
Uniqueness
Temperature
Special Characteristics
History of place
Future of place
Reason for place

WHY

What is the conflict
Who will gain
Who will lose
What will be gained
What will be lost
What forces pushed it forward
What forces held it back
What limits existed
What limits changed
Why did it happen now
What will be different because it happened
What attitudes are involved
What traditions are involved
What beliefs are involved
What problem is central
What conditions existed
What was the catalyst
What was forgotten
What might have been done
What happened in the past
What rational factors were involved
Where or when did it happen before - and why
Where or when did it not happen before • and why

HOW

Was it expected or unexpected
Was it fast or slow
What was it like/not like
What was it not like
Was it hidden
Was it crude
Was it subtle
Was it legal
Was it easy
Was it hard
What was the problem
How was it solved
Was it done well
Was it done poorly
Was it done wisely
Was it always done this way
Will it always be done this way
Was it expensive
Was it dangerous