

Interviewing

Foundations of Journalism
Emerson College
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Interviewing

- Interviewer = Journalist
- Subject = Person being interviewed
- Interviewing is one of the most basic and most necessary skills for a journalist.

Interviewing

- The purpose of interviewing is get
 - Information
 - Quotes
 - Details
- Combination of knowing what questions to ask going in to an interview and what to ask that comes up during interview.

Interviewing

- Multi-step process
 - Find people to interview
 - Prepare for interview
 - Background on the subject of story and interviewee
 - Plan out questions
- Conduct the interview
- Follow up (if necessary)

Preparation

- Direct proportion between what a journalist knows before going into an interview and what he/she gets out of it.
- At all costs avoid going into an interview “blind.”
 - “Winging it” is not a successful interview strategy.

Preparation

- Do as much legwork/research/reporting as possible before going into an interview.
- This will help you shape your questions.
- It will also help you focus in on the key points of your interview.

Preparation

- You should have an idea of what to expect in an interview.
 - This doesn't mean you shouldn't be prepared to change things up on the fly.
- Don't go into an interview with assumptions.
- Don't act like you know or understand things when you do not.

Preparation

- Think up your questions beforehand.
 - Write them out.
- Don't get so caught up in your questions/the order of your questions, that you fail to allow the interview to shift direction
 - As long as the direction is still newsworthy/relevant
 - Be flexible

Set Up

- When you are interviewing people on scene, you need to ask them to be interviewed/make clear that you're conducting an interview.
- Many interviews -- both for features and on-site coverage -- can be set up in advance.
- Depending on the subject, you will likely go through:
 - Subject
 - Communications/media relations office
 - Person's assistant

Set Up

- Not everyone is going to want to speak with you.
 - Do not take “No” as an immediate answer
 - Exceptions: Victims/Families of victims, Man-on-the-Street
 - At the same time, don’t harass people.
 - Try to get access ≠ be a stalker.
- Be confident in your request.
- Be polite to secretaries, assistants, PR people.
 - They are gatekeepers to people you may want to speak with.

Set Up

- Email can be an effective way to set up an interview.
 - If you don't hear back to your request, follow up by phone.
- If you can't get Person A, try to get Person B. Do this until you get someone.
- When setting up interview, explain the nature of the interview.
 - Do not misrepresent.

Set Up

- Sending along some questions (or general idea) of what you will ask is acceptable.
 - If you send specific questions, make sure you make clear that the questions might shift slightly during course of the interview.
- Scheduling an interview is about when is convenient for the subject.
 - That might not be the best time for you, but unless you absolutely CANNOT move something, make that time work.
- If a person is refusing to speak with you, let him/her know the story will run either way.
 - Do this in a non-threatening way.

Interviews

- Interviews can be conducted
 - In person
 - By phone
 - Via email

In Person (Pros)

- Ideal interview method.
- You can get the best feel for the subject.
- You can get details.
- Develop a greater rapport with the subject.

In Person (Cons)

- Can be expensive. (Travel)
- Can be time consuming.
- Scheduling
- In some cases, observation isn't necessary.

Phone (Pros)

- You can still hear the person's voice.
- Easier to schedule
- Efficient
- Inexpensive

Phone (Cons)

- You can't observe the person/scene.
- Calls can get dropped.
- Less personal

Email (Pros)

- Good for quick follow ups.
- Good for if you're looking primarily for factual information.
- The quotes are there verbatim.

Email (Cons)

- No spontaneity.
- Subject might not even be crafting the statement.
- Least likely to get good quotes.
- Elaboration unlikely.

Email (Cons)

- No personal interaction.
- How to handle grammar, spelling, etc., errors.
- Use email interviews as a last resort.
- Make clear that it was in an email interview.

Information

- One way you get information is through interviewing.
 - Interviews should not be a substitute for information you can easily get elsewhere.
- When attempting to get information, start with asking for an overview.
 - First get “What happened?”
 - Then you can get more into the specifics.

Information

- Get information specific to your story.
 - Don't let people ramble needlessly.
 - Getting a ton of information you don't need is just a waste of both your time.
- Have an idea of what information you are looking for.
 - You do not want to be (or even come across as) clueless.
- If part of a media scrum, do not ask a question that someone else has just asked.

Quotes

- Interviews are also conducted to get quotes for a story.
- Write out quotes in your notes.
 - Jot down time if recording.
- Ignore quotes that are
 - Irrelevant
 - Obvious
 - Poorly worded

Questions

- Well-formulated questions are more likely to yield good answers and quotes.
- Ask for specifics.
- As with everything, keep your questions tight.

Questions

- Direct questions will get direct answers.
 - You want direct answers.
- Make sure you're asking question, not just making a statement and waiting.
- You want specific answers, not vague generalities.

Questions

- Most interviews will contain open and closed questions.
 - Open questions: Require explanation/more than 1-2 word answers.
 - Closed questions: Can be answered with basically yes or no.

Open Questions

- These are the kind of questions that will generate quotes.
- These are also good for getting detail, anecdotes, examples, things that will add “color” to your stories.
- You want to ask more open than closed questions.

Closed Questions

- Good for confirming facts and details.
 - Make sure you get spelling of names and proper titles.
- Can be timesaving.
 - Sometimes, you just want a yes or no answer.

Follow-Up Questions

- Questions asked to solicit elaboration/get more information or to follow up on an answer to a previous question.
 - Follow up questions are often questions generated on the spot.
 - When someone says something good/interesting, follow up.
- Follow up questions can also be asked to
 - Get a better quote
 - Respond to evasions
 - To translate jargon

Follow-Up Questions

- Depending on the person you're interviewing, you may not get another shot at your subject.
 - Make sure you have what information you absolutely need from the interview before it's over.

Softball

- Super easy question for the person to answer.
 - Usually, good to open.
 - Likely won't yield anything great, but gets the person comfortable.
 - Not controversial
 - Too many “softball questions” likely result in a weak story/ fluff piece.

Throwaway Questions

- Questions asked to kill time while a journalist either formulates his/her next question or as he/she is still taking down what the subject has just said.
- Something very basic which will not generate anything useful to the story, but will prevent a lull in the interview.

How to Record

- **ALWAYS** take notes.
 - Even if you use an audio recorder, it could fail.
 - Notes provide an important backup.
 - Also notes are easier to go back through.
 - You don't need to know "shorthand," but you will likely develop your own version of abbreviations, etc.
 - Don't try to write down everything (News judgment)
 - Just key information
 - Great quotes
 - Summarize
 - But make sure you get enough information for your story.

How to Record

- Audio recorders
 - Don't get bogged down in transcribing fill audio.
 - You will use very little verbatim.
- Both
 - Jot down the time in the interview a great quote is said. Then you don't have to go back through the whole tape.

Listen

- Always give your subject's words your full attention.
 - Often people get caught up in what they're going to ask next and forget to actually listen to what the subject is saying.
- If you don't listen, you'll miss information and your interview/story will suffer.
- The best interviews tend to be conversational.
- Listen because you might catch something you never expected.

Listen

- Know when not to speak.
 - Pause.
 - Let a person gather his/her thoughts.
 - Don't interject your opinion. (It's not about you.)

Be Engaged

- Be engaged.
 - Verbal cues and non-verbal cues
 - For print you can say, Uh-huh or other things to indicate listening.
 - For TV/radio, avoid verbal interjections except to ask a question.
- Body language. You want to be approachable/relaxed.

Maintain Control

- You must stay in control of your interview.
- This does not mean that you don't allow the interview to go where it will in pursuit/relation to the story, but don't allow it to veer off course.
 - Keep the interview on track.
- It is up to you - as the reporter - to make sure you get the information necessary out of your subject.

Maintain Control

- If the speaker digresses or begins to start talking about something that is completely irrelevant/that you will not use, redirect the interview.
- Time may be limited. You do not want to run out of time having not gotten the information you need.
 - Additionally, you could be cut short/interrupted.
- Letting people ramble needlessly is a waste of both your time