

Interviewing - Part II

Foundations of Journalism

Emerson College

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Interviewing Strategies

Interviewing Strategies

- There are various different interview styles and strategies.
- Some depend on what the journalist prefers. Others depend on the situation.

Interviewing

- Ease in.
 - It almost NEVER works to open with an accusatory question.
 - You don't immediately want to put person on the defensive/edge.
 - Get the subject comfortable.
 - More comfortable = more likely to open up
 - In-person interviews may have time for small talk.
 - Works best to be more direct over the phone.
 - Still start with a softball/something easy.

Interviewing

- Overview
 - First get the basic scenario.
 - Don't get bogged down by the specifics if you haven't even gotten the basics.
 - You'll end up with a disjointed story.

Interviewing

- Goal
 - Get information that suits the needs of the story.
 - Know what kind of information you need/are looking for.
 - This is not the same thing as trying to put words in someone's mouth.
 - Do not assume
 - Be mindful of framing your questions
 - Ask questions that should get subjective answers when seeking quotes, insight, opinion.
 - Explain, predict
 - Ask questions with objective answers when you want to confirm.
 - Remain flexible so that you can change direction if needed.

Interviewing

- Most interviews are friendly/cordial.
 - 75 - 99.9 percent.
 - You may never do a “machine gun” interview.
- Occasionally you will want to get a newsmaker to say/comment on something they don't want to talk about.
 - In this case, you lay a “trap”
 - Not trying to trick the person, you just want the truth
 - This is generally an exception, not a rule

Difficult Interviews

- Every journalist has to ask difficult questions at times.
- Difficult interviews are different from having to ask difficult questions.
 - Difficult interview = person is trying to evade question/possibly lying/doesn't want to speak with you
 - Never accuse a person of lying in an interview (or in your piece.)
 - Have facts that will counter falsehoods.
- You need to be extremely well-prepared for a difficult interview.

Difficult Interviews

- Different techniques for (intentionally) difficult interviews
- Funnel: Get general statements on the record, getting more focused and more specific so evasion becomes more difficult.
- Covertly sequenced: Difficult questions spread through the interview to surprise newsmaker or lead to contradictions
- Machine gun: A series of tough questions that leave little room for evasion. Do NOT use this to start an interview.
 - Can come across as combative.
- Sandwich: Begin with softballs, get into hard questions, end with softballs.

* These are terms you may not hear again, but the concepts are important.

Difficult Interviews

- Do not misrepresent the purpose of your interview to try to get a subject to speak with you.
- Be prepared for subject to get angry.
 - Yell, storm out, leave.
- If someone gets really angry at you, make sure your boss is in the loop in case that person complains.

Interview Structures

- Often start easy - overview, softball - then ask questions in descending order of importance.
 - Again, this way you won't just have fluff if you get cut short.
- Ask for specifics.
 - Get examples.
 - Get anecdotes.
 - Can you tell me about a time?
- Get elaboration.
 - Details.
- Vague/weak responses usually result in vague/weak stories.
- If on-site reporting, look around.

Interviewing Strategies

- Make sure you get spellings and necessary fact confirmation.
- Works often to start or end with “housekeeping”
 - Detail confirmation.
 - Spellings, titles, etc.
 - If you may be pressed for time, fact check at end.
 - If facts cannot be confirmed elsewhere, fact check at beginning.

Ending the Interview

- End by asking “Do you have anything else to add?” or “Is there anything I might have asked?”
- Leave recorder running.
 - Still make sure that it’s clear to the subject that the interview is not over.
 - Don’t want them feeling tricked.

Post Interview

- Type up notes ASAP when they still “make sense.”
- Check for holes.
- If something isn't clear, follow up.
 - Don't worry about annoying/bothering someone if you make one follow up.
 - They'll be more annoyed if you get it wrong.
 - Get everything together so you only need to make one follow up.

Post Interview

- Book says you can read a passage, especially if complicated.
 - I'd summarize and ask if you're getting it correct.
- Do not allow quote approval or tell people they can read the story before it prints.
 - Ethics.

More Tips

- Be appreciative. Say thank you.
 - They're taking their time to speak with you.
- Do not be hostile.
 - Keep your calm at all times.
- Don't try to trick people.
 - Your job is to report. That's it.

More Tips

- Asking tough questions isn't easy.
 - But it's your job as a reporter to do it.
- Questions don't need to be written out in advance, but keywords can help.
 - Have a list of items you want to hit on.
 - Make sure you have before you leave interview.
- If you do write your questions out, be willing to switch direction.

More Tips

- Don't belittle a point, but you can try to ask a key question a few different ways.
 - Might get additional information
 - Better quote
- Push for good quotes.
- Don't get flustered.

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Man on the Street

- Exactly what it's name says. Interviewing a selection of random people "on the street"/at a given scene
- Purpose is to get a selection of perspectives.
- Informal opinion poll
- Can be specific to a question (closed + why).
- Can be regarding an open question.

Man on the Street

- Usually just one or two questions.
- Not a full interview.
- Everyone asked the same question.
- Can be interwoven into a story.
- Can be done as “a list.”

Man on the Street

- Can do man-on-the-street for pretty much any topic.
- You may not use everyone you interview.
 - Not everyone is a great quote
 - Don't throw out people because they're not saying what you want.

Man on the Street

- Mix up who you are asking.
 - Gender balance, Age, Race
 - But you may do a MOS specifically on a certain group.
 - i.e. young voters
- Get basic details from the person
 - Name (spelling)
 - Age (if relevant)
 - Job
 - Hometown
 - Anything else relevant

Terms

- On the record
- Background
- Off the record

On the Record

- Everything said can be used and attributed to the interview subject.
 - As long as you've identified yourself as a journalist.
- Virtually all interviews you do should be on the record.
 - You should always try to get people on the record first.

Background

- You can use the information in your reporting, but cannot attribute to your source at all.
- Generally, you will need someone else to confirm for attribution (because you need to attribute information in your stories).
- Not the same as/to be confused with background for information/context purposes.

Off the Record

- You cannot use this information unless you are able to report it using other sources.
 - Either other people
 - Or from other sources (records, research, etc.)
- You cannot even tell other people that you know it in order to get them to confirm or deny.
- Think of “X marks the spot” and you need to find your way there on your own.

Terms

- Background and off the record cannot be applied retroactively.
 - However, you can ask someone to go on the record retroactively.
 - They have to agree.
- Avoid using either of these unless absolutely necessary.
- Once you commit to background or off the record, you cannot violate that trust.
 - See Ethics.

Interview Requests

Interview Requests

- You will often solicit an interview request
 - Either in initial contact (email)
 - As a follow up
- Keep interview requests short and to the point.
- Try to direct interview requests to as specific a person as possible.
 - If you can only find general contact information/email on Web, call to ask if you can direct to a specific person.
- Make sure that interview requests are well-crafted and error-free.
 - This is a first impression as to the quality of your work.
 - Sloppy request can give impressions you make careless errors.

Interview Requests

- Format.
 - Salutation
 - Introduction
 - Summary of story
 - Request
 - Timeline
 - Thank you/Closing
 - Contact information

*Each of these should be its own graf.

Salutation

- Use a formal greeting.
 - Hi, Hello
 - Avoid Dear
- Whenever possible, get a name.
 - Make sure you spell the name correctly.
 - Usually can use first name, but formal address acceptable
 - For executives, people with titles (Dr.), you may opt formal

Introduction

- Introduce yourself.
 - My name is XXXX.
- State your position and outlet
 - I am a reporter for XXXXX.
- It is often good to include how you came across the person's information.
 - Either via recommendation
 - During your reporting
 - On the Web.
- If you're following up after a phone call, indicate that.
 - This note is to follow up on my earlier call.

Summary

- Briefly summarize the story you are looking to interview the person for.
 - 1-2 sentences.
- Include they would be a fit/why you want to speak with them for this piece.
 - Are they an expert?
 - Are they involved in the story itself?
 - Can they offer a specific opinion?
 - This is something you will tailor in each individual request.
- Do not misrepresent your story or your motive for speaking with the person here.

Request

- Clearly state that you are looking to interview the person.
 - I would like to speak with you for this piece.
 - I am hoping it would be possible to speak with you for this piece.
 - I would like to get your insight for this story.
 - Etc.
- How (what kind of interview)
 - In person or phone
- How long would it take (approximation)
 - I would expect the interview to take XXXX
 - Five minutes, an hour, etc.
- Any other details.
 - If you're filming for broadcast
 - Bringing a photographer

Timeline

- When do you need to have this interview completed by?
 - If you're looking to do the interview in advance of your deadline, only let them know when you want the interview completed by.
 - Whenever possible you don't want to push stories right up against deadline.
 - Try to get interviews done as far in advance as possible.
 - However, if you are right up against deadline, let the person know that as well.
 - When you're asking for a quick turnaround, acknowledge that.
 - In either case, build in a little bit of padding.

Timeline

- Sample wording
 - I would need this interview completed by [date].
 - I am looking to have this interview done by [date].
 - I am under deadline and asking for of a quick turnaround. I would would need this interview completed by [time] today (or tomorrow).

Timeline

- If you have specific time you'd like (or times you absolutely cannot do), include those.
 - Don't be overly detailed.
 - Be as flexible as possible.
 - You're the one that needs to speak with them.
 - I'm ideally looking to set this interview up for Wednesday afternoon.
 - I'm currently free any afternoon this week after 1 p.m.
 - My schedule is relatively flexible, but I am unavailable Tuesday from 9 a.m. to noon.

Thank You/Closing

- Show appreciation of the person's time and attention.
 - I appreciate your assistance with this request.
 - I'm grateful for your attention on this request.
- Look ahead.
 - I look forward to hearing from you.
 - Please let me know if you have any questions.
- Closing
 - Good: Best, Thank You
 - OK: Sincerely
 - No: Goodbye, Yours

Contact Information

- Can be included in a graf.
 - I can be reached at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or via email at XXX@X.com.
- Or as part of your signature.
 - Best,
Your Name
Title
Outlet
(office)
(cell)
email

Interview Requests

- Make sure that interview requests are well-crafted and error-free.
 - This is a first impression as to the quality of your work.
 - Sloppy request can give impressions you make careless errors.
- Be polite and appreciative.
- Be clear and direct.
 - Should never be more than half a page.
 - Rule is people shouldn't have to scroll in their email.