

Interviewing 101: A Quick and Dirty Guide to Getting the Scoop

Journalism is a creative job. Despite all the professors who told me articles were a fixed formula plugged up with simple facts and despite the avalanche of clichéd crap that passes for most mainstream journalism, I stand by that statement.

The finished product may be a piece of writing that you craft, but the material a result of the interviews you conduct. Like any creative profession, you use your perception to re-interpret the world around you. You try to engage an audience with ideas and issues—you create something meaningful from all the incoherent information and noise out there.

But here's the catch: good journalism is dependent on a total stranger's cooperation and participation. At the heart of this issue is the interview. The finished product may be a piece of writing that you craft, but the material a result of the interviews you conduct.

And while sources vary—some people know exactly what they want to say while others love to make you sweat for a basic quote—how you conduct the interview has more to do with the outcome than anything. It's odd that so much emphasis is put on teaching journalists how to write an article when that skill is useless without also teaching journalists how to develop strong interview techniques.

In an effort to help other aspiring reporters develop this crucial skill—I brought together some of my colleagues and journalist friends to ask them what interview tips they think are most helpful:

#1 - Find a good location

Avoid Starbucks! It's often easiest to suggest a centrally located corporate coffee shop but if there is any way you can interview in a place that has some relevance to the story or your subject you'll have much greater success.

Not only because you'll gain a further sense of context, people are often more comfortable (and open) when they're in a familiar place or what feels like "their territory."

Ask to meet at your subject's house, work, or the location of an incident relevant to the story. Even meeting at the interviewee's favorite restaurant is more interesting than a Starbucks.

#2 - Prepare Your Goals Ahead

Know what questions you're going to ask and why you're going to ask them.

Heading to an interview with a sense of what you want to get out of it (a colorful re-enactment of an event, an on-the-record opinion on the issue you're covering, general background, etc.) is critical to conducting a successful interview.

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You should already be thinking about what you want your piece to look like and what you need from this interview to get your article closer to that end result.

#3 - Write down your questions

Be sure and bring prepared questions with you. I usually go into an interview with twice as many questions than I expect to ask. The security of knowing that I'm not going to get stuck helps my confidence and you never know what question will get you the information you're really looking for.

#4 - Work on your flow

This is probably the most challenging, but also the most important interview skill you can develop.

You want to strike a balance between a conversation (which helps make your subject feel comfortable and aids candor) and getting the job done. As your subject is answering your question, be thinking about what you'll ask next and why.

The flow of questions needs to seem natural and conversational, don't spin your subject off on a completely different topic just because that's the next question on your list—think about segue's and transitions.

This way your subject doesn't feel forced to give you sound bites and may open up a little (particularly important for anyone working on an audio piece where you may need blocks of the raw interview).

#5 - Think about the medium

Interviewing techniques defiantly vary for different mediums. If you're interviewing for audio or video you want to ask two part questions which encourages subjects to talk for longer blocks of time.

Conversely, when you're interviewing for print, try and break questions up so you can get shorter and more concise answers (easier for taking notes and for quoting later). You can be more conversational with interviews for print, you can say "yeah," and "uh-huh," etc.

Not doing this is one of the biggest challenges when you're interviewing for audio. Nodding and smiling accomplishes the same sort of conversational encouragement and keeps your tape clean.

Another great trick for audio interviews is to have your subject re-enact the story. It makes for good sound and helps you avoid having too much of your own narration later on.

#6 - Bring a buddy

I find having a second person as a note taker and extra set of ears can be very useful.

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If you don't think another person will overwhelm or distract your subject (I find that is pretty rare) it can be a lifesaver to have that second set of notes to check your quotes and information.

#7 - Avoid Obsessing

While good notes and recording are very important, you can do yourself a disservice by obsessing about recording every little detail of what your subject says.

As you're interviewing you should be able to discern the gems from the chatter—focus on the quotes and info you know you're going to use and make sure you get that right!

#8 - Be a little annoying

Don't be afraid to relentlessly revisit a question or topic that you feel hasn't been properly addressed by the interviewee. Sometimes people need time to warm up to you or a topic, or will respond better if your question is worded differently. Keep trying.

#9 - Be a little sneaky

Continue taking notes even after the interview is officially over. Sometimes people say the most revealing or intimate things when they feel that they're out of the "hot seat." If they don't say "off the record," it's all game.

#10 - Empower them

A great question to ask if you don't fully understand the perspective of your interviewee is "what is your ideal solution/resolution?" Obviously this only works in certain circumstances, but when appropriate it can help clarify a person's point of view or opinion.

#11 - Work them up

Another great question is "Why do you care about this issue?" This can be an effective way to get a strong and emotional quote about why the topic you're covering is so important.

You can also ask for the turning point in a story, the moment when everything changed or catalyzed. This can help you shape the narrative of your story as well.

#12 - Endure awkward silences

I know this is totally counterintuitive. My instinct is to keep chattering and asking questions to keep people feeling comfortable, but sometimes, especially when you're dealing with sensitive subjects, you need to shut up and wait.

Ask your question, let them give you the rehearsed and generic answer, then sit there quietly and see what comes next. You'd be amazed how often this technique yields powerful results.

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#13 - Ask for what you need

Seriously, sometimes interviewees are frustrating not because they're trying to bust your chops but just don't understand what you want from them.

I find that many interview subjects get a kick out of having you "pull back the curtain" a little and tell them about your process.

You can say, "Listen, I really need a quote from you encapsulating your feelings on this issue," or "I really need you to walk me through the chronology of this," or even, "I really need you to take me to a location that is relevant to this issue so I can set a scene."

For the most part people want to be helpful and you just need to tell them how they can.

As you gain more experience interviewing, you'll hone your own techniques. Your personality as an interviewer also plays a huge role in how you develop your approach.

In the meantime use these hints to help you mine the information you need to get down to the creative business of crafting a great piece of journalism.

Questions? Comments? Let us Know!

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