

INTERVIEWING

GETTING ALL THE ANSWERS YOU NEED

An interview is a controlled conversation and the journalist's most essential research tool. It is useful not only for gleaning information but for giving your article life and colour.

Your job is to make it easy for the interviewee to tell you what you want to know.

1 DON'T REVEAL TOO MUCH TOO EARLY

■ There's no reason to give away all your secrets when you set up the interview. People usually want to know what you'll be asking them when you call to arrange an interview. Interviewees need to be informed, so giving the gist of the story could help them get the right information. But don't send them written questions because you don't want to receive scripted answers. Still, the element of surprise can be your best ally. This is definitely the case with school administrators, many of whom fancy themselves media-savvy because they've spoken with many student journalists over the years and know you're new to the craft. Whatever you do, never give away the angle of your story.

2 ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

■ An open-ended question will yield an answer beyond yes or no. It's the difference between asking: "Are you the systems quality enhancing supervisor?" and "What does your job entail?" You'll save time and garner better responses. Even if you already know some of what the answer is, never assume in journalism. Check your facts.

3 ASK LOGICAL QUESTIONS IN A LOGICAL ORDER

■ Imagine the interview as a funnel—you start at the top with fairly broad questions as you establish a rapport with your subject. You ask background questions and do your best to put the person at ease. As you continue, your questions narrow, like the funnel, becoming more focused on seeking specific information. While the interviewee is speaking, jot down some interesting points you want them to elaborate on.

4 BE SMART, NOT A SMARTY PANTS

■ The goal is to get the information you need, not to wow your subject with your question-asking prowess. Ask simple, direct questions. As a journalist, you have the responsibility to act on behalf of readers, who aren't speaking with the interviewee. Step back for a moment and think about the questions you'd want answered if you were a reader.

5 KEEP IT CONVERSATIONAL

■ Interviews should be conversational. An interviewee is most likely to open up if they are comfortable. The more confrontational your style, the less success you will have. Of course, some interviews will be more hostile than others. Be confident.

6 LET YOUR SUBJECT SPEAK...

■ Listen carefully to the responses. While it's important to have prepared a list of questions, it's vital that you follow the thread of the subject's responses and be ready to deviate from what you've prepared. This almost always leads to juicy stuff you never would have known to ask about. Interviewing is more about listening than speaking. Your job is to set the stage for your subject to tell you exactly what you want to know. By actively listening and asking follow-up questions related to what an interviewee has said, you'll get information you didn't even know you were looking for—and probably a few more story ideas. You never know what hints people might unintentionally give away. A passing assertion from an interview or an oddly-phrased sentence in a newsletter might hint to ATIPs you should be filing and what they might expose. Ask who else might know about what happened and then speak to them. And then ask who else they might know. This is especially useful for features.

7 ...BUT MOVE ON WHEN YOU'VE HAD ENOUGH

■ It's a skill that takes time to develop, but being able to interrupt a rambling subject and get the interview back on track is essential. Timing is everything. It's a matter of jumping in and re-routing the person's wander. Try asking a follow-up question to something they mentioned, or say "Let's go back to what you said about global warming for a minute..." A drawn-out interview is exhausting to do and listen back to for the story.

8 TRY TO BREAK DOWN THE JARGON

■ There are two main reasons an interviewee will use jargon: 1. If the person is really familiar with their rather obscure material, which is common in academic settings, or 2. If they're trying to hide something from you by talking in circles. Either way, it's important to get to the root of what the person is saying before you leave the interview, otherwise you may have a mess on your hands when it's time to write up the story. One way to make sure you're on the same wavelength is to pause the interview and repeat what the person just said back to them in your own words and ask "If I'm to understand, what you've said is ..." If you've got it wrong, this will give the interviewee a chance to re-explain. It's also a polite way of letting the interviewee know you're not going away without a clear answer.

9 SILENCE IS GOLDEN

■ There's nothing better than asking a tough question and just being quiet and waiting. People hate silence and feel the need to fill dead air. Even if your subject doesn't want to answer the question they'll end up saying something just to cut the tension.

10 THE RELUCTANT SOURCE

■ Sometimes people have something they just don't want you to know, and not even the silence method works. The key in these cases is cool-headed persistence. Explain to the subject that it is in their best interests to answer your questions, because you want them to have the opportunity to explain their position. Try to keep things from getting hostile, but if they do, don't get into a fight. The bottom line is you have a job to do, and most reasonable people will understand that. Know when to retreat, when it becomes evident your efforts are futile. Accept that sometimes, you just won't get the answers you need, and feel free to mention that in your story.

11 IT AIN'T OVER TILL IT'S OVER

■ At the end of the interview, ask if your subject has anything to add. It's a formality, but once in a while you'll get great information that otherwise would've been lost. Your last question should be to ask if you can call the person back if you have more questions. This leaves the door open if you forgot something or another source raises a new issue. Don't be afraid to call back. A source won't mind clarifying something they've said if it assures greater accuracy in reporting. Having a contact's cell phone number is best.

12 BE CRITICAL

■ Everyone has an agenda. The interview is a journalist's most essential research technique, but beware the temptation to think that by attributing to someone else that you absolve yourself of the duty to inform your readers accurately. Don't trust everything your sources say at face value. Ask different sources the same questions, find supporting sources, etc. And always ask yourself why this person is telling you what they're telling you. And what would they say to somebody else?

13 A WORD ON TAPE RECORDERS

■ Tape recorders are a must. Always get your interviews on tape whenever possible. However, remember that your contemporaneous notes are vitally important. Resist the urge to get lazy and trust you have what you need on tape. Notes are critical to the efficient journalist and help you plan and organize your story before you even set down its first word.

14 FURTHER READING

■ It's impossible to cover all you need to know about interviewing in a few hundred words. If you want to know more, the definitive book on journalistic interviewing is Paul McLaughlin's *How to Interview*. It's a fantastic read and belongs in every journalist's library.