

Journalism/Creative Writing Extended Project Non-Fiction Track

Step Five: Interviews

Skillful interviewing is a psychological process. Sometimes it's even a contest. You may find yourself trying to get information from someone who doesn't really want to give it to you, or someone who wants to give you something else. Whether you know it or not, you're already well equipped for the more formal process of the journalistic interview. You've been interviewing people casually since you first learned to talk. While nearly any piece of journalism includes some interviewing, many stories, especially features, are almost purely based on the interview. Often you'll conduct an interview with a single person, but sometimes you'll need to do an interview with several people. An interview can focus on a source's information, opinions, or personality.

These papers have all the information you'd need to understand the interviewing process. Over the next three days you'll use this information to either conduct interviews during class time, plan for interviews you'll conduct on your own time, or organize information you've already gathered from interviews.

Types of Interviews

- The **informative interview** reports details that the source can provide because of his/her expertise. The source may hold an official position in the community or may simply be a prominent person. The source may have the knowledge or experience that supports the topic you're writing about.
- The **opinion interview** reveals attitudes or viewpoints that are significant because they come from prominent people or authorities or that are interesting because their unusual or well phrased. Articulate people are most likely to show up in opinion interviews, as television news demonstrates.
- The **personality interview** tries to bring out the essence of an individual by looking at the facets of his or her life. Such an interview creates a sensory image, allowing readers or viewers to see and hear the person in action. The personality interview creates a snapshot or sketch—or even a whole album. It is an effort to get the reader to comprehend an abstract personality through concrete observation.

Many interviews are a mix of all three types. Nevertheless, the reporter needs to be sensitive to the details that define each category.

Preparing for the Interview

Nearly all interviews require advance preparation. The following steps should help guide that process.

1. **Choose someone to interview.** In many cases, the story topic determines whom you'll interview because you need to talk to experts. In other cases, you have flexibility because you need sources who illustrate your story topic. Accessibility of sources and your ability to persuade them to talk to you affect your choices.
2. **Set up an appointment.** Try to plan ahead if possible, out of respect to the source. However, know that some interviews will happen spur of the moment, which is fine too.
3. **Identify yourself.** When you call for an appointment, be careful to explain who you are, what topic you want to discuss, and how much time you'll need. Many professional interviews are done on the phone. However, face-to-face interviews work better psychologically because it's harder for the source to dodge questions and the reporter can see body language, environment, etc.
4. **Research the source.** The more important your source, the more essential your background information becomes. You can't afford to waste time asking questions about trivia that you could have looked up. More importantly you want to conduct the interview on an intelligent level. Otherwise the source loses interest or begins to take advantage of your ignorance.
5. **Research the topic.** Know at least the basics of your story topic before you go into the interview. Remember that sources can lose patience if you're unprepared.
6. **Prepare questions in advance.** Be sure of what you want to ask but also be ready to bring up other questions as they occur to you. You need a script, but you also must be able to improvise. The prepared questions will come from research. The improvised questions will occur as the source brings up unanticipated material.

Levels of Attribution

- **On-the-record.** When everything is on the record, whatever the source says may be used in the story, including direct quotes. The source, who is identified by name and title, understands he/she will be on the record and that anything they say can be used in the story.
- **Off-the-record.** When the source says something that he or she does not want to go into the story, this information is off the record. Both the source and the reporter understand this before the information is given, not afterwards.
- **On background.** When an interview is on background, the reporter may use the material but may not identify by name who said it. The attribution becomes, for example, "a government source" or "a school administrator".
- **On deep background.** When an interview is on deep background, the material may be used, but no indication may be given of where it came from. The attribution then because something like "It has been learned..."

The Interview Scene

1. **Be a bit formal.** Don't chew gum or avoid eye contact. Don't sit down until you're invited to. Don't slouch in your chair.
2. **Dress conservatively.** Pay attention to how you'll be perceived by your source, especially if they're an adult. Make sure you look like you're taking the interview seriously.
3. **Introduce yourself.** Even though you introduced yourself when you set up the appointment, again explain clearly who you are, what you're reporting on, and what you'd like to discuss.
4. **Ask permission to record.** Many reporters will record interviews to ensure they get direct quotes right, etc. If you want to record, make sure it's okay with your source first.
5. **Take notes conspicuously.** Even if you record, you must take notes in case the recording malfunctions. Sources are afraid of being misquoted or misunderstood, so make sure your notes are careful and clear. Don't hesitate to ask the source to repeat information or to slow down. The more you demonstrate how hard you're trying to be accurate the better.
6. **Observe the scene.** While this isn't so important in a news interview, if you're doing a personality interview you want to include details on body language, the source's appearance, and perhaps the setting. Record these details as you go.
7. **Adjust as needed.** Adjust the questioning style to the source. You actually have plenty of experience with this already. You know how to adjust your style to get information from different adults, don't you?
8. **Conclude with thanks.** As the interview ends, ask if you can come back or telephone if you have any further questions. Lastly make sure you give the appropriate thanks for their time, cooperation, etc.