

Interviewing Tipsheet

By Doug Cospers

Before the interview:

- Research your subject and his or her field of expertise, so you can ask thorough questions, understand the answers and pose follow-up questions. Showing your interest also encourages the subject's full involvement in the interview, producing a stronger story.
- Arrive on time and dress appropriately.
- Always identify yourself as a reporter. Schedule a personal interview instead of a telephone interview, if possible. This allows you to observe how the subject reacts to questions, and to glean colorful details.
- Explain to the source generally what your story is about and the information you seek. If you have written similar stories, send copies so they can see that you are serious about your work.
- Consider taking a tape recorder so you'll have complete quotes and an accurate record in case of dispute. Some reporters, however, find it unwieldy to review an entire conversation before writing the story.
- If you will be accompanied by a photographer, inform the source so he or she can prepare. Explain the story to the photographer so he or she can plan a photograph that illustrates the story well.

During the interview:

- Start with a few minutes of casual conversation. This helps the subject relax and is a good time for background questions.
- Prepare a preliminary list of questions, in order of priority. Check the list during the interview so you ask the most important ones and have the basis of a story. Don't restrict yourself, however. Your source's responses may generate follow-up questions, or he may offer information that leads to an entirely different line of questioning.
- Structure questions. Avoid those that produce yes/no answers ("closed-ended" questions) in favor of those that require thoughtful responses ("open-ended" questions). Don't ask, "Will you vote for the president?" Ask "Who do you think is the best candidate, and why?"

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- Establish the ground rules. In most cases, your source will speak “on-the-record” and will be quoted by name. Sources may ask to go on “background,” meaning they cannot be quoted by name. Instead, you would attribute the information more generally, to a senior government official, for example, or an expert in a particular subject area. The source may ask to go “off-the-record,” meaning the source is not quoted at all, but you may query other sources, and, if the information is verified, publish it without the original source’s name.
- Use follow-ups. When you get an answer, think about what further questions it might spark for the reader – and ask.
- Listen carefully. Is the source offering even more information than your question required? Sometimes this provides the most interesting material. Don’t miss it because it isn’t what you expected.
- Clarify if needed. Don’t be afraid to ask what sounds like a “dumb” question if it will save you from making a mistake in your story.
- Pause if necessary to catch up on your notes, and to give the source time to think further about your questions.
- Don’t inject your own opinion into the interview or into the story. During the interview, consider your subject’s opinion with an open mind. Always keep yourself out of the story.
- Control the interview. If the subject strays from the topic or avoids a question, repeat it until you are satisfied with the answer.
- Save the sensitive questions for last. If a question might prompt the source to end the interview abruptly, ask it at the end of the interview.
- Be accurate. Ask the source to spell names, titles, etc., as they arise during the interview. If the source says something you don’t understand, clarify.

Ending the interview

- Ask, “Is there anything I forgot to ask you?” “Is there anyone else I should talk to?” This gives the source a chance to elaborate on earlier points, volunteer information, or suggest additional experts for your story.
- Ask the source if you can call him if further questions arise. Ask for home and mobile telephone numbers or e-mail addresses. This is a good time to get personal contact information not ordinarily shared with reporters.