

## Tips for conducting interviews

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Every reporter has her own interviewing style, but it can take dozens of interviews—both successful and terrible—to figure out yours. Some of the following notes are important points to remember, and some are just tips and suggestions.

### Do your homework

- Read up on the subject and the source beforehand, if possible. You don't have to know everything or prove to them that you did your homework, but it will help you carry on an informed interview.
- In fact, trying to *prove* to a source that you've "done your homework" on a topic can lead to assumptions.

### Prepare your questions in advance

- It can be useful to put a placeholder before your first question to remind you to quickly reintroduce yourself and provide a very quick explanation of why you are speaking with them, e.g. "We're putting together a short item for the news section of the October issue, and so-and-so suggested I should speak with you."
- Even if you expect the interview to be casual or conversational, it is critical to have specific questions outlined for yourself as a fallback. Sometimes, an interviewee will take the shortest route to answering your question, and leave you with little opportunity to sustain a conversational interview.
- Be mindful of the source's time, but don't rush, either. Know the priority of your prepared questions in case you start to run out of time.
- Work the basics into your questions: who, what, when, where, why. Even if you think you have those details from your background reading beforehand, **it's safest to double-check with the source during the interview**. (And in some interviews, you can get to the real story by following the money. How is a project funded? What does the funder expect to gain?)
- If you have tough questions to ask that might put the interviewer on the defensive, it's usually best to save those toward the end of the interview.
- In some cases, especially when you are just getting started in your reporting, you can always ask an interviewee if there's anyone they'd suggest you also speak with. (This can also work if someone politely declines an interview.)

- Often it's useful to wrap up with a catch-all question: "Is there something important that you think I'm missing or might misunderstand? A question you wish I had asked?" etc.
- It's a good idea to ask them for contact information at the end, in case you need to follow up with another question or two. I generally ask this even if I've already got their information; often you'll be given a shortcut.

### Notes and recording

- Because our magazine format and schedule afford us time to work with transcripts, we often record our interviews. If you'll be recording your interview, here are some important points:
  - The best practice is to ask the interviewee if you can record the conversation. Personally, I find it easiest to briefly explain that I'd like to record for accuracy and ask if that's all right. If I expect that the recording might deter the source from mentioning something on background, I mention that I'm happy to stop recording at any point.
  - Make sure your equipment / audio set-up works smoothly beforehand, and that you know how to operate it seamlessly. It shouldn't get in the way of the interview itself.
  - Recording an interview can be—and often is—a pact with the devil. Working from the audio recording will give you long, luxurious, and fairly accurate quotes. It also takes far longer to deal with a recording than it does good reporter's notes. Personally, I find it difficult to have both. For me, recording an interview frees up my brain to adapt my questions to any new information the source presents on the fly.
- Decide whether you will be taking notes by hand or on a computer; do what's most effective for you but be mindful of how it will affect the interview. During an in-person interview, for example, it could be impractical to set up your laptop on a dean's desk to take notes.

### During the interview

- Stay calm and take your time. If you are finishing a note before moving on to the next question, take the time to get it right. Don't fear silence (Sometimes it's even useful. Nervous sources might feel compelled to fill it with more information). Or you can just say, "One moment while I get this down."
- In your first interviews, it's easy to forget who is being interviewed. Remember that the conversation is not about you.
- In truth, how your early interviews go really depends on the sources. Over time, a reporter learns to adapt or use different styles as needed for different sources. One of



the most significant distinction is whether a source is accustomed to being interviewed.

- If the source asks *you* something you aren't comfortable answering or don't know the answer to, don't be afraid to suggest that they ask your editor.
  - Avoid making promises to a source you aren't sure you can fulfill
  - For example, it's not uncommon for sources to ask if they can see the article before it is published, or if they can see their interview before it is published. Typically, most publications would not release a draft of the story to a source before publication. But if a source requested to see their quotes, as a reporter I would likely send them direct quotations I was planning to use, along with facts or assertions attributed to the interview. However, if I am confident in the quotations, I would not suggest that I am seeking approval from the source for their use.