

Tips for Conducting an Interview

For the Interview Assignment, you will conduct an interview with an individual whose skills, knowledge, or experiences seem pertinent to the argument of your second essay.

Because interviews impinge not only on your own time as a student but also on the time of an innocent stranger, it is vital that you prepare yourself adequately in advance. The interviewee will have his or her own responsibilities, and taking time out of that busy schedule to help a student is an act of generosity. To repay that kindly deed, you should prepare your questions in advance and be punctual and organized. If an individual refuses to talk with you, do not badger her, but seek a different respondent for this assignment.

The interview should have a clear purpose, rather than simply being a "fishing expedition" to see what facts you turn up. The purpose might be gaining the perspective of an expert or insider within the field, explaining a tricky or technical issue, or providing the reader with information normally unavailable in books. You will need to find the interview subject early in the writing process and set up the time in advance. It is sometimes more convenient to arrange for the interview to take place over the phone or via e-mail if that is preferable to both parties. You might wish to read Carter McNamara's General Guidelines for Conducting Interviews before you begin as a supplement to the guidelines below:

REMEMBER:

Prepare your questions in advance before meeting with the interviewee.

This interview is for academic purposes, not the Jerry Springer Show or Hard Ball. Mainstream media of lowbrow taste often engages in confrontational or aggressive questioning in order to spark disputes, embarrassment, or scandal. That sort of tomfoolery is both inadvisable and unnecessary for genuine research. Often mass-media interviews serve primarily as a source of "sound bites," snippets of quotation that sound neat, but end up water-down or simplifying the debate rather than engaging in a sincere, nuanced analysis. Collecting sound bites is not your purpose here. You are not inflating your paper with neat-but-empty catch phrases; you are seeking to understand something better as a part of your argument. You are seeking to become an expert on the subject at hand.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

Think about what sort of person would be a useful candidate for an interview. A professional who works within the field? An academic who studies that issue in particular? A published author who has already written books on that topic? A person in the local community who has dealt with this issue in his or her personal life? Identify that person and make arrangements to contact her. Authors can often be contacted through the publisher of their books or the editor of their journals (though this may take a week or two). Scholars can often be contacted through

their respective departments, or through campus directories. Professionals often have listings in the yellow pages of the phone book. Other individuals may be harder to track down. Allow yourself sufficient time to locate them and set aside a little cash for a high phone bill if you are contacting someone far away.

WHEN YOU FIRST CONTACT THE INTERVIEWEE TO SET UP THE INTERVIEW:

1. Explain who you are, why you want to talk to them, and what you wish to find out. The purpose of that interview should be made clear to the interviewees before you meet them.
2. The interviewees should know in general what sort of questions they will be asked, and approximately how long the interview will last. (Note that when conducting interviews on the radio or on television, some reporters will often not let the interviewee know specifically what questions will be asked. The purpose in this subterfuge is to catch the interviewees off guard, and perhaps make them slip and reveal more than intended. It makes for good ratings and a dramatic presentation during a live-interview, but that sort of trick is not appropriate for a scholarly interview; our purpose isn't to impress the audience with chicanery.)
3. Arrange a time to meet, a time to call them on the phone, or a date for an e-mail exchange. If you meet face-to-face, pick a fairly public location, but one with few distractions. Let them know how long you expect the interview to take. Many interviewees will feel most comfortable if you interview them at their offices, i.e., on their "home-turf" where they are psychologically at ease.
4. Ask to obtain permission in writing to quote the respondents, to cut-and-paste e-mail responses they write, or to use a tape-recorder during the session if you will be doing any of these activities. You can type up and mail a form for them to sign, or bring it with you to the interview for their signature. I include an example below:

Example Form:

"I [respondent's name] hereby give my permission for [student's name] to interview me and quote my responses in a scholarly research paper. I understand that this research paper will be submitted to a professor at the University of XXXX. I understand that I waive any claim to copyright to this material should the student ever publish it in a scholarly journal or in electronic format online. I understand that the author [will / will not] maintain my anonymity as a part of this interview. I hereby give my permission in the form of my signature below."

Signature _____ Date _____

5. Ask if the interviewee has any questions to ask before you begin.

WHEN PREPARING THE INTERVIEW

1. Plan to wear appropriate apparel for the interview. Dress a bit more formally than normal so the interviewee will treat you seriously and respectfully, rather than dismiss you as some punk college student who is barging into her life demanding an interview.
2. Prepare a list of questions in advance. Decide if you want an informal, chatty interview (which often puts interviewees at ease), or a more formal, structured interview (which often is more time-efficient and covers material more completely).
3. Since relying on one's memory is haphazard, be prepared to record responses in some way. Take a notebook for jotting down answers, or bring along a partner to take notes. Even better, bring along a tape recorder and ask permission for the interview to be recorded.

WHEN YOU FIRST MEET THE INTERVIEWEES:

1. Explain any issues of confidentiality. Explain who will get access to their answers and how their answers will be analyzed. Do note that it is often difficult to promise absolute confidentiality. Court orders may supersede their request for anonymity if you are interviewing someone who has engaged in illegal activities (something one should only do with caution--if at all. Professional reporters are paid good money to interview dangerous individuals, and they have the staff of their publication to help ensure their safety. College students aren't and don't.)
2. If these comments are to be used as quotes, get written permission to do so.
3. Explain the format of the interview. Explain the type of interview you are conducting, its purpose, and its nature.
4. Explain how to get in touch with you later if necessary.

WHEN ASKING QUESTIONS:

1. Ask only one question at a time. Don't jumble the response by trying to combine multiple questions at once.
2. Attempt to remain as neutral as possible. Often researchers suggest that the interviewer should not show any strong emotional reactions to their responses to avoid altering the responses. One researcher, Patton, suggests acting as if "you've heard it all before."

3. Encourage and elicit responses with non-committal body language, such as nodding, or murmuring "uh huh," and so on. Don't suddenly jump up to take notes, or it may seem that you are unusually surprised about an answer, which may influence the subject's response to the next few questions.
4. Don't let the respondent stray to another topic, but steer them back to the topic at hand with your questions.
5. Phrase your questions in such a way as to ensure an open-ended response. Don't put words in the interviewees' mouths, but let them choose their own vocabulary and phrasing when responding.
6. Keep questions neutral in tone. Avoid judgmental wording or evocative language. Asking someone, "what do you think the effects will be of higher levels of acidity in the Mackenzie" is less likely to direct a response than, "What do you think the effects will be of callously leaking industrial waste into a freshwater river?"
7. Word the questions clearly. Make them concise.
8. Pick pertinent inquiries. Part of this is also becoming familiar with the vocabulary of that field or topic, so you can ask intelligent questions.
9. Use caution when asking "why" questions. This type of question suggests a cause-effect relationship that may not actually exist. These questions may also invoke a defensive response, e.g., the interviewees may feel they have to justify their response, which may inhibit their responses to future questions.

OTHER TIPS:

1. Begin the interview with simple, factual questions that the interviewee can easily answer. This will help put the interviewee at ease, and make her more talkative for later, more complicated questions.
2. A good way to start is to ask about the interviewee's qualifications or knowledge. For example, "How long have you studied or worked on X?" "What first made you interested in X?" These questions, called ice-breakers, help establish a rapport with the subject.
3. After easing into the interview with simple questions, you can seek information about personal opinions or about more controversial issues.
4. Ask questions about the present before moving into questions about past events or future events. People have an easier time talking about what is taking place currently than they do recalling the past or speculating about the future.

4. The last question should be an invitation for the interviewee to add any final points or comments of his own.

5. If you are using a tape-recorder, check to see that it is working over the course of the interview.

AFTER YOU ARE DONE:

1. Go over your notes and make sure you can read your writing while it is still fresh in your memory.

2. It is polite to send a thank-you card or letter expressing your gratitude to the individuals interviewed and offer them a copy of the final paper, if they wish to have one. If your paper is later published, it is also polite to acknowledge the interviewee's assistance in a section thanking those who helped in the creation of the paper.

3. Be sure to include an entry for the interview in your Works Cited or Bibliography page of your final essay.

Congratulations. You have engaged in first-hand research, and found information that may never have been recorded before in any publication. You are one step closer to becoming an authoritative writer on this topic. Other writers may end up quoting you and your publications on this matter.

Step One: Choose the following:

1. Name of the person interviewed

2. Date scheduled for interview

3. A brief explanation of why the interviewee seems like a pertinent source (i.e., what qualifications, knowledge, or experience does he or she have regarding your topic).

4. A list of a dozen questions for the interview.

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