

Prep Points for Writing Interviews

No. 19 in the Writing Center Handout Series

Many good feature stories, history and sociology papers, and other writings start with a well-prepared and well-executed interview. While each discipline has specific guidelines and rules, these general tips will help you start writing a journalistic interview.

Preparation:

- Prepare written questions. Advance research about your subject will help you make better use of your time because you will be able to get right down to business. Stay with your planned questions during the interview because even if the conversation goes elsewhere, the questions may provide valuable angles. Be ready to go with new directions to the interview if the topics raised are more interesting than the ones covered by your original questions.
- Gather written documents such as flyers, fact sheets, posters, business cards, etc. These help with accuracy in spelling and other factual information and give you more material to work with when you sit down to write.
- Take good notes with pen and paper AND use a tape recorder if possible. Both methods have their unique advantages: writing helps you process the material for eventual written form and keeps your mind from wandering from the conversation; taping the interview insures exactness and is especially valuable if you change your mind later about the emphasis or approach your written work will take.

The Interview:

- Begin the interview with casual conversation to establish a rapport with your subject. When you are both at ease, the conversation will flow more smoothly.
- Notice the surroundings and take notes. A subject's office décor, gestures, or dress might tell you something about his or her personality that you wouldn't pick up from conversation alone. Such details can help provide a realistic, lively setting in the written version of the interview.
- If you have a tough question or questions about a difficult or controversial topic, ask them early in the interview so as to ease tension and get these issues out in the open. If the subject doesn't answer or answers incompletely, come back to those questions later when the subject is more at ease.
- Understand and respect the terms "off the record" and "not for attribution" and the concept of using a piece of information for developing further research. When the subject is highly controversial and the subject's job or reputation might be in jeopardy, he or she will sometimes provide the interviewer with information that is "off the record" but that can lead to quotable sources. Make sure that you and your subject are agreed on the meanings of these terms and on other aspects of the interview, such as its scope and length.
- Thank your subject following the interview, and make arrangements for follow-up. In some situations it is advantageous to check on important quotations or to clarify the meaning of what was said.

For more information on Interviews, see

Writing Features and Interviews (2nd ed), Christine Hall

<http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/EvaluationGuidelines.html>

<http://www.jteacher.com/PDF/writinginterviews.pdf>



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