

INTERVIEWING - TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

The Reuter Foundation

PREPARING

1. Research (library, cuttings, etc) the person you are going to interview and the subject matter. That way, you won't waste time asking mundane questions and you will be able to identify new material.

2. Prepare notes of what he or she has done and what questions you want to ask - get some idea of the story you are looking for.

3. When setting up the interview, be sure your subject knows why you want to talk and be definite as to when and where you will meet. Check whether you will need a photographer. Be prompt.

4. Establish the ground-rules:

- *Is it to be on-the-record or not attributable by name? Some old hands say you should not even ask, but assume everything is on-the-record. You could tell the subject you assume this, and leave it up to him to say if he wants to go off-record at any point.

- *Find out how much time you have.

- *If the subject asks to see a copy of your story before you issue it, what are your house rules on this? Sometimes it might be helpful to have it looked over, especially if the subject matter is complex.

- *Always ask permission if you want to use a tape recorder, and say whether it is for note-taking or broadcast purposes (carry a spare tape and batteries!)

5. If possible, make yourselves comfortable, away from noise, distractions and spectators. Be friendly, take a look around (visual detail can help liven up an interview report) and chat for a couple of minutes to break the ice. Beware adopting hostile body language.

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS

6. Check that you have the subject's name and title right and any other personal background details needed for your story.

7. Have your main questions written down or firmly in mind, but don't slavishly follow a list; be alert for the unexpected angle or nuance and follow it up.

8. Be a good listener and let your subject do the talking. But remember to ask the "nuts and bolts" questions that elicit vital details and attitudes - the "how", "where", "when" and "why" of a situation

9. If the answer is a mere "yes" or "no", lean forward and wait a moment. Usually, to fill the silence, the source will go on talking.

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10. Ask only one thing at a time - multi-point questions are confusing. Keep questions as short and succinct as possible. If your source rambles into irrelevant areas, have a question ready to bring the interview back on course. Beware letting the source interview you ("What do you think about this?")

11. Retain your impartiality and composure - NEVER, NEVER lose your self-control and display anger, however unhelpful you may consider the replies. Often - but not always - it is best to save the very toughest questions until last in case they sour the atmosphere of the interview. Play that by ear.

12. Be persistent. If a subject evades answering an important question, keep returning to it, perhaps using different words. If that does not work, say you will have to report him as declining to answer the question (that usually brings a more direct response).

13. Try not to let note-taking interrupt the flow of your questions. If you are tape-recording the interview, make sure your recorder has a tape-counter - you can then glance at it and write down numbers that correspond with important points in the interview. This allows you to jot down just headline points while the interview is in progress. When you come to write the story, the numbers will help you to go straight to the right point in the tape for the full quotes.

14. Don't trust important points to memory. If you are without a tape and need to get down an exact note, you might explain: "I want to make careful notes on that; it seems to be a crucial point."

15. Always ask for clarification if there is something you don't understand. Taking the risk of seeming ignorant is better than having to ring your source back later to ask what was meant.

ENDING THE INTERVIEW

16. Make sure any information gaps have been filled. When you think you have covered all the ground, draw things to a close by asking something like: "In summary, then, how would you put it - what is the most important point for you?"

17. It's also a useful protection to ask: "Is there anything important I've missed that you would like to add?"

18. Don't forget to thank the subject for granting you the interview - and then say goodbye.

19. On the way back to the office, evaluate your story and frame an outline. What's the main point, does anything need checking out with other sources, does it need another view to balance it?

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