Tips for Interviewing Sources

Interviewing is an important research skill. Interviews come in many shapes and sizes: News reporters interview sources for stories to keep the public informed, academic researchers interview subjects for studies to advance scientific knowledge, and investigators interview witnesses to help solve crimes. The tips here (this is a working list) are relevant to many types of interviews, including job interviews. But they are geared mostly to your research paper, for which you will interview professionals about the writing they do. Consider this advice as you delve into the task. Have fun!

When requesting an interview:

* Introduce yourself, using your full name and affiliation.
* Try calling by phone (leave a message if they don’t pick up) and follow up quickly with an e-mail. If your prospective interviewee is on campus, you might swing by their office in person.
* Be honest and clear about why you want to speak with them and how you plan to use their information (for a class paper, a news article etc.)
* If not on the spot, set up a time and place convenient to your source.
* Be clear about your deadline.
* Plan ahead how much time you think you’ll need. 15 minutes to a half hour should work for our assignment interviews.
* Prepare your questions ahead of time and write them down.
* If reaching out to a few potential sources on the same topic, be sure to thank those who get back to you, even if you no longer need their help, or it’s past your deadline.

During (on the day of) the Interview:

* Dress professionally if speaking with someone in person (for example, do not come in gym clothes or pajamas).
* Show up/call on time.
* Thank your source for meeting.
* Have your questions ready for reference.
* Reiterate the reason for the interview and how it will be used.
* Make sure you cover your most important questions in the time you’ve allotted for your interview.
* If you plan to record the interview, be sure to get permission from your source in advance.
* Recording or not, always take reliable notes.
* Generally, it helps to start with bigger picture questions and then move into the details. For example, I’d ask your sources to describe their job first. Then you can move to specifics about the documents they write – their audiences and purposes.
* Take your time to write legibly and ask your source to hang on if you need time to finish writing down a point (they’ll understand and appreciate your concern for getting it right).
* If you have any doubt, run direct quotes back by your source for accuracy.
* Ask permission to contact your source, if needed, for follow-up questions/clarification before your deadline. Confirm how they would prefer to be contacted (for example by text, or a call, or e-mail).
* Thank your source for their time.

After the Interview

* Take a moment, while the conversation and your notes are fresh, to write up the most important information and some of the quotes you may use. If you have time, you might just draft the whole career section of your paper supported by the interview. It’s easier to do this sooner than later.
* Contact your source if you need to clarify any of their information.
* Consider sending them a copy of your work as a courtesy/thank you – especially to sources who gave a good deal of their time to you.