Tips for Conducting Personal Interviews

When conducting research, it may be necessary to go directly to the expert who can best provide information and insights on the topic; interviewing, either in person, over the telephone, or through email, allows you to ask questions that specifically relate to your topic and concerns. Noted below are several strategies for how to best conduct an interview. Good luck!

**Pre-Interview**

- **Research your topic and the person (subject) you intend to interview before the interview.**

- **Make a list of questions and refer to it during the interview.** If the conversation flows well, and the subject says something that makes you think of a great new question that is not on your list, remember to ask this new question either in the moment or once you come to the end of the interview.

  **Tip:** Add the new question to the list, so it can be easily referred to and not repeated during the interview. This is especially important if you’re nervous.

- **If meeting in person, if possible, go to the site to determine if there are too many distractions to have a meaningful face-to-face interview.** The interviewee should be comfortable to speak freely (and audibly!) at the chosen location.

- **Call in advance at least several days to a week to arrange an appointment with your interview subject.** Be on time for the interview.

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**Technology Tidbit**

There are so many great, and often free, applications that make interviewing from afar easier.

**Skype** lets users make free internet calls from their computers to other users. This program is user-friendly and easy to sign-up for.

**Pamela for Skype** allows users to record up to 15 minutes of conversations on Skype for free! This recording feature makes interview transcription a cinch.

Ira Glass, of **This American Life**, gives some excellent tips on what makes a great narrative once you’ve conducted your interview. Check out the blog, **Presentation Zen**, to read more about Mr. Glass’ suggestions for how to organize an interview once you’re done.
During the Interview

• **If you bring a tape recorder to the interview, be sure to ask the subject if it is okay to record the session**; don’t turn the device on until after chatting with the interviewee to build rapport. This ice-breaking should take about 10 to 15 minutes.

• **Try to place the recorder in a location where it’s not the “elephant in the room.”** It may make the interviewee nervous if the recorder is always in view.

**Tip: If you do not record the session, take copious notes.** Never quote someone incorrectly (aka, misquoting). This means that unless you taped the session (or know shorthand well) and can quote the subject’s words exactly as they were spoken, do not place words inside quotation marks. A quote is a phrase that is not altered in any way by the interviewer. You should not add anything to the original wording, nor should you misquote someone by deleting wording, even if it is something you disagree with. Reporting what someone said out of context is unethical.

• **Ask questions that are open-ended.** If you only ask questions that require a “yes” or a “no” answer, your subject does not have a chance to ramble, think more deeply, or say something you may find extremely interesting. You may unintentionally cut off the subject’s verbal character and personality if you only asked closed questions (those yes-no questions mentioned earlier). Surprisingly, during these rambling moments, your patience is often rewarded with insightful quotes you may use in your writing.

• **Letting the subject speak freely does not mean you should ignore time constraints.** Not only do you not want to overstay your welcome during the interview, but you also want to be sure you have enough time to gather all of the information that you need. You’ll find that gauging time gets easier the more interviews you conduct; you may even develop an inner clock that sets off an alarm whenever the subject strays too far from the topic at hand.

• **Think about some polite redirection phrases that you can use to get the subject’s attention back on track,** such as “I was intrigued by what you just said about...,” “Getting back to the...,” or “Just to make sure I’ve covered everything...” If you are really desperate to move the focus back to the topic, try saying something like, “I really enjoyed learning about X, but do you mind if I ask you about Y? I’m afraid I’ll forget to ask something we both consider important in the short time we have together.”

• **An interview opportunity may be wasted when the focus remains off-topic or fractured for more than a few minutes.** It isn’t just the subject who loses focus while talking about a range of things that don’t pertain to the interview. You will lose focus, too, and find yourself spouting...
opinions while telling your life’s story instead of gathering information. The morale of this story is not to continue giving the subject too many chances to digress once the interview begins. As a general rule, an interview may last from thirty minutes to two hours. The interview gets stale though if it lasts for more than two hours; both you and the subject begin to tire, so close the interview while you’re both still enjoying the give and take. Once you hone your interviewing skills, you can complete a successful interview in about 60 to 90 minutes, depending upon the topic.

- **Towards the end of the interview, your subject will either make some type of body gesture that tips you to the fact the interview needs to be winding up, or you will do that.** When closing an interview, do the following:
  - Ask if there are any questions you did not ask that should be asked.
  - Ask the exact spelling of the subject’s name.
  - Thank your subject for his/her time.
  - Ask the interviewee if he or she wants a copy of the interview’s transcript or the final version of the document the interview material will appear in.

**After the Interview**

- **Contact the interviewee by email, telephone, or handwritten note to thank him or her for taking time to respond to your questions.**

- **If you recorded the session, transcribe the interview as soon as possible** so that you can note body language that you remember, and also fill in gaps that the recording device may have missed due to noise interference or device malfunction.

- **Review and analyze the responses from the interviewee,** keeping in mind the associated body language, voice inflection, and what the interviewee did not say. Take notes on your reflection so that you remember your first impressions of the interview.

Figure 3: A firm handshake in thanks is often a good idea after the interview is done.