

Good journalism is dependent on a total stranger's cooperation and participation. At the heart of this issue is the interview. The finished product may be a piece of writing that you craft, but the material is a result of the interviews you conduct.

And while sources vary — some people know exactly what they want to say while others love to make you sweat for a basic quote — how you conduct the interview has more to do with the outcome than anything.

It's odd that so much emphasis is put on teaching journalists how to write an article when that skill is useless without also teaching journalists how to develop strong interview techniques.

In an effort to help other aspiring reporters develop this crucial skill, I brought together some of my colleagues and journalist friends to ask them what interview tips they think are most helpful.

1. Find a good location. Avoid Starbucks! It's often easiest to suggest a centrally located corporate coffeeshop, but if there is any way you can interview in a place that has some relevance to the story or your subject, you'll have much greater success. Not only because you'll gain a further sense of context, but people are often more comfortable (and open) when they're in a familiar place or what feels like "their territory."

Ask to meet at your subject's house, work, or the location of an incident relevant to the story. Even meeting at the interviewee's favorite restaurant is more interesting than a Starbucks.

2. Prepare your goals ahead of time. Know what questions you're going to ask and why you're going to ask them. Heading to an interview with a sense of what you want to get out of it (a colorful re-enactment of an event, an on-the-record opinion on the issue you're covering, general background, etc.) is critical to conducting a successful interview.

You should already be thinking about what you want your piece to look like and what you need from this interview to get your article closer to that end result.

3. Write down your questions. Be sure and bring prepared questions with you. I usually go into an interview with twice as many questions as I expect to ask. The security of knowing I'm not going to get stuck helps my confidence, and you never know what question will get you the information you're really looking for.

4. Work on your flow. This is probably the most challenging but also the most important interview skill you can develop. You want to strike a balance between a conversation (which helps make your subject feel comfortable and aids candor) and getting the job done. As your subject is answering your question, be thinking about what you'll ask next and why.

The flow of questions needs to seem natural and conversational — don't spin your subject off on a completely different topic just because that's the next question on your list. Think about segues and transitions. This way your subject doesn't feel forced to give you soundbites and may open up a little (particularly important for anyone working on an audio piece where you may need blocks of the raw interview).

5. Think about the medium. Interviewing techniques definitely vary for different mediums. If you're interviewing for audio or video, you want to ask two-part questions, which encourages subjects to talk for longer blocks of time.

Conversely, when you're interviewing for print, try and break questions up so you can get shorter and more concise answers (easier for taking notes and for quoting later). You can be more conversational with interviews for print — you can say "yeah," and "uh-huh," etc. Not doing this is one of the biggest

challenges when you're interviewing for audio. Nodding and smiling accomplishes the same sort of conversational encouragement and keeps your tape clean.

Another great trick for audio interviews is to have your subject re-enact the story. It makes for good sound and helps you avoid having too much of your own narration later on.

6. Bring a buddy. I find having a second person as a notetaker and extra set of ears can be very useful. If you don't think another person will overwhelm or distract your subject (I find that pretty rare), it can be a lifesaver to have that second set of notes to check your quotes and information.

7. Avoid obsessing. While good notes and recording are very important, you can do yourself a disservice by obsessing about recording every little detail of what your subject says. As you're interviewing, you should be able to discern the gems from the chatter — focus on the quotes and info you know you're going to use and make sure you get that right!

8. Be a little annoying. Don't be afraid to relentlessly revisit a question or topic that you feel hasn't been properly addressed by the interviewee. Sometimes people need time to warm up to you or a topic, or will respond better if your question is worded differently. Keep trying.

9. Be a little sneaky. Continue taking notes even after the interview is officially over. Sometimes people say the most revealing or intimate things when they feel they're out of the "hot seat." If they don't say "off the record," it's all game.

10. Empower your subject. A great question to ask if you don't fully understand the perspective of your interviewee is, "What is your ideal solution/resolution?" Obviously this only works in certain circumstances, but when appropriate it can help clarify a person's point of view or opinion.

11. Work them up. Another great question is, "Why do you care about this issue?" This can be an effective way to get a strong and emotional quote about why the topic you're covering is so important.

You can also ask for the turning point in a story, the moment when everything changed or catalyzed. This can help you shape the narrative of your story as well.

12. Endure awkward silences. I know this is totally counterintuitive. My instinct is to keep chattering and asking questions to keep people feeling comfortable, but sometimes, especially when you're dealing with sensitive subjects, you need to shut up and wait.

Ask your question, let them give you the rehearsed and generic answer, then sit there quietly and see what comes next. You'd be amazed how often this technique yields powerful results.

13. Ask for what you need. Seriously, sometimes interviewees are frustrating not because they're trying to bust your chops, but because they just don't understand what you want from them. I find that many interview subjects get a kick out of having you "pull back the curtain" a little and tell them about your process.

You can say, "Listen, I really need a quote from you encapsulating your feelings on this issue," or, "I really need you to walk me through the chronology of this," or even, "I really need you to take me to a location that is relevant to this issue so I can set a scene." For the most part people want to be helpful, and you just need to tell them how they can.

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