Conducting an interview for an internal news story

The success of an interview depends on the journalist’s preparation, professionalism and people skills. You have to be able to ask the right questions in the right way at the right time. Much of it is something that cannot be taught -- only learned through experience. But if you can remember the fundamentals of interviewing, you will continue to develop as a journalist. Interviewing is the bedrock of our skill set – it enables journalists to not only get information, but to add color and dimension to stories while also establishing a network of contacts.

Photo courtesy of Defense Imagery
Interview basics

An interview is a form of two-way communication used as a basic information-gathering tool for journalists. Its purpose is to investigate, explore and reconfirm facts surrounding a news story, event or topic. It also offers expert opinions on the facts that are the framework of the story and adds dimension that would be hard to produce strictly from facts.

We find the experts and ask the questions that interested readers would ask in order to write a thorough, informative story. Although a journalist should know a little about the interview topic, it’s not necessary to be a subject-matter expert to conduct a good interview and write a good story.

As a military journalist, you must keep in mind that you not only represent yourself, but also your publication, public affairs office and service. It’s vital that you act as a professional and maintain your military bearing while interviewing any person -- regardless of rank or position.

- When requesting the interview, introduce yourself and summarize the purpose of your story.
- Never be late or unprepared.
- Express gratitude for the interviewee’s time and cooperation.

To use information gathered from any source, you must take notes to organize and record the information for use in writing your article. Note taking is a skill that will become easier with practice.

- Develop your own shorthand. Streamline your note taking by using abbreviations such as initials of people or organizations. For example: TDY, TAD, govt., CQ, trans, etc. You can even omit vowels or use a single letter with a prefix or suffix.
- Get the facts right. Get the names spelled correctly and double-check them. All of the facts must be accurate. Accuracy is essential in journalism.
- Don’t write everything down. You are not a court reporter trying to transcribe every word. You’re a journalist seeking to capture the important and interesting points of the interview. Concentrate on getting down the strong quotes and specific facts.
- Look up from your notebook. As important as your notes are, your story is in front of you, not in your notebook.
- Echo, echo, echo. Slow the speaker down and get confirmation for your notes by echoing the speaker, especially about important facts: “You said Oct. 13th, right. Thirteen?”

Now that we’ve covered interviewing basics, let’s move on to the interviewing process itself. We’ll start with a journalist’s responsibilities before the interview.
Before the interview

Before the interview, you should also plan questions you need to ask. Experts have said that writing the questions is the key to a successful interview. While every situation is a little different, basic questioning techniques are relatively the same. Without good questions, getting the information readers want is nearly impossible. Here are some guidelines:

- Focus on the topic and your objectives. The more you can narrow down the purpose to a specific topic or set of related topics, the more interesting information you will receive. For a news story, journalists should ask at least the five W’s and H to get off on the right foot.
- Prepare more questions than you think you’ll need, with a goal of about 20-25 questions. The problem some journalists have when they don’t prepare enough questions and “wing” all, or most of the interview is they forget key points or miss information, which makes their story shallow or incomplete.
- Ask open-ended questions. Plan your questions carefully to allow the interviewee ample opportunity to elaborate, clarify or qualify his response.
- Avoid yes/no questions. If you do fall into one, ask a follow-up question.

Well-prepared journalists know that the planning will be fruitless if the interview itself falls short. Let’s take a look at some guidelines to follow during the interview.

The first step in the interviewing process is defining the purpose for the interview. Identify the information you want and who can provide it. Determine the news peg, or the reason you are writing the story. This will form the foundation for your interview preparation.

Researchers next. You should become familiar with your topic and interviewees before conducting the interview.

- Research the news peg. Find out what you can by hitting the Internet, or reading past stories about the subject.
- Research the interviewees. Seek out background or biographical information about your sources. This information can help establish credibility in your story.

Before the interview, journalists may have to conduct spontaneous interviews during their careers, but when possible, time should be taken to prepare for the appointment.
During the Interview

Remember you are in control of the interview. You are there to accomplish a purpose and obtain the information you need to report the story. However, leave your interviewees plenty of latitude to introduce additional ideas.

- Establish rapport. Begin by explaining who you are, what you want and why. Ask simple questions to start.

- Learn to listen effectively during an interview. Your body language and eye contact should convey interest and make the interviewee feel at ease.

- Use the source’s responses as a springboard to additional, follow-up or clarifying questions. Don’t be afraid to get away from your prepared questions.

- Ask for clarification. Don’t be afraid to ask the interviewee to explain, elaborate or restate important points. Be alert for vague words and follow up by asking specific questions.

- Confirm facts. Read numbers, names and specific facts back to the interviewee to check your notes.

Just like a story has a beginning, middle and end, an interview should have a well-executed closing.
Ending the interview

You should make an effort to complete the interview on time, but carry on if the interviewee agrees and seems eager to offer other information.

- To signal your intent to close, review your notes and ask if the subject has any final thoughts or anything to add.

- Leave your business card and request contact information in return. Ask for the best way to get a hold of him for more information in order to clear up any facts, if necessary. Always leave a “foot in the door.”

- Always review and fill in your notes as soon as possible after the interview. Don’t wait or you’ll forget what was said and won’t be able to decipher your shorthand. It also helps to outline your notes by highlighting good quotes or important points.

- You may need to follow-up to fill in “holes” in your story. Ask your subject to confirm, correct or elaborate information missing or unclear in your notes.

In this lesson, we’ve covered the fundamentals of interviewing and the guidelines to plan, execute and wrap-up an interview. Before we end this lesson, let’s review everything you’ve learned.
Conclusion

Remember, the success of an interview depends on the journalist’s preparation, professionalism and people skills. This lesson was only an introduction to the basics of the interviewing process. As you continue in this course, and as you progress in your careers, you will learn to hone your interviewing skills. The ability to ask questions and listen effectively to the responses will make your stories more informative and interesting, which in turn will increase your readership’s interest in your publication.
References


