

An Insider's Guide to Good Interviews

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Interviewing is a skill gained by following practical procedures. Good reporters, from local newspapers to national magazines, follow these procedures to get great stories. For yearbook writers looking for stories and details to capture the year, the same techniques will work for you.

The interview began with a polite introduction. “Mr. Stiles, my name is Wright Thompson and I’m writing a story for the New York Times regarding Jackie. Do you have a few minutes?” Jackie Stiles, a Southwest Missouri State University basketball player, was only days away from becoming the all-time leading scorer in college basketball, having already surpassed the women’s mark and quickly closing on the men’s record. What had been reported many times was that Stiles was raised on the family farm near Claflin, Kan., (population 688) and she understood the benefits of hard work. She would stay after practice each day and shoot until she made 100 baskets, unusual for any basketball player, particularly a team’s star player.

As a journalism student at the University of Missouri, Thompson learned how to research stories, prepare questions to ask the source, and conduct interviews that encouraged the source to provide out-of-the ordinary information. By the time Thompson telephoned Pat Stiles, Jackie’s father, Thompson had developed an outline for the story. He wanted to know the driving force that pushed this country girl from the Kansas plains to become the most prolific scorer in college basketball history.

“I hope I didn’t interrupt your supper,” Thompson said to Mr. Stiles. “What’d ya’ll have for supper this evening?” For the next 20 minutes, Thompson and Mr. Stiles discussed the intricacies of cooking and their favorite foods. Thompson was not taking notes or firing questions at Mr. Stiles. He was having a friendly conversation about food with a complete stranger. Thompson realized that the relationship between the reporter and source begins with trust. Thompson understood that as a college student from Mississippi, he and Mr. Stiles had little in common. Nonetheless, Thompson quickly learned they shared a similar hobby – cooking.

Research, Research, Research

Although different stories, such as features, news, investigative, and personality profiles, sometimes require different types of interview techniques, there are similarities. A good interview always begins with research. How do you research a story?

- Read previous school and local newspaper stories about the subject (check the newspaper morgue or online archives).
- Find documents, such as minutes from meetings, police reports, programs from school events, etc.
- Locate statistics, such as the school district budget, salaries of public officials (city, state, federal or public school employees), sports teams, debate teams, band member awards, attendance figures, etc.

- Talk with people familiar with the subject (other reporters or editors, local historians, others sources who were involved with similar stories, etc.).

The idea is to gather as much information about the subject as possible before conducting the interview. Each story should be carefully researched. If you have not educated yourself about the subject, a source will view you as an ill-prepared reporter. Now, that does not mean you need to have all the answers before the interview begins. The source will provide much of the information for the story, but an educated reporter shows he or she cares about the subject and has a general understanding of the subject matter.

Compiling Questions

After researching the subject, compile a list of questions you want to ask the source. Or better yet, compile a list of key words that will spark a question. If you are interviewing a school principal about enrollment, write, “enrollment” in your notebook. Here are a few more tips:

- Do not feel compelled to ask the questions in order. The questions, or key words, are simply a guide.
- Be curious about the subject of the story. Ask questions that interest you.
- Talk about the story with an editor, fellow reporter or friend. Talking about the story allows you to broaden your perspective. Others might think of questions, or story angles, that you have not.
- The best interviews are structured conversations. Do not force questions that do not flow with the conversation. If you ask the principal, “What do you think will be the most difficult part about your new job?” and he says, “My wife just passed away. I’m not sure how I’ll be able to do this job without her. She was my guiding light.” Your next question should not be the “enrollment” question. You might want to say, “I’m so sorry. This must be a difficult time. In what way was she your guiding light?” To some degree allow the discussion to flow naturally without losing focus of what the story is about.

Making Contact

When you contact the source to set up the interview, request a specific amount of time, usually 15 to 30 minutes. If your interview is an hour long, it is probably too long and should be divided into two interviews. Other tips include:

- Interview the source in a place where he or she will be comfortable and willing to talk. The source’s office or home usually provides the best setting. To interview students at school, go someplace in or around the building that relates to your line of questioning, and go during a quiet time when you will not be disturbed.
- Greet a source you do not know by introducing yourself. If it is an adult, use a firm handshake.
- If you are conducting a telephone interview, be polite and professional.
- Unless the subject is a teenager, using courtesy titles such as “Mr.” or “Mrs.” or “Miss” is appropriate. If the subject is a medical doctor, use “Dr.”
- Make eye contact with the source, and be attentive and interested in what is being said. Remember, the source has taken time out of his or her busy schedule to talk with you.

Interview the Room

When you arrive for the interview, look around the home, office or other setting and interview the room. What pictures are on the desk? Is there artwork on the walls? What kind of furniture? What is the source wearing? Jewelry? Shoes? Does the source have calluses on his or her hands or are the hands smooth? Calluses are indicative of someone who works with their hands. If so, what kind of work; does a teacher garden as a hobby or create sculptures as a second income? You do not just interview the source; you interview the source's life. That does not mean making assumptions, but it is simply a way to spark conversation and learn more about the subject. Use all your senses when reporting. What does it smell like? What do you hear, see, and feel? You are a trained observer so be certain to observe.

Getting Comfortable

Start the interview with casual conversation. There might be a piece of artwork in the room you can discuss, or the college class ring the person is wearing. Keep it light and friendly. After a couple minutes of chitchat, you will be ready to start the interview. The line of questioning should go something like this:

- First question, "Could you spell your name for me?" Do not assume the previous stories had his or her name spelled correctly.
- Ask "softball" questions – easy questions that the source can hit out of the ballpark. It allows them to get loose to handle the other questions.
- The conversation will usually direct the remainder of the interview. Although it is a conversation you must keep in mind your original list of questions. You do not want to make this a question-and-answer session – you ask a question and the source responds – but keeping the source on track is important.
- Allow the source to talk. Do not interrupt or complete sentences for the source. Sometimes lulls in conversation spark answers to questions. Silence makes people uneasy so they'll keep talking to avoid dead air. Sometimes that's when the source provides the most interesting and pertinent information.
- Save the tough questions for last. Get all the information you need to write the story before asking a question that could end the interview. At least that way you have a story, even if it probably will not address the difficult issues.

Wrapping up the Interview

When your time has expired (15 to 30 minutes), say, "I think our time is up." If the source wants to continue the interview, you can continue.

Your final question of the interview should be, "If I have further questions, may I contact you?" Politely ask for a phone number. Shake the source's hand, and thank the source for his or her time.

Immediately after the interview organize your notes and transcribe your tape if you used a tape recorder. Be certain to check facts, statistics, dates, quotes, and name spellings. To be accurate you might have to talk with a source several times. There is no shame in

repeatedly contacting a source to check and double check information. You can explain, “I want to be certain to get the story right.” The source will want that as well and will cooperate.

Final Tips

Do not be a stenographer and publish everything you are told. Be a reporter. As the old saying goes, “If your mother tells you she loves you, check it out.” A reporter investigates what he or she is told in an effort to determine what is fact and what is fiction. Providing an open microphone to a source to speak freely without confirmation or accountability is irresponsible journalism. If the principal says, “We’re expecting an enrollment of 1,000 students this year,” take time to check it out with the school district. A phone call can quickly verify or nullify the enrollment figure. Many times sources do not accurately quote statistics. Help them out by checking it out.

It is also a good idea to do an accuracy check – reading quotes and information back to a source to confirm its accuracy. The accuracy check is NOT an invitation for a source to change quotes. It is only a method for checking the facts. If a source wants to change a quote, talk with your editor. However, the first question you should ask a source is, “Is the quote accurate?” If the response is, “Yes, but. . .” you are under no obligation to alter the quote. Nonetheless, consult with your editor. When doing an accuracy check, read the paragraph before the quote and the paragraph after the quote. That way the source will know that the quote was used in the proper context.

Probably the most important aspect to remember when interviewing is to be fair with the sources and be accurate with the information. As one University of Missouri professor says, “Journalism is not rocket science; it’s much more difficult. Provable commodities, such as the laws of physics, guide rocket scientists. Journalists do not have such provable commodities.” Trust, respect and accuracy are characteristics of journalism that come with hard work and concerted effort. Nonetheless, there is no proven formula for those characteristics in journalism. Hopefully, these tips will assist you in becoming the most responsible journalist possible.