THE ART OF THE INTERVIEW
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By Evan Blackwell
Copywriter, Walsworth Yearbooks

STUDENT WORKBOOK
Before any yearbook writers can start crafting their masterpieces, information for the story must be gathered. One of the most important ways journalists do this is through interviewing sources.

Actually getting out and talking to people in and around the school community is vital to your yearbook’s coverage. Students, teachers, coaches, administrators, parents – they all make great sources.

But as you get started, there are some fundamental truths about interviewing that you should understand:

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**Good interviews require research and preparation.**

Do you know the background of the person you’re interviewing? Did you think about what questions to ask before the interview?

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**The best interviews are conversations.**

Yes, as the reporter, you’ll be asking most of the questions, but that doesn’t mean an interview is an interrogation. It should be a comfortable experience. And while you might be most comfortable on the phone or using email, a face-to-face, in person interview is the best practice whenever possible.

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**Interviewers need attention to (the right) detail.**

Good interviewers learn what types of questions to ask, which details to pay attention to, and which ones to ignore. Not everything a subject says will be interesting enough to make it into your story.

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That all sounds sensible, right? Unfortunately, learning these principles is not always easy. They don’t come naturally for every yearbook reporter. But don’t worry, there’s an art to interviewing and every staffer can learn it.
Lesson 1
Preparing for an Interview

Objectives – In this lesson, you will learn:

- The importance of research and how to gather background information
- How to construct useful interview questions

Interviewing starts before you show up to begin the questions and answers. If you arrive for an interview uninformed about the source and the topic, you’re asking for things to go poorly. You need to be prepared.

RESEARCH

Interview prep starts with research. It doesn’t matter if you’re going to interview a coach, principal, teacher or another student (like an athlete), do your homework first. That background research can be done in a variety of ways and comes in different forms:

1. Do an online search for any previous articles about the person you’re interviewing or topic you’re writing about. Absolutely make sure to search through old issues of the school newspaper too, possibly in the library. See if the person is active on Twitter or other public social media.

2. Get statistics that might pertain to your interview. This could be the record and leading scorers for the basketball team, the school’s attendance numbers for the year or school district budget figures.

3. Gather any important documents that could help your interview. For example, if you’re going to interview the principal and ask about an issue from the previous school board meeting, be sure to get a copy of the minutes from the meeting.
DEVELOP QUESTIONS

The next important part of your interview prep is figuring out the points you want to cover in the interview and writing down a list of questions.

All interviews need to make sure and cover the basics, and a starting point is the 5 W’s and H – Who, What, When, Where, Why and How. These questions are the foundation of information gathering and they serve as the perfect starting point for getting the basic facts of a story. But your interviews will often need to go deeper than that.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF QUESTION</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who</strong></td>
<td>Who was involved in this story?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What</strong></td>
<td>What is this story about?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>When</strong></td>
<td>When did this story take place?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Where</strong></td>
<td>Where did this story take place?</td>
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<td><strong>Why</strong></td>
<td>Why is this important?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How</strong></td>
<td>How did this happen?</td>
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**BRAINSTORM WITH OTHER STAFF REPORTERS.** Just as you would brainstorm about a theme idea, brainstorming about interview questions makes perfect sense.

Write your questions down! You shouldn’t plan on going to the interview preparing to read from a script or cue cards (we’ll get more into that in the next lesson), but you will absolutely want notes with your questions in front of you in some kind of ordered fashion.

TYPES OF QUESTIONS TO AVOID

**Yes/No questions** – A common mistake is to ask questions that lead to a flat “yes” or “no” response. It only leads to weak quotes.

**General questions** – Vague questions get uninteresting answers. Don’t ask, “How did the team play on Friday night?” Instead ask, “Which play was the turning point on Friday night?”

**“Feel” questions** – It’s always a good idea to get personal reflections. But try not to just ask, “How did it feel when you were in the car accident?” What will they say? “It felt awful.” Ask more specific questions, like “What was the first thing you remembered after the accident?”

**Leading questions** – You should not interject your opinion into a story, and the same goes for questions. It can lead to false, slanted information. Don’t ask, “Do you have any problems with (name)?” Right away, you’ve implied there’s a problem. Ask, “What’s your relationship like with (name)?”
Practice research – Identify a story you might be assigned to write for this year’s yearbook. Decide who the sources for the story would be, then list what background research you would do below.
WHO IS YOUR CELEBRITY?

Famous interview – Pick a celebrity, sports figure or anyone famous you would like to interview. Research all the background information you can on the person, and then write out a list of initial questions below that you would ask them in an interview.

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Interviewee Name: 

Your Name:
I can do all tasks in 3.0 and I can teach others!

3.0  I can demonstrate an understanding of my interview subject and can draw on my preparation and research to stimulate thoughtful, well-reasoned interview questions. I can...

a. gather relevant information from multiple authoritative sources to help both answer questions as well as generate questions

b. create clear and coherent questions that will propel the interview forward and demonstrate an understanding of my purpose and audience

I demonstrate command of the planning and revision process by editing my questions for word choice, meaning, purpose, and organization.

2.0  I understand that it is necessary to research and prepare questions in advance, but I am still unsure how to gather and compile information in order to construct clear and coherent questions for an interview.

1.0  I still don’t understand how to prepare for an interview.
Lesson 2
Conducting an Interview

Objectives – In this lesson, you will learn:

- The skills needed to conduct an interview, using proper methods of communication
- Effective methods for taking notes in an interview, and how to designate direct quotes

Once all the research and prep work is done, it’s time to simply have a conversation. Because at the root of it, that’s exactly what an interview is. You’re looking for knowledge and information, and the source is going to provide it, if you have the right source.

IN PERSON

Technology is awesome, and you probably have a smartphone that you constantly use to text, Tweet and Facebook. But for yearbook interviews, you should always try to make it face-to-face. A phone interview is acceptable if there’s a deadline crunch, or something in person just simply can’t be worked out, but don’t conduct an interview with an exchange of emails or text messages.
When you go to an interview, it’s important to remember the saying “Interview the room.” Take note of the environment around you – all the sights and sounds. If you’re interviewing the principal or football coach in his office, what’s up on the walls? Are there awards or trophies? Is the interview inside or outside? What’s the person wearing?

Taking notes is critical. It’s great to record interviews if the source is comfortable with that – most smartphones have audio recording capabilities. But you should never depend on recording an interview as the only method for taking down information.

As mentioned in the previous lesson on interview prep, your questions should be written down in your notes and the answers you get should be written in close proximity. Try numbering the questions and answers to match them up. Develop your own shorthand that makes sense to you.

When you hear something important, mark it with a star or check mark. If you hear a line you think might make a good quote, put quotation marks around it. Don’t try to write down everything unless you are capturing a quote – summarize.

The questions you prepare for an interview are like a roadmap that shows you the direction you want an interview to go and help keep you on course. But sometimes, depending on an answer to one of your questions, you will need to improvise and change directions. Don’t always expect to ask your questions exactly in order like a script.

For example, you might be doing a profile on an award-winning teacher. After asking the teacher what they considered to be the keys to their success, they tell you an emotional story about their child overcoming cancer and how that provides them daily motivation. You should then ask follow-up questions to learn more about that powerful personal story.

For the time being, you would bypass your notes that list the next question as, “How did you get started as a teacher?” You can always come back to that question later.
Make eye contact with the person you’re interviewing, and act interested and invested in what they’re saying.

Do not arrive or call late. Be professional!

Always ask a source for the correct spelling of their name. Even if you’re confident you know the spelling, always verify it.

When an interview is over, thank the source for their time and ask for their permission to call with any follow-up questions.

Be polite. Always introduce yourself and identify that you work for the yearbook.

End an interview on time. Don’t be inconsiderate of somebody else’s schedule.

Make eye contact with the person you’re interviewing, and act interested and invested in what they’re saying.

Smile and say hello to one new person at school every day for a month.

Every time you go to the store, smile and say hello to the cashier and ask them how their day is going.

Find an opportunity before or after class to ask a couple of your teachers why they got into teaching.

If you have a job, are on a team or in a club, ask a co-worker or other club member one question to learn more about them.

GOOD INTERVIEWING HABITS OF GOOD REPORTERS

These simple habits often get overlooked, but they are crucial to successful interviews.

Many new yearbook reporters struggle approaching new people and getting comfortable during interviews. Try these tips for learning to talk to new people:

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OVERCOMING SHYNESS

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Find an opportunity before or after class to ask a couple of your teachers why they got into teaching.

If you have a job, are on a team or in a club, ask a co-worker or other club member one question to learn more about them.
**Mock interviews** – It’s time to put your new skills to use. Pair up with another yearbook staff member and practice interviewing each other. Alternate who gets to play each of these roles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assistant principal</td>
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<td>Student council president</td>
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<td>School nurse</td>
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<td>Quarterback on the football team</td>
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**Note-taking practice**

Find a speech on YouTube that is at least 10 minutes long, and take notes. Afterwards, compare your notes with other yearbook staffers and see if you pulled out the same quotes.
I can do all tasks in 3.0 and I can teach others!

I can demonstrate how to draw upon my research and preparation to propel the interview forward and encourage the flow of useful information. I can...

a. clarify, verify or challenge ideas that are presented in the interview

b. determine what additional information is needed based upon the responses I receive in the interview to deepen the investigation

I demonstrate command of the interview process including the ability to appropriately record responses and ask follow-up questions.

I understand how to ask my questions, but am unsure how to turn my preparation into a productive, guided conversation that solicits useful information.

I still don’t understand how to conduct an effective interview.
Lesson 3
After the interview

Objectives – In this lesson, you will learn:
The importance of communicating and following up with interview sources
Methods for transcribing notes and determining the usefulness of information for the writing process

Once the Q&A of an interview is completed, your job isn’t finished. All the information you just acquired needs to get processed into a usable format.

TRANSCRIBING NOTES

Never let notes from an interview get cold. If possible, stop and review your written notes immediately while the interview is fresh in your mind – if not immediately, then within a few hours.

If you recorded an interview, listen to the recording and compare it to your written notes. Don’t feel the need to transcribe it word for word, but listen for good quotes and verify the accuracy of your written notes.

PREPARING TO WRITE

Before you start to write, don’t forget these important post-interview tips!

1. Confirm name spellings, stats or other facts the source gave you by double-checking other resources.
2. Read your quotes aloud to other staff members to see which ones will work best in your story.
3. Don’t be afraid to call a source back with a follow-up question. They will want you to be accurate and get the story right.
Use the list of notes from an interview below and select what you consider to be the most important information to start an article about Spirit Week/Homecoming.

This year’s Spirit Week theme was “Go Green.”

The theme was chosen by the senior class to match the school colors and to promote a school-wide recycling effort.

“Go Green” won out in a senior class vote over theme choices “Back to the Future” and “Superhero Week.”

“This was the most fun I can remember having during a Spirit Week. Everybody got involved and excited about the environmental cause.” – Jeremy Smith, senior class president

Fifteen groups made floats for the Spirit Week parade – the most ever.

Principal Crowley and several teachers were chaperones at the homecoming dance to end the week.

The Central Green Dragons defeated Longview, 27-17, in the homecoming football game.

“It was really cold tonight. I’m surprised how big the crowd is.” – Emily Johnson, sophomore

A record homecoming crowd of more than 4,000 showed up for the homecoming game.

Recycling bins and an informational table about the Spirit Week “Go Green” campaign were set up at the homecoming game.

“Our whole team fed off the energy from Spirit Week, and it helped us play great tonight. The spirit the whole school showed all week just allowed us to get fired up.” – Chris Curtis, senior quarterback
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I can do all tasks in 3.0 and I can teach others!

I can demonstrate professionalism in following up with the interview subject so that I can gather information that may deepen my investigation. I can...

a. evaluate the interviewee’s point of view and identify strong pieces of information as well as faulty reasoning or logic

b. determine a central idea out of the information gathered

c. identify, organize, and present the useful pieces of information from my interview in a concise and logical manner

I understand how to transcribe my notes, but still struggle to determine which pieces of information are both relevant and sufficient for my story.

I still don’t understand how to break down and analyze the information I gathered from the interview.
Evan Blackwell is a Copywriter for Walsworth. Evan joined Walsworth in 2004, and he is responsible for writing and editing articles related to yearbooks and scholastic journalism for walsworthyearbooks.com, Idea File magazine and the Idea File Extra mobile app.

Prior to joining Walsworth, Evan was a magazine and newspaper reporter for nearly five years.

As a sports reporter for the St. Joseph News-Press in St. Joseph, Mo., Evan was twice honored for Sports Feature Writing by the Missouri Press Association. He was also awarded one of 10 national prizes for Best Sports Game Story by the Associated Press Sports Editors for his coverage of Northwest Missouri State University’s football national championship in 1998.

Evan holds a bachelor’s degree in journalism from the University of Kansas. While a student reporter for the University Daily Kansan, Evan was honored nationally for Personality/Profile Writing in the William Randolph Hearst college journalism contest for his profile of then-Kansas football coach Glen Mason.