

Journalist's Resource

Research on today's news topics

REPORTING, WRITING

Interviewing a source: Rules of the road; talking with officials and experts

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By Christopher B. Daly and Leighton Walter Kille

Interviews may be conversational, but they are not casual conversations. Organization is essential, as is attention to detail and a firm will. The process also begins well before you talk with the other person, be it face to face, on the telephone or over the Internet. The

intensity of your preparations may vary depending on the gravity and importance of the interview.

The first thing to determine is your goals: Do you want to obtain specific information? If so, what? Even if you're working on a long-term project and are just interested in "learning more," do your best to determine what you'd like to learn. Based on your goals, compile a list of questions you'd like to ask. They can be highly specific ("What were you doing at noon on June 12, 2003?") or general in nature ("Tell me about your work"), as required. Err on the side of more questions rather than fewer, and prioritize them as you go.

Ensure that your list also includes the most basic questions: Is the interview on the record? Even if you know the subject's name (and presumably you do), you should always ask and confirm the spelling; if appropriate, get the name of his or her organization and title. If there's any other basic information you need for the article — say, if it's on young entrepreneurs born in your state, you'll need to ask his or her birthplace and age — make sure those questions are on the list.

Once you've got your list of targeted questions ready, turn them into a list of general topics that you will have in front of you for the interview. Ultimately, it's better to work with a topics list rather than a series of carefully worded questions. You should strive to create a natural, though purposeful, conversation.

Gather the tools of the trade: voice or video recorder (make sure it's fully charged and tested; if you're really cautious, you can bring a backup unit), reporter's notebook, pen or pencil (always carry a backup), laptop. If the interview is taking place in person and you have business cards, bring some with you.

If you're having to deal with press officers or public relations people to arrange the interview, they may ask you for a list of topics you want to cover. While you can give them a general sense of topics, resist agreeing that you will stick only to those topics and definitely don't send the questions you've compiled. Reserve your right to ask any question that you deem relevant during the interview itself.

Do not let anyone get you to agree to have quotations approved before they are used in your story; it is not good journalistic practice and does not serve your audience in an honest way. This has become an important ethical issue in contemporary American journalism. For a sense of how such dynamics may play out, read "[Latest Word on the Campaign Trail? I Take It Back](#)," in the *New York Times*.



Good practices during the interview

First off, regardless of the situation, state that you are a journalist. It is unethical to fool or mislead people. You should also indicate that you are planning to publish or broadcast material from the interview, even if you are freelance and don't yet know where or how it will be published. (For student journalists, if you are going to put the article anywhere — including a blog — you should explain that it may be seen publicly.)

If at all possible, arrange to conduct the interview at the subject's home or workplace (whichever is more appropriate). That places them in a target-rich environment, which greatly increases the chances that you will be able to meet people and see things that you would never get otherwise. In any case, find a quiet location to talk. Ask permission to record the interview and be sure to mute your mobile phone, particularly if you're using it as your recording device. Leave it up to the person you're interviewing to do the same, however.

If you are recording the interview, remember that some people may not say as much on tape — especially if it's the first time you've sat down together. Also, public officials may ask to be able to speak "on background" (meaning you can use the information, but without specific attribution) or even "off the record" (information that cannot be used). Establish the rules at the

beginning of the interview. If you agree that an interview is all on the record, do not let the subject declare afterwards that something is off the record. At the same time, understand that you may be in a negotiation, and keep in mind what best serves the public interest.

When the time comes to record, start your device and put it on the table closer to your source than you (it's his or her words that are important, after all) but ideally in a position that allows you to see the timer.

First get the basic information (name, title and so on), then begin your list of questions. All people are different, of course, and some will talk without end while others barely speak. It can help to start with open-ended questions ("So, tell me about your childhood") rather than ones to which the subject can give a yes/no answer ("Was your childhood happy?"). Allowing your subject to talk a length early can help put them at ease and open up mutual communication.

As things continue, remember that as a journalist, it's your job to control the flow of the interview, asking the questions and keeping things on track. That doesn't mean you can't let the topic of discussion move in unexpected ways — indeed, this can sometimes be to your advantage — but make sure you get what you came for. If an important question is sidestepped, ask again. If the interviewee seems to become angry or upset, stay calm and ask the question in another way. If responses go off track or go on too long, gently steer the subject back in the right direction. Be polite and respectful, but also firm.

As the interview proceeds, take careful notes, but don't allow it to become distracting. If something is said of particular interest, it's helpful to jot down the time in the interview when it occurred — this will greatly speed finding and verifying the quote after the fact. If your source mentions the name of a person, organization or place, ask for confirmation of the spelling.

At the conclusion of the interview, thank the interviewee for his or her time and ask if you can be in contact again if there are additional questions; ask for a cell phone number and direct email if you don't already have them, as they can provide a quicker path to a response. Also ask for access to photos and any other documents or objects that have come up. It will be much harder to do this hours or days later.

Maximizing your material

Now that you have the interview, what you do with it depends on how it's going to be used. If you only need a few quotes, you can jump to those points in the recording based on the times you jotted down. If you're doing an extended printed Q&A — your questions and their responses — it's best to do a complete transcription and edit that down (of course making clear to your audience if it has been edited for brevity and clarity.)

In editing the interview, remember that people rarely speak in perfect, well-formed sentences. There will be many an "uh" and "ah" that can be safely omitted, assuming that this does not distort meaning. While you can trim the beginning or end of responses without having to

indicate with ellipses, if you cut out a sentence or phrase in the middle, they should be used. Similarly, if you insert text for clarity, use brackets. Extensive information on the use of punctuation in quotes is available in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

If you have interviewed a public official, do not, under any circumstances, allow him or her to modify answers that are already on the record. But some reporters will read back sections of stories and ask if there's anything he or she might like to add. However, it's a reporter's role to decide whether or not to use additional information, not the person interviewed. When dealing with private citizens, take particular care in cases where identities, locations and other identifying elements may be sensitive and could expose persons to danger or unneeded distress. Use your judgment about how a sensitive quotation from a private citizen — particularly those who have no media sophistication — needs to be used, and what information and context best serves the public interest.



Special cases: The need for more homework

If the interviewee is someone whom you are seeking out because of his or her particular position or authoritative knowledge of a situation (the deputy transportation commissioner, the CFO of a company, etc.), you need to put in sufficient time researching previous news articles written about that person and other relevant background. Come informed — in many ways, a journalist is the one person in the community who represents only the public interest and whose job it is to give voice to collective

concerns. It may be the only time an official has to be accountable for certain things, and it is in this way that journalists play a special role — with special responsibilities and burdens — in a democracy.

Another special case are experts whose views you seek to deepen a story. The same rule applies there: Prepare, prepare, prepare. The following are key things to keep in mind for these two special classes of sources:

Academics and experts

For research experts, don't just show up or call to "get a quote"; do enough reading of his or her materials that you show respect and can speak a little of the expert's professional language. Don't waste someone's time with factual questions that you should really know yourself. An example of a sub-par question would be asking a political scientist: "How many electoral votes does our state have?" An example of a good question might be: "What factors might influence the vote in our state?" That doesn't mean you can't ask simple, direct questions; just ensure they aren't things you could learn on your own perfectly easily.

Though it is not good professional practice to give questions in advance to sources such as public officials, with experts you may want to email some general questions before speaking on the phone or in person. Help them educate you. Most experts' Web pages feature links to their

work; for academics, also search [Google Scholar](#) and other databases. Try to read any primary articles and research he or she has authored (at least be familiar with the subjects and extent) that directly relate to your subject of interest. For academic papers, try to at least read the introduction and conclusion, even if the methods section is [heavily statistical](#). Know that most papers, at their root, are simply trying to figure out the logical relationship between several variables and test a hypothesis — try not to be intimidated. If the research is what you're interested in, email other academics cited in the paper and ask them what they think of the findings.

Greg Ip, the U.S. economics editor at *The Economist*, has [this to say](#) about interacting with experts: "If I don't have a lot of experience in the area, I'll ask, 'Can you point me to some other things so I can get a better grounding before we can begin the interview?' I find that academics are incredibly helpful and patient; they like to talk about their work, because they're excited by it and publicity is usually good.... [But] one thing that I have learned about academics is that — even when they are not partisan or biased in the direction the research goes — I think it's the nature of the discipline that academia rewards people who develop very strong views on often narrow subjects."

Remember that many experts can be skeptical of journalists because of the media's general tendency to oversimplify. Show them you know the subject matter and care enough to read in depth. By doing so, you may earn a trusted source who can help you in the future. You will almost certainly get better answers and fresh angles for further stories.

Public officials and newsmakers

When interviewing public officials and people in the news, know the job that he or she does — what their powers, limits and constraints are. Also come to the interview with a sense of his or her agenda. Is the person simply a good public servant? Running for higher office? Wants to clear the record on some specific point? Good interviews with public officials are directed but conversational. Remember, too, that one reason people want to have a conversation with a reporter is to learn things they may not know. As a reporter, you talk to people in the community that officials and newsmakers don't. Many good interviews involve a two-way exchange in which both parties learn something. Don't give up your professional objectivity, but recognize that you are dealing with human beings who are often just as curious as you are.

Above all, educate yourself so that you do not walk into an interview unaware of some previous controversial public issue or high-profile accomplishment or failure that serves as important context. Once an official realizes your ignorance, it would be very easy for him or her to sidestep questions or give easy answers, if that's what he or she wants to do. You may want to do some advance background interviews with others — especially those who may disagree with your primary interview subject — about key areas of concern.

Review related coverage in your own publication's archives and those of other sources. Also dig through [Lexis-Nexis](#) or [Factiva](#); each differs in the kinds of articles and transcripts available, so try them all. If you need to search historical news, a good choice is [ProQuest](#). If you don't have

access to these, contact your local libraries and ask for access to similar databases, such as those through [NewsBank](#). Note that a [Google News](#) search only yields recent articles; to see older related content, go to the drop-down menu on the right of the the search bar, and select "in archive" for the "Date added to Google News" option.

High-level persons typically have limited time in their schedule, so you'll want to plan your interview questions very carefully. Remember that you can ask for things to be put on the record at the end of the interview or later on; and you can always ask if there is another way you can confirm information, such as a public record that says the same thing. As mentioned, some of the most useful things that you can come away with are documents, so ask if there are reports, spreadsheets, papers, transcripts, etc. that you can take or photocopy that might help your story. In the heat of an interview, it is not always easy to figure out what is important; but documents can be analyzed and studied afterward, when you have time to think.

If you are planning to ask difficult and uncomfortable questions, structure your questions so that the tougher ones come last, knowing that, sometimes, you may be asked to leave. And prepare to follow up even if things get tense. Maintain your composure. Frame the question so that it does not become a debate and consider triangulating so it does not become personal: For example, use the phrasing "Your critics have said... What do you say?"

Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Ron Suskind [advises reporters about interviews](#) as follows: "Be honest; and always say, 'Please explain this to me in words so I can understand it.' People live inside a lexicon. Lexicons often carry with them judgments. We're very tribal.... Tribes develop language, and I am always wary of that. When I say, 'Explain that to me in terms I can understand,' then sources start to get more fundamental and elemental."

For particular issues relating to business leaders, see the tip sheet "[Writing a Compelling Company or CEO Profile.](#)"

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