

Making the Most of Primary Sources

THE SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEW

Getting Ready for the Interview:

A great interview doesn't happen by accident. Here are a few important steps to begin with if you want your interview to go well:

- ✓ Make an appointment with your guest in plenty of time for both of you to prepare. Establish a starting and ending time.
- ✓ Make yourself as knowledgeable about your guest's background as possible.
- ✓ Be sure your guest knows what topics you will be discussing. Unless you are specifically looking for spontaneous answers, it can be very helpful to provide a list of at least some of the questions you will be asking, so that your guest has time to think about them and gather memories and details.
- ✓ In fact, it's okay to let the subject participate in designing the questions, if you feel that is appropriate. For example, is there anything he/she wants you to ask? Is there any topic that should be avoided. (Depending on the purpose of your interview, however, you may not want to make certain topics off-limits.)
- ✓ Make yourself familiar with the subject you will be discussing in order to ask intelligent questions. If you show your ignorance, you will not be taken seriously, and your guest may not open up to you.
- ✓ Before the day of the interview, practice asking the questions. Speak slowly and clearly. Be sure you know how to pronounce all the words!

Conducting the Interview:

- ✓ Be on time, and have everything ready (paper and pencil, tape recorder, camera) before your guest arrives. Making people wait can cause them to feel nervous and become less likely to do well.
- ✓ Be friendly and polite – remember that your guest is doing you a favor by agreeing to the interview.
- ✓ Quickly and clearly establish what the interview is about. Stick to the subject. (Exception: if something unexpected comes up, even if it's off the subject, it's usually okay to follow up on it, but you should return to the original subject of the interview as soon as you can. Use your own judgment on this – you don't want to be so tied to your notes that you frustrate everyone involved by missing a golden opportunity, but an interview that feels unfocused and out of control will have much less value.)
- ✓ Start with some easy questions so your guest can relax. Throw in another easy question once in a while to vary the rhythm of the interview.
- ✓ Try to use “open,” thought-provoking questions, avoiding those with “yes” or “no” answers. Use “how” or “why” questions – ask for explanations, not confirmation – “Could you tell me something about (*blank*)?” – “How did you get interested in this?” – “What were some of the problems you faced?”
- ✓ Be sure to get names, dates, and places correct.
- ✓ DON'T INTERRUPT!
- ✓ Don't argue or barge in with stories of your own.
- ✓ Don't try to explain what your guest just said. If something is not clear, ask another question or ask the person to repeat or explain.

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Conducting the Interview, continued

- ✓ Don't waste time.
- ✓ Remember that the interview is about the guest and the subject under discussion – not about you! The best interviewers are almost invisible.
- ✓ LISTEN CAREFULLY to what your guest is telling you. If you're too busy thinking about what you're going to say next, you could miss some important information or ask a question your guest has already answered!
- ✓ Be sure that you have obtained all the information you need before ending the interview. Check details you are not sure of before you leave.

Recording the Interview:

- ✓ Always ask whether your subject minds if you use a tape recorder.
- ✓ There are many good reasons to record the interview. Not having to take notes will free you up to listen more carefully and to be more responsive to your guest.
- ✓ It allows you to make eye contact with your guest instead of having to look down constantly at your notes. That allows your guest to feel that it is more of a friendly conversation than an interrogation.
- ✓ A recording is hard evidence of what was and was not said, in case there is any disagreement.
- ✓ Many people feel awkward about talking into a tape recorder. You can often make a guest more comfortable by laying a book or other item in front of the recorder to make it less visible – be careful not to block access to the microphone.

Following up:

- ✓ Most interviews are conducted for the purpose of gathering accurate information. Therefore, many interviewers review their notes with the guest, or even send a typed transcription of the interview for the person to look over before turning in the final copy. That allows the person to make necessary corrections or additions.
- ✓ Write a thank-you note to your guest, expressing your gratitude for the time and effort involved.

Learning from Others:

- ✓ You can learn a great deal from studying other interviewers at work. Watching Charlie Rose draw out a guest on his television interview show is an education in itself. On the radio, it's hard to beat Terry Gross, host of "Fresh Air." Although her program often sounds like a friendly conversation over coffee, in fact she conducts many of her interviews by phone.
- ✓ One thing you may notice is that a really great interviewer does not rush to fill a silence, but is willing to sit quietly for a moment and wait. That approach makes the guest feel obligated to fill the silence, and that may bring out a piece of information you might otherwise never have heard.

Good luck!