

# INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES AND TIPS

## Getting the interview:

Start lining up sources the second you get your story assignment. They may not be available later in the week. It is especially hard to find someone to interview on campus Friday, Saturday or Sunday.

Also contact them to set up the interview. Don't expect them to do it then, particularly if the interview will be detailed. The advantage of doing this is that you don't catch them when they are busy and likely to say "no."

Start out by letting your source know who you are and that you write for The Signal. Explain what you are writing about. Tell them how much time the interview will take and if you will need to meet more than once.

It also helps if you call the interview something else. The word "interview" is scary to some people. They associate it with being put on the spot. It's better if you can just ask to speak to someone about your topic. Tell them you have a few questions about it for a story you're doing.

When you are calling to arrange an interview, be nice to secretaries and assistants. They are gatekeepers who can help you tremendously or make life very hard.

Important Note: Be sure to have backup people in case your source falls through. People get sick, go out of town, get busy or just change their minds. But you still have a deadline to meet. Loss of a source is not a viable excuse for missing deadline. There is never just one person with the information you need. When you arrange interviews with people ask them if they can also suggest other people you should speak to about your subject.

## Techniques:

### 1) Fact Gathering:

Learn about your subject ahead of time. If your source has to tell you the basics you lose credibility. It will naturally be worrisome to the interviewee who is relying on you to make an accurate and understandable report.

At the very least, know what your story is about, know your source and his or her relationship to the story. Know why it is important to the student body.

This kind of research will also help you prepare appropriate questions. Remember in fact gathering there is always two sides to every story – research and present them both.

2) Be prepared before you go into the interview:

Have questions prepared (written down so you don't forget them).

If you don't know what to ask your source, brainstorm with your editor and other people on the staff. Tell them what you are writing about and ask them what they would want to know if they were reading the story.

A good interview will start to flow, like a conversation. Your source's answers will probably spur you to think of more (or follow-up) questions during the interview. Jot them down on your notepad so you don't have to interrupt the flow of conversation.

3) Verify basic information -- spellings, names, titles, dates, times, places. Do this early in the interview.

NEVER RELY ON INFORMATION YOU HAVE SEEN IN PRINT SOMEWHERE ELSE. (Not even in The Signal. Verify. Verify. Verify.)

4) Be aware of how the source is reacting to you.

Keep an eye on his or her comfort level and try to adjust your level of formality or informality to fit the situation.

5) Try to keep the interview focused on the source and not yourself as much as possible.

Don't waste time talking about yourself. Listen carefully and don't interrupt.

At the same time, don't rush to fill pauses. Let the source be the one to fill those uncomfortable silences. Good quotes come out of those silences.

Use nonverbal cues to keep people let your source know that you are interested.

6. Pick a place that's comfortable and quiet.

(Not a restaurant or the cafeteria -- all you'll here on your tape is dishes clanking and your source talking with a mouth full).

Try to find a location that is appropriate for the story -- that is your source's natural domain.

7) Be courteous.

If you disagree with something the source says do not get into an argument. Your job is to be a good listener, not to argue. However, at the same time, you can courteously challenge them to support his/her stance.

8) Use a tape recorder if possible.

Ask your source if it is OK before you turn it on. People don't like to be recorded, but they usually agree if you point out that it will help you quote them accurately and get more of the information they give you.

Eventually most people forget the tape recorder is on.

BUT be sure you also take notes as unobtrusively as possible. Tape recorders have been known to malfunction at the most inopportune time.

9) Start with easy questions to help put yours source at ease. Save the tough questions for later in the interview.

You are more likely to have it answered after you have spent some time with this person and developed a rapport of some kind.

Or, if your source blows up, at least you will be near the end of the interview.

If your source shies away from the question, ask it in another way. You might have the information already that they don't want to give you. You can ask them to confirm or ask them if they can add to it. This might help them to open up and not feel like they are the one letting the cat out of the bag.

Be careful not to give away investigative information though. If you are working on a story that is controversial, don't tell them everything you know. They will clamp down. However, don't be sneaky. Give them a chance to give their side of the story and address the real issues.

10) Sometimes people will try to tell you things off-the-record. That means they tell you, but you can't use them as a source for the information in your story. If this is the only way to get the information, listen up then look for someone who will give it to you on the record.

11) Don't be intimidated by a source.

Your job is not to please your source. You are working for your readers.

Be polite, but ask the questions you need to ask to get the story.

12. Don't try to over impress your source by pretending to understand more than you do.

If you have done your research, the questions you ask will not be dumb. So don't be afraid to ask your question or have them clarify an answer you didn't understand. If you don't understand then you won't be able to explain it to your reader. Also, if you don't understand, you are creating a huge potential for inaccurate reporting - - this won't impress anyone. If you skip a question because you don't want to look dumb and leave a hole in your story, you're going to get called on it later.

13) Always ask open-ended questions with lots of "whys?" and "hows?"

This will give you better quotes.

Help people be descriptive. Ask specific questions. Ask for examples and descriptions.

People will try to tell you what they think you want to hear, i.e., "I am very pleased with the program." Pat answers like this are clichés. Don't use those quotes. Instead, ask questions that elicit interesting answers.

14) Collect documents if you can.

( i.e., reports, that back up what the source says, articles written by the source, anything to substantiate and provide added information)

15) Dress appropriately for the setting of the interview.

You don't have to wear a suit, but do look professional. People will treat you will more respect.

16) When you near the end of your interview, check your list of questions to make sure they have all been answered, then close your notebook and turn off your tape recorder. Ask your source if there is anything else that you should have asked, but didn't...anything else that should be included in your story.

17) Ask permission to call back to check quotes and fill any holes if necessary. Inevitably you will have another question or your editor will. Prepare your source for the possibility.

18) Thank your source. Ask if there is anyone else you should be talking to about your article.

19) As soon as you leave - - open up your notebook and write down anything extra you learned.

20) When you've left, review your notes and make sure they are very clear. Transcribe shorthand, fill holes, etc.

Quote from Leonard Witt:

“Impressions from interviews are like dreams: when they're fresh in your mind, you think you'll remember them forever, but they fade. As soon after an interview as possible, record notes, atmosphere, impressions in your computer, notebook or somewhere you won't lose them.

**Things not to do:**

Don't pretend to be someone you're not.

Don't tape secretly.

Don't misguide sources about the topic and tone of your story.

Don't ask yes-no questions.

Don't ask two-part questions.

Don't call your source by his or her first name unless you are invited to.

Do not promise the person you are interviewing that they will be in the paper. Once you turn over a story to your editor, it's out of your control. A quote could be cut for space or relevance. Just tell people when you arrange to meet that you want to get information from them to help you with your story.

Don't interview off the record unless you have no choice.

- Nothing is off the record unless you agree
- No off-the-record claims after the fact...after the statement. Agreement must be made in advance.
- Clarify, what information can be used but not attributed, what information cannot be used period. (for background, deep background)
- If it's the only way you can get the information, take it. The source may be persuaded to change his or her mind later. Or you may find another way to confirm it.

Later when you are writing your story, remember:

Direct quotes may be changed to improve grammar. But they should not be changed in content. Any changes should be minor and corrective in nature.

In the case of controversial issues or when your source is being accusatory, it is doubly important to include all sides of the story. There is never just one side. Usually there are several.

Be certain of the context of any quote you use and be certain that the context is obvious to your reader.

If someone was not available for comment or would not comment, your story must include that information.

Call to verify information or to ask additional questions if you are in doubt of anything. Rarely will you get everything you need in the first interview. (On the other hand, try not to bug them over little stuff, and if you have questions, try to get them all together for just one call.)

### **Fact Checking**

Not everything your sources tell you may be accurate. Reporters have a responsibility to check up on anything that sounds questionable or may be beyond your sources experience or expertise to trust in their opinion. Just because you attribute the information to someone else does not excuse you from knowingly or out of laziness pass on misinformation. Inaccuracies in an article can still hurt your reputation or credibility as a journalist. (If one issue in your story is known to be false, it makes EVERYTHING else in the article questionable as well).

Be especially watchful for surveys or research statistics. The first question to ask yourself is: “Who conducted it?” Then ask yourself if that person or group had a vested interest in the outcome?

### **Pre-publication review**

Many sources will ask to see your article before it goes to print. You are not obligated to submit a copy of the article to your sources before publication. However, if, in your own judgment, you need to verify quotes or accuracy by checking with your sources, please do so. You are responsible for the factual correctness of your work.

In most journalism classes, students are told never to let a source see work before it's published.

- Reporters don't like to have to deal with sources who might want them to change something. But you don't have to promise to change your story simply because a source wants you to.
- Reporters argue that allowing sources to review their work takes too much time. But by faxing a story, using e-mail or reading it over the phone, you can get around this.
- Reporters sometimes develop God complexes, thinking they can't get anything wrong, but they often do. The advantage of sharing your work with a source is that the source may be able to spot inaccurate information and warn you before it goes to print.
- And the most ridiculous reason.... Some reporters argue that they don't like to show sources their stories because sources may be angry and threaten to sue. Well imagine how they will react after it is in print for thousands, or even millions to see – if you've gotten something wrong.

# ONLINE INTERVIEWS

Traditionally, there has been two types of interviews: Face-to-face and telephone. The invention of the Internet and the World Wide Web has created a third type of interview: E-mail. For many students, this type of interviewing is more comfortable to conduct. It takes away the nervousness and intimidation many students feel when having to talk to someone direct. And, in some situations, it is a viable way to contact a source for information. For example, expert sources or international sources who would otherwise be difficult to reach may be more obtainable via e-mail. However, it is not always the best choice and should never be used as the only means of obtaining quotes for an article.

## PROS:

- It is less stressful to conduct because you do not have direct conduct.
- It gives both the interviewer and the source time to carefully contemplate their questions and answers.
- It allows the source to respond at his/her convenience.
- It may allow the interviewer to reach a source that would otherwise be unavailable to him/her.
- You will not have to worry about accuracy because you have a recorded document.

## CONS:

- It is harder to get a sense of the personality of the person you are interviewing.
- The interview is not going to be as in-depth. There is no flow of conversation, which often leads to better quotes than anticipated with the prepared questions. You won't be able to ask as many questions and may not get the source to respond a second time if an answer needs explanation.
- It's hard to get your source to answer the "tough" questions. Traditionally, you begin an interview by warming up the interviewee with easy questions. By the time you get to the "tough" questions, the source has vested enough time in the interview to answer and/or you have direct contact with him/her to press your case. E-mail interviews are a lot like surveys. If the questions are too difficult or if there are too many questions, people tend to just ignore them altogether.
- The delayed reaction time – you may not hear back from your source for several days, if at all.

TIPS:

- Use a professional e-mail address so sources will take you seriously. “Witchy Woman,” “Drama Diva,” “Macho Man,” and other such personal e-mail addresses do not invite sources to trust you as a journalist. Your best bet is to use your UHCL student e-mail address while working on The Signal. Not only does it identify you as a student, it will help ensure that your e-mail will get through the university spam blockers.
- Make sure the Subject Line will grab the attention of the reader. The first trick of e-mail interviews is to get the person to open his/her mail and not discard it offhand as spam. This means taking a “you” point of view and making sure the subject line is of interest to the person you are trying to contact.
- Email interviews should be written like a formal letter. As with the other forms of interviewing, always identify yourself and your purpose in the initial e-mail. Example:

*Dear Vint Cerf,*

*My name is Jane Doe and I am a reporter for The Signal Newspaper, the student newspaper for the University of Houston-Clear Lake. While researching for an article I'm writing about the Stop Online Piracy Act, I came across the open letter you sent to U.S. Representative Lamar Smith, who sponsored the SOPA bill. In your letter you point out that there is a better way to approach online piracy and that the SOPA bill would actually cause more damage than it will fix. As one of the founding fathers of the Internet you bring a unique perspective to the bill and how it affects the original vision for the Internet. Would you mind answering just a couple of follow-up questions based on statements you made in your letter?*

*Question one goes here*

*Question two goes here*

*Question three goes here: Is there anything else you would like to add?*

*Thank you so much for your time. As with all newspapers, I am working on a tight deadline. The article is due next Tuesday. I look forward to hearing from you soon.*

*Sincerely,*

*Jane Doe  
Staff reporter for The Signal Newspaper  
University of Houston-Clear Lake  
Houston, Texas*

Do not treat email interviews in the same informal manner that you would treat an email to a friend. Do not resort to addressing the interviewee by his/her first name. Do not use incomplete (or text message) sentences. Do be sure to observe the social niceties, remember there is no “vocal tone” in an email, so it’s very easy to come off sounding rude if you’re not careful.

- Do not pose too many questions at once. I’ve found that I have been much more successful in getting people to respond to my e-mail when the amount of questions does not seem too overwhelming to bother with. I would suggest no more than three – if you have more questions you need addressed, try spreading them around and use more than one source. Of course, most articles require more than one source anyway. (Articles written for The Signal require a minimum of two sources - - most stories require more).
- Do not pose generic “one survey fits all” types of questions. The sources that you want to interview are going to be more likely to respond if they can tell that you have done your research and are asking questions that specifically fit their area of expertise.
- Allow plenty of time for a reply. But, be aware that you may not hear back from your source at all. Unfortunately, several days may go by before you realize that this source is not going to answer your e-mail request. You should follow-up with a telephone and/or face-to-face contact if necessary - - or if it can give you a better interview. Staff for The Signal are always supposed to try to get a face-to-face interview whenever they can.
- Be sure to state in your initial e-mail that you are working on a deadline. Politely ask him/her to respond by such and such date. Be sure to allow a reasonable time for response.
- Since you have the extra time to contemplate your questions – do so. Be especially careful that your grammar and sentence structure is correct and professional. Unlike the spoken word, the written word is unforgiving if used incorrectly. You will lose credibility with the source you are trying to reach and possibly lose the interview as a result.
- When a source takes the time to answer your questions via email, be sure to reply and thank him/her.

## **INTERVIEW TIPS FOR INHOUSE SOURCES**

(Note: These tips will work for outside interviews as well)

1. If the person you are addressing has a Ph.D., address him or her as Dr. (and make sure you check to see whether or not he/she holds the title of Dr.)
2. If the person you are addressing does not have a Ph.D. address him or her as Professor, Mr. or Mrs. - - unless they are another student. Students are allowed to call each other by their first name. Never address a professor, staff or administrator by his or her first name unless invited to do so.
3. Be friendly, but professional. Most professors and administrators prefer to maintain a formal, office-type environment during interviews. This includes e-mail interviews. Treat an e-mail interview as if it were a formal letter - - not the casual, chat room style you use when e-mailing friends. Address the source as Dear so and so (or Dear Dr. so and so if it applies). Sign off as Respectfully Yours or some other courtesy close.
4. Be polite. Always thank the person for their time. If they have answered you via e-mail, reply that you have received the e-mail and, again, thank them.
5. E-mail Interviews: Proof for grammar, spelling and punctuation before sending. Your credibility is at stake here. Sources will not trust you as a reporter if your e-mails contain errors or are submitted too informally. E-mail correspondence should be written formally and professionally.
6. Make sure that you are asking the right questions of the right sources. Design your questions to match the source - - one question does not fit all.
7. Make your questions count. You want quotes that will add impact or interest. Ask questions designed to elicit those types of responses.
8. Direct quotes add more strength to your article than paraphrasing. When the person you are interviewing says something really good - - stop them for a moment and say something like, "I really like what you just said. Let me make sure I've got that right." And then repeat the person's quote back to them to make sure that you did get it right.
9. PRIOR REVIEW: We do not practice prior review at The Signal. The Signal is a student newspaper and no one you interview has the right to demand to see the story before it goes to print. However, some people will be nervous about being misquoted and/or taken out of content and will ask to see it first. Chances are, it's happened to them in the past. Although it is up to you, it usually reassures them if you let them see just the portion of your paper in which their quotes appear.

If you let them see their quotes and they want to dispute something you wrote, you are then faced with the ethical dilemma of changing your quotes or standing by what you

originally wrote. You have to decide if the change they want to make was 1) a mistake on your part, in which case you will want to make the change before it's printed/distributed; 2) It was what they actually said, but maybe it doesn't reflect what they were trying to say; sometimes it's the difference between the spoken word and the written word. If the change they want to make improves the story, you may want to give them some leeway and go with it. OR 3) What you wrote is accurate but they regret saying it and want to take it back. This is when you run into a real ethical dilemma. There is no pat answer for this one.

Also, sometimes students are called upon to write about something technical that they don't really understand. Then it becomes your job to interpret this very technical material into layman's terms. If you don't understand it, your readers won't either. When this happens, students do sometimes let their source review their entire paper for accuracy. Remember, if you think there's a chance that you've made a mistake - - or maybe not a mistake, but not sure you've quite got the whole story - - it's better to double check yourself before the article goes out in print.

10. Remember, the written notes from your interviews are confidential. Do not share them with anyone outside of the editors or myself. Some of the information given may be sensitive when not presented in the context of your article. You are responsible for protecting your sources so that they will want to talk to you, and other reporters from The Signal again. Reporters never violate this trust. This includes e-mail interviews.