Conducting an interview

In the newswriting portion of this course, you learned basic interviewing skills. From that lesson, you learned an interview is an exchange of information between a reporter and a source. Interviewing requires patience, confidence, the ability to listen and the ability to observe. Interviewing is the basic tool in obtaining information in practically all forms of news and feature stories. Reporters must be able to ask a question and then listen to the entire answer, all the time analyzing what the source is saying and looking for key points. Most seasoned reporters feel that out of the entire writing process, writing the story is the easy part. Conducting a good interview is really where a reporter earns his money.

You’ve learned how to develop questions for a feature story interview. There are many skills in addition to developing questions you must master to become good military journalists. Perhaps the most important skill you must master is listening. After all, it is your job to gather information and disseminate that information to your audience. With this in mind, let’s take a look at how being a better listener can make you a better interviewer.
**Listening tips**

**Focus on the here and now**
During an interview, concentrate on what the source is saying now, not what you will ask next. Your next question will be better if you have fully heard the answer to your last question.

**Practice conversational listening**
Base your next question on the last sentence or thought the source expressed. This will make the interview seem more conversational. If you want to change the subject, use a transition, such as “On another subject . . .”

**Practice critical listening**
Evaluate what the source is saying as you hear it. There are three things you should be listening for while a source is responding to your questions: facts, good quotes and elaboration. Is the source making a point clearly and supporting it? Do you understand the point? If not, ask the source to repeat or elaborate the meaning. If you listen for meaning, you can direct the interview instead of letting the source direct it.

**Be quiet**
Don’t try to impress the source with what you know. Let the source explain a point, even if you understand it. This allows you to get information in the source’s words. By being quiet, you may also force the source to say something it is human nature to fill a silent pause because it feels awkward.

**Be responsive**
Make eye contact frequently so your source knows you are listening. Nod, smile, say “Yes” or “Uh-huh,” or look confused. Just let the source know you are paying attention. If you show disinterest, the source will quickly pick up on this.

**Listen intently and pay attention to the answers.**

**Listen with your eyes**
Learn to read body language. What kind of body language is the source displaying? Is the source enthusiastic, nervous, excited or sad? Observation can be a good listening tool.

**Be polite**
If the source starts to ramble or give you irrelevant information, don’t interrupt. Wait for the source to pause briefly, and then you can change the subject.

**Block out personal intrusions**
You’ve had a bad day, your car broke down, you failed a test, or you have some emotional concerns. Make a willful effort to block out these personal thoughts. They intrude on your concentration while you are trying to listen. Your problems will still be there when the interview is over. The source will not.

**Develop listening curiosity**
Don’t go to the interview with a rigid agenda of questions. Although you may start with prepared questions, if the interview goes in another direction, follow that course if it is interesting. Listen for what you want to know and what you didn’t expect to know.

**Here are some other suggested listening tips:**
- Keep your ego in check
- Open your mind to new ideas, even those you dislike
- Rarely interrupt
- Concentrate on what the person is saying. Appearance is secondary
- Show respect, regardless of rank
Note taking tips

Using a recorder
In addition to taking notes, some reporters use tape recorders. As you will see, there are advantages and disadvantages to using a recorder.

Advantages of recording
- If you want to get the exact wording of quotes, or if you are interviewing a source about a conversational subject.
- Provide a permanent and precise record of what is said, preventing you from inadvertently misquoting a source.
- You can establish and maintain eye contact with the source and conduct the interview as if it were a conversation.
- It records everything.
- Enables you to capture the rhythm of colorful speakers.
- Enables for rapid speakers.
- Enables you to relax and concentrate on what is being said.
- You can critique your performance to improve your question-asking techniques.

Disadvantages of recording
- Not only does it record your information source, it also records background sounds, ringing telephone, etc. This may drown out an important point or quote for your story.
- You may experience mechanical failures, no power or low battery power.
- Recorders can intimidate your sources and cause them to shut down instead of open up and speak freely.
- Recorders can weaken your note-taking skills, making you recorder-dependent.
- On long interviews, recorders can waste time because you have to go back and listen again and again to the recording for useful quotes.

Recording guidelines
Before you begin taping your interview, follow some etiquette.
- Start your interview with basic introductions – who you are and why you are there – and some opening conversation.
- To put the source at ease, you might even ask a question or two before you ask the source if he would object to you using a recorder.
- Then if the source agrees to allow the recorder, don’t place the machine directly in his face. Put it off to the side of the desk or table, where it is not so intrusive.
- The bottom line when you want to record your interview – ask before you start recording.
**REMEMBER** -- If you choose to use a recorder to take notes, you must also use a pen and pad. Your primary means of taking notes is with a notebook. Never fully rely on a tape recorder. Good note taking offsets the disadvantages of using a tape recorder when used in conjunction with the recorder. After the interview, you should not play the entire tape and transcribe it before you write your story. That is too time-consuming. Instead, scan the tape until you get to the facts or quotes you need.

**Using a pad and pen**

Take a lot of notes -- more than you will need to write the story. It is not unusual to write a two-page story from 15 pages of notes. It is better to have too many notes than not enough. There is no need to take notes on everything said. Listen carefully to the speaker, formulate follow-up questions, and write down only pertinent information. Most importantly, relax. Don’t spend so much time frantically writing notes that you miss the meaning of what is being said.

Develop your own shorthand -- it is nearly impossible to write an entire conversation word for word. To take notes faster you must develop your own shorthand. One trick is to leave the vowels out of most words. This may take time to learn, but it gets easier with practice.

Example:

*The black smoke looked like a huge mushroom cloud.*

Th blck smk lkd lk a hg mshrm cld.

Learn to remember -- note taking allows you to get the high points on paper, but you should learn to remember complete anecdotes and vivid phrases which need to be written down in their entirety. Also, learn to remember what is said after the formal interview is over. A source often relaxes when the recorder is shut off and the note pad is closed. You may miss a good quote.

Nonessential information -- when the source is supplying nonessential information you know you don’t need, catch up on your note taking. Write about the setting or ideas you have from statements made earlier in the interview.

If you stop taking notes, the source may become discouraged from continuing, maybe thinking what he is saying is unimportant.

Before you leave -- quickly look over your notes and ask the source to repeat something to make sure a quotation is precise and the meaning is clear.

After you leave -- regardless of how you take notes, it’s important to go over your notes immediately after the interview to make sure you understand them. You can also spend this time inserting information you recall from the interview or correcting errors in your notes.

**Managing your note pad**

Shield your notebook -- When conducting an interview, put your notebook in an inconspicuous place. The best spot for your note pad is in your lap or in your hand. That makes eye contact easier and allows the person being interviewed to talk to you rather than your note pad. It also shields your note pad somewhat from your source. You don’t necessarily want your source to see everything you are writing or what you’re not writing.
Using symbols -- Get into the habit of putting some type of symbol, such as a star, next to key phrases or quotations. That is a good way to identify possible areas that need additional probing.

Your ability to conduct a well-organized interview is perhaps the most important skill you need to master in order to write a good feature story. It is a skill that takes some practice. But once you conduct several interviews with several sources, it’s a skill you will become comfortable with in time.
Conclusion

Your ability to conduct a well-organized interview is perhaps the most important skill you need to master in order to write a good feature story. It is a skill that takes some practice. But once you conduct several interviews with several sources, it’s a skill you will become comfortable with in time.
References


Patterson, B. (1986). Write to be read: A practical guide to feature writing. Iowa State Press


Feature writing handbook (2008)