Interview questions

One of the most important steps in writing an article is gathering the information. Research and interviews are the bread and butter of a good story. Interviews gather the accounts and opinions of people that will help you tell both sides of the story. It is your job to report independently and to answer the questions your readers may have about the subject. Preparing interview questions can be the difference between a good story or one that finds it way on the bottom of a bird cage. The purpose of this lesson will be to prepare questions based on your focus statement and outline you created.
Framing questions

An interview does not just happen. It can go wrong as easily as it can go right. That's why you must pay close attention to the structure of the interview, particularly the way questions are asked and the types of questions that are asked. First look at how to frame questions to fit a story’s purpose.

News stories simply report the facts in descending order of importance. Developing questions for news stories is straightforward because you can rely on the basic who, what, where, when, why and how questions. But when you write a feature story, your questions must be much more probing. As you have already learned, feature stories have a focus or angle. After you have determined the focus of your story, the next steps are to brainstorm and prepare an outline. These will give you a clear map to help you frame questions in preparation for your interview.

If the story’s purpose is to show how a service member has overcome adversity, such as overcoming alcoholism, your questions should be designed so his challenges and victories can be revealed. All of your questions should lead toward one point: the triumph of the human spirit. In the first phase of the interview, the questions are background in nature and easy to answer. As you establish rapport, the questions will become more personal and the answers take greater thought and emotion on behalf of the source.

If the purpose of the story is to show, for example, how a successful tank commander got to where he is today, your questions should be designed to show the best in that person. You should be looking for descriptions and anecdotes.

Preparation is the key to making an interview fit the story’s purpose. You should have a prepared list of questions that need to be answered during the interview. You should prepare more questions than you think you may need. It's better to have more information than not enough. Your questions do not have to be followed precisely, but you should insert them into the interview at the best times. However, there is no way of knowing in advance exactly the direction an interview will take. If the interview strays from your prepared questions, that’s fine. Just try to get it back on track as soon as possible.

We’ve looked at how to frame questions to fit a story’s purpose. Now let’s look at some of the types of questions we use to get the information we need to write an effective feature story.
Types of questions

Questions that establish rapport

As you begin an interview you must establish rapport as soon as possible. This is true when conducting interviews for news stories, and it’s especially true when conducting feature story interviews. During an interview for a news story, you may be only seeking facts. However, when interviewing a source for a feature story, your source must feel at ease with you. Your goal is to get your source to open up and share his feelings and emotions. Whenever possible, don’t just get down to business when you begin an interview. Ask a few warm-up questions. For example, find something you have in common with the subject and discuss that. It is also helpful to compliment your source about one of his achievements or the way he dresses. Think of yourself as a salesperson.

Background questions

Every story, whether news or feature, contains basic facts. These are who, what, where, when, why and how. These questions must be asked. But a good reporter will go a step further and ask the source about the significance of these facts to your readers. Also, make sure you get the source’s full preferred name, job title and unit, and all contact information.

Closed-ended questions

You’ve already learned that it is generally best to avoid closed-ended questions, those that can be answered by short, specific answers, such as yes or no. However, if it is your goal to get background facts, you may want to ask a few closed-ended questions. These types of questions may be all you need if you’re writing a news story.

For example, if you are writing an accident story, you may ask such closed-ended questions as, “What time did the accident happen?” and “Where did the accident happen?”

Open-ended questions

However, when writing a feature story, you must look for much more than just the facts. Although some feature stories have a hard news peg, all feature stories show a deeper, human side of a story. For feature stories, you will generally ask open-ended questions. These questions allow your source more time to develop an answer. Examples of open-ended questions include “How would you trace your rise from a private to sergeant major?” and “In your opinion, what can students do to become better interviewers?” Open-ended questions give your source a chance to elaborate in considerably more detail than closed-ended questions do.

Follow-up questions

No matter how carefully you plan your questions, you will likely have to ask follow-up questions. You should ask follow-up questions when you don’t understand an answer, when your source rambles too much and you forget the answer, or when he answers another question instead. Examples of follow-up questions include “How so?” “Why?” and “Could you give me an example?” These are the questions that will lead to interesting quotes and anecdotes. Sometimes a request to elaborate does not produce a satisfactory response. What should you do? The best tactic is
to drop the question and continue the interview. After you have discussed a few other points, repeat the question you wanted answered but this time in a slightly different way. Sometimes a source will recall more the second time the question is raised. It’s also important to use follow-up questions to verify information, ask for definitions or clarify a response. For example, military people use acronyms frequently. Never feel embarrassed to ask your source to explain the meaning of an acronym or technical jargon.

**Role-playing questions**

For clarity, you may want to ask your source to role play. For example, you may ask your source such a question as, “If you were in the readers’ place, how would you use this information?”

**Personal questions**

Some stories you write will require you to ask personal questions. This is especially true with personality features. For some journalists, it’s the toughest part of an interview. Even the most experienced journalist dreads asking a person how his fellow soldier was killed or a recovering alcoholic if he can recall his darkest moment in battling the bottle. However, feature stories depend on answers to these emotional questions. There is no perfect time or way to ask such questions. Usually if a personal question is asked at the right time and with sensitivity, a source will respond passionately and candidly. It also helps if you have established a good rapport, and the source feels comfortable with you.

**Free-choice questions**

Before concluding the interview, ask the source if there is anything else he would like to add. You may have failed to ask an important question that would benefit your story.

Now you know the types of questions you can ask, but if you have trouble formulating questions, there is one technique that may help you get started. It’s called the GOAL method of interviewing.
The GOAL method

Goals

Obstacles

Achievements

Logistics

Many interviews can be designed around this GOAL concept, especially for news and personality features. If you structure your questions around these ideas, you will get answers to the questions of why, how and what. The GOAL method of interviewing might not work in all cases. Even so, it’s something for you to consider if you need to conduct an interview with little time to prepare.

Goals -- question examples:

“What were some of your goals when you joined the military?”

“What are some of the goals in this program?”

“What are some of the goals in your career?”

“What are you trying to accomplish?”

“Why do you want to do this?”

Obstacles -- question examples:

“What were some of the obstacles you faced?”

“What are some of the obstacles you are facing?”

“What is one example of a difficult problem you experienced?” (With this question you are fishing for an anecdote).

Achievements -- question examples:

“How did you overcome these obstacles?”

“How did you achieve your goals?”

“How do you plan to achieve your goals?”

Logistics -- question examples:

“What led up to your decision to join the military?”

“How did you or the program get to this point?”

“How did your background affect your goals, obstacles and achievements?”

“What factors in your background relate to the focus of the story?”

“Is there a chronology of events that will help the reader understand the story?”
Managing your questions

Index cards

Some reporters find it useful to use index cards on which write their questions on. You created a basic outline. On this outline, you broke your story into several parts or topics. Using index cards, you can write the titles of these topics at the top of separate cards. Below each topic, you can write your questions. By doing this, you will have an organized, portable way to manage your questions during an interview.

Single sheet of paper

If you’re uncomfortable using index cards, you may want to write your questions on a single sheet of paper. You should organize your questions carefully. For example, make sure you begin with questions that establish rapport followed by questions that gain background information followed by more personal questions. Avoid physically checking off your questions in plain sight of your sources. This may intimidate them.

Notebook

If you write your questions in the same notebook you use to take notes in during the interview, try to write one question per page. Avoid clumsily fumbling through your notes to return to your questions.
Conclusion

Preparation is the key to a good interview and a good story. Without carefully developing your questions, your story will be difficult to write. Writing a story will become easy if you have more than enough information. Without enough information you will struggle, and you may have to repeatedly call your source for more information. Interview questions are like building a campfire. You always collect 10 times more wood than you think you will need, because in the end you will use it.
References


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


Feature writing handbook (2008)