**Category:** Detail and Development

**Title:** Getting What You Need by Asking the Right Questions

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**Lesson Objectives:** This lesson is designed to help students formulate effective interview questions. They will also learn the importance of asking follow-up questions in order to get information useful for understanding and representing the discourse community they have chosen to report on for their ENG 101 analytical report.

**Prep and Materials:** Students should have been previously introduced to the analytical report assignment and understand that an important aspect of the ENG 101 analytical report is conducting research through personal interviews with members of the discourse community upon which the student has chosen to report. For this lesson on interviewing, the instructor will need a copy of the documentary film about pinball “Special When Lit” or another suitable documentary focused on a particular discourse community and that features members of a discourse community responding to interview questions. The film should NOT include the actual questions being asked, but only the interviewees responses! Technology for showing a portion of the film in class will also be necessary. Students will need paper and something to write with.

**Introduction:** Students should be informed that that they are going to be asked to think about various aspects of the interview process and how questions can be constructed that will yield sufficient information for them to fully understand and report on their community. In thinking about these issues students will hopefully be better prepared to conduct their interviews and come away with useful information for writing their reports.

**Procedures:**

Begin by telling the students that they are going to watch a brief excerpt (first ten minutes) of a film about pinball that consists entirely of interviews with various members of the pinball community. They will not, however, be merely watching the clip, but actively writing and thinking about responses to questions that the instructor will provide them before beginning the film. They should consider and write down, as much as possible, answers to the following questions to be used during classroom discussion after watching the film:

* What questions do you think the interviewer asked in order to elicit the responses he got from his subjects?
* What kind of information is uncovered by the examples of questions you have imagined? For example, do we get background information, personal opinions, individual experiences? How do these all fit together to form a full picture of the community?
* What follow-up questions do you imagine were asked by the interviewer?
* What follow-up questions would you have asked if you were doing your report on this community? What information is missing that could be filled in through further questioning?
* Aside from the actual answers provided by interviewees, what else can you learn about the discourse community surrounding pinball through observation during the interviews? For example, what do the surroundings tell you, or the appearance of the interview subjects?

After discussing the tasks the students will be responsible for while watching the film, show the excerpt.

After viewing the film ask students to provide their answers to the questions they took notes on while watching.

For example, students, or the instructor, might note that several of the interview subjects talked about childhood experiences playing pinball, and in particular some shared descriptive, detailed memories of the first time they played a pinball machine. From this we might assume that the interviewer asked them to talk about the first time they played pinball and encouraged them to provide a detailed narrative in an attempt to elicit personal experiences from the interview subjects that show the personal and powerful impression pinball has had on members of the community.

On the topic of follow up questions, it might be noted that after discussing their first experiences with pinball, some interview subjects also talked about how much they played pinball as a child, or how much money they spent on it, and then about the reactions of their parents to their pinball playing. This demonstrates the interviewer’s determination to explore multiple aspects of the pinball experience of the interview subjects by following a line of questioning that begins with the personal, but then branches out into the opinions of others (the parents) in order to give a fuller picture and include multiple viewpoints.

As an example of utilizing observational skills to learn about a discourse community, it could be noted that most of the interview subjects are middle-aged or older, and that none of them are women. Students can be asked to provide their ideas about what this says about the community and to share follow up questions they might like to ask in order to explore this issue further.

**Conclusion:** By presenting students with a finished report on a discourse community, in film form, that relies heavily on interviewing and having the students consider the kinds of questions that were posed in order to obtain the information that went into that finished product, as well as pointing out opportunities for further inquiry that the film might have pursued, hopefully students will be better prepared to conduct their own interviews and to get a fuller picture of the discourse communities that they will report on.