Conducting an Interview

Whether interviewing someone informally for information or formally for an assignment, you want to make sure that you get the best information possible. We often think about preparing to be interviewed, but we may not take as much time as we should to prepare to interview others. Of course, you will probably think about coming to the interview with prepared questions, but there are additional preparations that will make for a more successful interview.

Plan the questions: You should come to the interview with a list of questions. Be prepared to veer off course, though. In planning the questions, keep the following tips in mind.

Know what kind of information you need
- What is expected from the assignment?
- What kind of information will give you the best material?
  - Stories?
  - Details?
  - Personal information?
- Do some preliminary research on your subject

Number of questions
- Create more than you think you will need and then be prepared to omit some of the questions if you start to run out of time.
- Rank order the questions. In other words, make sure that you get to the most important questions first. That doesn't mean that you have to start with those questions, but you should ask them before you run out of time.

Design a variety of questions
- Open-ended questions (as opposed to close-ended, “yes/no” type questions) require a bit more thought on the part of the interviewee and will often give you better information.
- Think about questions that might trigger stories. For example, “When did you know you wanted to be a lawyer?” might bring out more stories than “Why are you a lawyer?”
- Balance questions that are both easy to answer and a bit more personal. Be careful not to be too invasive or to ask questions that don’t reveal anything meaningful.

Avoid
- As Stephen Lucas (2009) argues, avoid asking questions that can be answered with a little research
- Leading questions that do not leave room for the interviewee to state their own opinion
- Hostile or loaded questions

**As you create these questions, think of ways that the interviewee might misinterpret/not respond to the question and try to prevent those problems. Test the questions out on people ahead of time.

Structure of the interview: Have a plan for conducting the interview.

Beginning (omit some of this information if it happens in the initial phone conversation)
- Introduce yourself and talk about why your are conducting the interview.
- Put them at ease. Start with some small talk before you start with the questions.
- Preview the interview—let them know what you plan to ask about and about how long you plan for the interview run.

During the interview
- Ease into the harder questions. Start with some simple, even close-ended (yes/no, dates, etc.) questions before moving into more detail-oriented questions.
- Wait—don’t jump in to cover up silence. They might be thinking about what you have asked them.
**Listen!** This is hard because you probably have many things on your mind, but you’ll want to pay close attention to the responses and let that guide the interview.

Some people find that it is easier to listen if they don’t take notes and some have the opposite opinion. You may have some indication of your preferences based on your note taking style.

Be prepared to break from your planned interview questions. If the conversation is going in the right direction and you are getting good “material,” just go with it! Think of the interview as a conversation—not just a list of questions to run through.

Basic note taking during the interview might be a good idea so that you don’t have to interrupt with a question that just popped into your mind (just quickly make note of it) and it helps keep you focused.

### Ending the interview

- Make sure that you end the interview on time.
- Finish by asking them “is there anything else you might like to add?”
- Make sure that you thank them for meeting with you and offer to share your notes/paper with them when you are finished.
- Let them know that you may follow up (via email or phone) with clarification questions.
- Review your notes as soon as possible after ending the interview.

**Set the right environment for the interview:** Where you conduct the interview may positively or negatively affect the interview.

- Look for places that are quiet, away from others who might interrupt, and comfortable.
- Remove distractions such as cell phones.
- Think about how you will collect the information. Will you record the interview, take extensive notes, or depend on your memory?
  - If recording, make sure that you have their permission and that they are comfortable with that option.
  - If taking notes, make sure that you are still maintaining eye contact and listening to the interviewee.
  - If depending on your memory, make sure that you sit down immediately after the interview and write as much as you can remember at that point.
- Remember to relax. This will put your interviewee at ease. Know that you always have the option of following up and clearing up any confusion on answers.

**Think about delivery during the interview:** The way you ask the questions and how you conduct your self during the interview may also affect the quality of the interview.

- Accommodate the interviewee—pay attention to how they are communicating (quiet/loud, high energy/low energy) and try to match up to that style.
- Think about your nonverbal communication. What messages are you sending with your body position, eye contact, voice (tone and rate)?

**Practice the interview:** It may seem strange to practice an interview, but it is a good idea. Try the questions out on others to see if they are clear and get some feedback on your interviewing style. This will make you more comfortable with the whole process.

For more information, see: