

The Informational Interview

The informational interview is the most common interview.

The **informational interview** is an every day occurrence for most of us because we employ it to obtain facts, opinions, observations, reactions, feelings, and attitudes. It is a staple of journalists, recruiters, police officers, attorneys, supervisors, counselors, professors, and students to name a few. Informational interviews may be as brief and informal as a staff member asking a committee chair when and where the next meeting is scheduled or as lengthy and formal as a journalist interviewing the President of the United States. The purpose of the informational interview is to obtain relevant information as accurately and completely as possible in the shortest amount of time.

Asking for information sounds simple, but it requires skillful questioning, listening, observing, and probing. Unfortunately, few of us, including professional interviewers, are trained in interviewing. Chip Scanlon, author of books and columns on journalism, writes that “Journalists get little or no training in this vital aspect of their jobs. Most learn by trial and error.”¹ The most effective informational interviewers are skilled in the basics of interviewing and are curious, friendly, organized, patient, and persistent.

The objectives of this chapter are to introduce you to the fundamentals of informational interviews that include the many components of planning the interview, conducting the interview, and performing the roles of interviewer and interviewee.

Planning the Interview

There are no simple formulas or easy short cuts in informational interviewing. Pulitzer-Prize winning investigative reporter Eric Nalder writes that interviews are as varied as the conversations we have and the people we talk to.² Informational interviews require careful and thorough planning because each is a process “that involves a series of decisions and actions designed to get the best possible information.”³

Your purpose controls how you prepare for and what you do during each interview.

Formulate Your Purpose

The first critical decision in the planning process is to formulate a purpose that answers this question: Why am I going to conduct this interview? Craft it carefully because it determines everything you do and do not do from that moment until the interview is completed. Your purpose should indicate what information you need (facts, opinions, observations, feelings, attitudes), how you will use this information (make a decision,

ON THE WEB

Use the Internet to research your college or one that you might select as a graduate or professional school. Focus first on the college or university, then on the school or college within this larger structure, and finally on the department. What kinds of information

are readily available? How up-to-date is the information? What kinds of information are not included that you would have to discover through interviews with faculty or students?

take action, write a report, create a profile, make an arrest), and how soon you need it (meet today’s publishing or broadcasting deadline, write a weekly report, prepare an end of semester research paper). Ken Metzler, a long-time professor of journalism, writes that when you know exactly what you want, “You’re halfway there.”⁴ With a clear idea about what you want to learn in this interview, begin your research.

Research the Topic

The Internet and databases are essential resources for interviews.

Research serves five essential functions for informational interviews. First, it reveals what information is available in other sources. Do not waste interview time asking for information you can find easily and quickly on Web sites, and in organizational reports, newspaper files, social media, data bases, archives, reference works, and previous interviews. Some journalists recommend that research time should be ten times the interview time.

Second, research may uncover aspects of a topic you might have failed to consider such as personal experiences, unique insights, causes of feelings or attitudes, and unaddressed or under-appreciated sides of issues. Research prevents you from making **false assumptions** and including **inaccuracies** in questions. Journalist Jaldeep Katwala warns, “Be sure of your facts. There’s nothing worse than being told you are wrong by an interviewee—especially when it’s live.”⁵

Be skeptical of what you find on the Internet and how you use it.

Third, research will reveal that much of what you read in books and articles and access on the Internet and social media is inaccurate or downright false. Exercise discretion when reviewing the information you discover. Beware of hidden agendas and political bias that lead to shoddy data and manipulation. Think of the wise saying that “Statistics don’t lie, but liars make statistics.” Although juries and the public tend to place great value on eye-witness accounts, they have proven to be highly unreliable.⁶ How recent is the information you have discovered? Sources may have changed their minds on critical issues such as educational reform, global warming, same sex marriage, and “illegal” immigration.

Show you have done your homework.

Fourth, research enables you to ask insightful and thought-provoking questions and indicate that you have done your homework. Your level of knowledge along with understanding and using correctly professional and social jargon, technical terms, and the respondent’s name, title, and organization establishes credibility with the interviewee and induces this person to answer questions openly and freely. Evidence of your research also indicates you cannot be fooled easily and motivates the interviewee to



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■ Select interviewees with several criteria in mind.

Is there a person you must interview?

to get more information about an assignment in your Civil War history class, your Civil War history professor will be your interviewee. If you need to interview the mayor of your city about his proposal to fund a new soccer stadium, the mayor will be your interviewee. At other times, you will need to choose from among several possible interviewees. Use four criteria to aid you in making this often difficult decision.

Does the person have the information you need?

Level of information: Check each potential interviewee's level of knowledge by becoming familiar with the person's education, training, experiences, positions, and achievements. *Primary sources* are those directly involved with the information needed; *support sources* are those with connections to primary sources; and *expert sources* are those with superior knowledge or skills related to the information needed. For instance, you may need an interviewee with a high level of expertise such as a first responder at the World Trade Center on the morning of 9/11, or you may want to interview a person who was on the street near the Trade Center on that fateful morning. Each has a unique level of information and insights into this tragedy.

An interviewee may be too willing to take part.

Availability: An ideal interviewee may be too busy, reside too far away, be out of the area until after a deadline, or available only for a few minutes when you need to conduct an in-depth interview. If distance is a problem, consider the telephone, Skype, or video conference. Never **assume** a person is unavailable until you ask. There are many stories about interviews with high status, famous, and seemingly reclusive people simply because the interviewer decided to ask or was persistent in asking.

Who might be your key informant?

Willingness: If a potential interviewee rejects your request for an interview, try to discover why. Does this individual mistrust you or your position, organization, or profession? Has this person been "burned" in previous interviews and is fearful of what will happen to information after the interview ends? Does the person see the interview as an invasion of privacy or fear the dredging up of old issues and embarrassing events? In short, a person may see nothing of value in an interview that warrants the time and risks involved. Before abandoning a potentially excellent interviewee after gentle persuasion, assurances, and mild threats, consider using what Raymond Gorden calls a **key informant** who can assist you in securing cooperation.⁷ A key informant may be

respond honestly and in depth. Do not tell an interviewee what you know; let your questions and reactions reveal what you know. Resist the temptation to cram your questions full of information you have discovered.

As you conduct your research, be sure to make note of possible areas and subareas of the topic or issue that will eventually form your interview guide.

Choose the Interviewee

Your purpose often dictates the choice of interviewee. If you want

Is this person able to give you the information you need?

an aide, former associate, family member, or friend of the potential interviewee or of you. On the other hand, be cautious of persons who appear to be too anxious to be interviewed.

A person may be physically or psychologically incapable of giving information accurately.

Capability: You must discover if a potential interviewee is capable of giving information freely and openly. Consider biases and prejudices, inability to tell the truth, proclivity toward exaggeration or oversimplification, or state of health that may affect a person's memory or ability to communicate. An eyewitness or survivor of an accident or wartime experience may be in a state of shock or have psychologically suppressed memories of a horrific event. Interviewers are often skeptical or disappointed when interviewees cannot relate minute details and timing of events that took place decades ago when most of us cannot recall what we had for dinner last evening. Copywriter Star Zagofsky writes that "The truth is that some people have a good story to tell on a subject and others don't. Some people are naturally talented at being interviewed and others aren't."⁸ And some are adept at evading questions and phrasing answers that reveal little or nothing of value. Journalists Eugene Webb and Jerry Salancik say you should know a "source well enough to be able to know when a distortion is occurring, from a facial expression that doesn't correspond to a certain reply."⁹ Your often difficult task is to choose an interviewee who best meets these four criteria.

Status difference and similarity may affect motivation, freedom to respond, control, and rapport.

Examine Your Relationship with the Interviewee

A positive relationship is critical in informational interviews because you will delve into sensitive areas such as beliefs, attitudes, feelings, values, and information an interviewee may prefer not to share. Review carefully the relationship that exists between you. Start with the basics of relationships such as desire to take part in the interview, affection and respect for another, inclination toward control or dominance, and mutual trust. The **status difference** between interviewer and interviewee offers advantages for each party.

When an interviewer is *subordinate* to an interviewee (student to professor, associate to manager, vice president to president):

- The interviewer need not be an expert.
- The interviewee will not feel threatened.
- The interviewee will feel freer to speak.
- The interviewee might want to help the interviewer.

When an interviewer is *superior* to the interviewee (lieutenant to sergeant, CEO to division head, physician to nurse practitioner):

- The interviewer can control the interview.
- The interviewer can reward the interviewee.
- The interviewee may feel motivated to please the interviewer.
- The interviewee may feel honored to be a participant.

Some organizations give high-status-sounding titles to representatives to enhance their superior aura: chief correspondent rather than correspondent, vice president instead of sales director, editor rather than reporter, executive rather than supervisor.

Status is a critical criterion for some interviewees.

When the interviewer is *equal* to the interviewee (student to student, associate to associate, researcher to researcher):

- Rapport is easily established.
- There are fewer communication barriers.
- There are fewer pressures.
- A high degree of empathy is possible.

Interviewees often prefer interviewers similar to them in age, gender, race, culture, educational level, or professional field. For example, a Vietnam War veteran may feel that only a person of similar age and military experience can understand what it was like fighting in the jungles of Vietnam. A woman may feel that only a female physician can understand her health issues. A senior executive of a corporation, a university president, or a senior member of Congress may expect a newspaper or television network to send a correspondent of similar status to them. Interviewees may consider interviewers of lesser rank to be an affront to their status and importance.

Study the Situation and Location

Choose the best possible setting.

Consider and weigh variables that may affect your interview. Although it may be ideal for you to select the timing and location of the interview, they are often not your choice to make or to make alone.

Sarah Stuteville recommends that you strive to interview in a place that has some relevance to the story of your subject you'll have much greater success . . . not only because you'll gain a further sense of context" but because "people are often more comfortable (and open) when they're in a familiar place or what feels like 'their territory'."¹⁰ A U.S. Senator may specify his office, a defense attorney the courthouse, a political candidate her campaign headquarters, a mother and father their home. Eric Nader recommends that the interview location should be mutually beneficial to both parties. He writes that it is essential to interview people "at the place where they are doing the thing that you are writing about." It is important not only to *hear* answers but to *see* and get the *feel* of things.¹¹ When Nalder was writing a book on oil tankers, a member of a crew told him that he could not understand crews and life on oil tankers until he'd been aboard in the Gulf of Alaska during the violent January seas "puking your guts out." Nalder took this advice and gained exceptional insights from his experiences and those of his interviewees.

Know all there is to know about each situation.

Prepare yourself for each situation to reduce surprises during interviews. Consider relevant events that have taken place before the interview or will take place following the interview: accidents, natural disasters, elections, protests, closing of a manufacturing plant. Are you ready for horrific scenes of destruction or filthy conditions, human suffering or death, cruelty to animals, emotional outbursts, and threats to health and safety?

Work with the other party in choosing a setting.

Other situational variables include the time you have to prepare for the interview, deadlines, an individual interview or a press conference, presence of invited or uninvited audiences, outside influences on either or both parties, and whether the interview will be broadcast live or recorded. You might prefer comfortable seats facing one

another with no physical barriers between parties, but interviewees may insist on seating arrangements in which they are in power positions such as behind a large desk or at the head of a table while you are seated in a powerless position in front of the desk or down the table.

Structure Your Interview

Now you are ready to structure the interview. Review your notes from your research that are particularly important to this interview and interviewee and prepare an **interview guide**. Your guide may be an elaborate outline, major aspects of an issue, or key words. The traditional journalistic interview guide consisting of six key words may become your primary questions for a moderately scheduled interview.

- *Who* was involved?
- *What* happened?
- *When* did it happen?
- *Where* did it happen?
- *How* did it happen?
- *Why* did it happen?

Create structural sequences and schedules that are flexible.

Length, depth, and significance of the interview determine the nature and detail of your guide. Review the structural sequences in Chapter 4. A chronological sequence enables you to progress through stories and events that occur in time sequences. A logical sequence such as cause-to-effect and problem-to-solution is appropriate for interviews on issues and crises. A space sequence works well when interviewing about geographical areas, cities, college campuses, and production facilities. If your interview will be brief, a guide may be sufficient preparation. If it will be more in-depth, create a **moderate schedule** that transforms topics and subtopics into primary and secondary questions.

A moderate schedule is ideal for most informational interviews.

Make your questions **open-ended** so the interviewee can elaborate on answers and you can listen, observe, and think of possible probing questions. A moderate schedule eliminates the necessity of phrasing each question carefully and precisely in the heat of the interview while providing the flexibility to modify, delete, or add questions as need or opportunity arises. You may discover aspects of an issue, insights, or surprises during an interview that warrant modifications or detours from your prepared schedule. Your schedule enables you to pick up where you left off without fear of getting off track. Thomas Berner recommends that if a question or area of inquiry comes to mind during an interview, jot it down in the margin of your schedule and come back to it when appropriate.¹² The freedom to adapt and improvise make a moderate schedule ideal for the informational interview.

Know the ground rules and adhere to them.

Ground rules agreed to or assumed in advance of the interview by both parties affect questions and answers and ultimately the success of the interview. Each party expects the other to be honest, to stick to the stated purpose of the interview, and to allow reasonable time to ask and answer questions. If you have prepared a schedule in advance, it is not uncommon for an interviewee to request a copy of your questions. As

Too many off-the-record requests may disqualify an interviewee.

a general rule, do not do it. If you give your questions to interviewees in advance, they may insist on modifying some questions and eliminating others. Whenever you agree to ask only approved questions or those on your schedule, you are prevented from adapting questions or delving into areas you were unaware of during your preparation. At the very least, providing questions in advance will affect the spontaneity of the interview. Establish rules in advance that pertain to which areas may be off-limits, what information may and may not be attributed to the interviewee, and which questions may be answered “off the record.” As a rule, do not accept “retroactive off the record” requests after an interviewee has answered a question or heard the answer read back or replayed. Excessive “off the record” demands may make a potential interview unacceptable.

The Interview Opening

A carefully crafted opening is essential for motivating the interviewee.

Plan the opening of the interview with care because the level of trust and motivation begins during the first few minutes of the interview. Sarah Stuteville observes that a successful interview may depend “on a total stranger’s cooperation and participation.”¹³ If the interviewee does not know you, identify yourself, your position, and your organization. Review the opening techniques discussed in Chapter 4 to determine which one or which combination is most appropriate for this interviewee and interview. Does your relationship with the interviewee and the situation warrant using a person’s first name or a less formal name such as Tom for Thomas or Peggy for Margaret? Starting an interview with “small talk” is traditional in interviewing, so prepare the small talk you might engage in without seeming trite, mechanical, or forced. Realize that busy interviewees may see small talk as a waste of time. Use humor cautiously. Be sure compliments are sincere. Prepare possible “icebreaker” questions that are easy to answer and get the interviewee actively involved in the interview. Plan how you will explain *what* you wish to learn, *why* you need this information, and *how* you will *use* it.

Conducting the Interview

The goal of the informational interview is to get in-depth and insightful information that only an interviewee can offer. It is essential, then, to get beyond superficial and safe Level 1 interactions to riskier and deeper Level 2 and Level 3 interactions. You must **motivate** an interviewee to disclose beliefs, attitudes, and feelings as well as unknown facts.

Motivating Interviewees

Motivation starts in the first minutes of the interview, so be careful of everything you say and do not say, do and do not do, ask and do not ask. The interviewee will size you up by the way you look, act, and sound. Exhibit respect for the interviewee and show that you appreciate the person’s time and willingness to be of assistance. Orient the interviewee as to the purpose and nature of the interview. Strive to make this a professional, purposeful conversation with all that implies. Ken Metzler recommends replacing the name interview with *conversation*, *talk*, *discussion*, or *chat* to call it what it is or should be.

Know what motivates each interviewee.

Interviewees are likely to communicate beyond Level 1 if you follow the golden rule: *do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. This rule applies to the most difficult of interview situations. A report about interrogation interviews with insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan noted that “the successful interrogators all had one thing in common in the way they approached their subjects. They were nice to them.”¹⁴ Parties communicate freely and accurately if they trust you to react with understanding and tact, maintain confidences, use the information fairly, and report what they say accurately and completely.

From the opening until the interview ends, show sincere interest in and enthusiasm for the interviewee, the topic, and answers. Do not reveal how you feel about answers and issues; remain neutral. Control the interview without interrupting. Look for natural pauses to probe or to ask new primary questions. Ask questions rather than make statements. Listen not only with your ears but also with your eyes, face, nods, and attentive posture. Metzler writes, “It’s not the questions you ask that make for a successful interview but the attention you pay to the answers you receive.”

Asking Questions

Although questions are tools of the trade, interviewers tend to ask too many questions, and this limits their opportunities to listen, observe, and think. All of us have witnessed or been victims of arrogant interviewers who assume they “are *entitled* to an answer.” Such arrogance, not limited by any means to media personalities, led Raymond and Moen to declare, “You aren’t, after all, paying for the service. You will earn an answer, if you earn it, by asking a substantial, interesting, and thought-provoking question—one that implicitly contributes to the experience of the community rather than merely passively demanding knowledge from others.”¹⁵

Listening is as important as asking.

Ask **open questions** that encourage interviewees to provide thorough answers that allow you to listen appropriately (for comprehension, empathy, evaluation, resolution) and observe the interviewee’s mannerisms, appearance, and nonverbal communication. Listening and observing may determine the accuracy and relevance of answers and the interviewee’s feelings. A raised eyebrow or a slight hesitancy of a respondent from another culture, for instance, may signal that you used a slang phrase, colloquialism, or oxymoron with which this person is unfamiliar.

Be an active listener, not a passive sponge.

Be patient and persistent. Do not interrupt a respondent unless the person is off target, evading a question, or threatens to continue answering forever. Ask a full range of probing questions. Metzler writes that it’s seldom the first question that gets to the heart of the matter, it’s the seventh, or maybe 16th question you didn’t know you were going to ask but have chosen to ask because of your careful, thoughtful listening.” **Silent** and **nudging probes** encourage interviewees to continue or to say something important about which you did not plan to ask. **Informational probes** detect cues in answers and get additional information or explanations. **Restatement probes** obtain direct answers. **Reflective** and **mirror questions** verify and clarify answers and check for accuracy and understanding. **Clearinghouse probes** make sure you have obtained everything of importance for your story or report. You cannot plan for every piece of information or insight an interviewee might have. Some journalists claim that “even if you go into an interview armed with a list of questions, the

most important probably will be ones you ask in response to an answer.” If an interviewee says something surprising or reveals a secret, follow this lead to see where it takes you. Then you can go back to your schedule and continue as planned until the next lead comes along. Be flexible and understanding when delving into sensitive or personal areas, and be prepared to back off if an interviewee becomes emotionally upset or angry.

Persistent probing is essential in informational interviews, but you must know when to stop. An interviewee may become agitated, confused, or silent if you probe too far. This exchange occurred between an attorney and a physician:¹⁶

Know when
enough is
enough.

Attorney: Doctor, before you performed the autopsy, did you check for a pulse?

Physician: No.

Attorney: Did you check for blood pressure?

Physician: No.

Attorney: Did you check for breathing?

Physician: No.

Attorney: So, then it is possible that the patient was alive when you began the autopsy?

Physician: No.

Attorney: How can you be so sure, Doctor?

Physician: Because his brain was sitting on my desk in a jar.

Attorney: But could the patient have still been alive nevertheless?

Physician: It is possible that he could be alive practicing law somewhere.

Be persistent, even relentless, but know when enough probing is enough.

Phrase each question carefully, particularly unplanned probing questions created on the spot. Review the common question pitfalls discussed in Chapter 3 so you can catch yourself before stumbling into one. Unintentional bipolar, yes (no), tell me everything, open-to-closed, guessing, and curious question pitfalls are particularly common in informational interviews. Make each question brief and to the point, and then give the interviewee your full attention.

All rules are
made to be
broken, but
you must know
when and how.

Sometimes you must break the rules to get information you need. It may be necessary to ask an obvious question even when you know the answer, such as “I see you were in Iran last spring.” Seemingly obvious questions can relax respondents by getting them to talk about things that are easy to talk about, showing interest in topics important to them, and revealing that you have done your homework. A leading question such as “You surely don’t believe that?” may provoke a respondent into a revealing interchange. Be cautious when asking leading questions of children. Children are susceptible to such questions because they “are very attuned to taking cues from adults and tailoring their answers based on the way questions are worded.”¹⁷ Ask a double-barreled question at a press conference to get two or three answers because it may be the only question you get to ask. A bipolar question will produce a yes or no for the record.

Know what you are doing and why.

Phrase questions carefully to avoid confusion. The following interaction between a patient and a physician illustrates the dangers of jargon and sound-alike words:

Physician: Have you ever had a history of cardiac arrest in your family?

Patient: We never had no trouble with the police.

Some interviewees answer questions about which they know nothing, rather than admit ignorance. Others are experts on everything and nothing. Listen to call-in programs that attract people who make incredibly uninformed or misinformed claims, accusations, and observations. An interviewee may play funny games, such as this exchange that took place during an election campaign in New Hampshire:

Reporter: How are you going to vote on Tuesday?

Resident: How am I going to vote? Oh, the usual way. I'm going to take the form they hand me and put x's in the appropriate boxes (laughing).

Reporter: (pause) Who are you going to vote for on Tuesday?

Think before asking.

Listen to answers to avoid embarrassing yourself. This exchange was between an attorney and a witness:

Attorney: Now, Mrs. Johnson, how was your first marriage terminated?

Witness: By death.

Attorney: And by whose death was it terminated?

Think before asking questions. Ken Metzler recommends avoiding the “how do you feel about that” question because “It’s the most trite, overused question in American journalism and sources begin to hate it after time.” Interviewees often respond with brief answers such as “Okay,” “Not bad,” or “As good as might be expected” that tell you nothing. It’s a vague answer to a routine question. Metzler suggests substituting “What were you thinking when . . . ?” for the “feel” question.



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■ *Effective note-taking entails maintaining eye contact as much as possible.*

Note-Taking and Recording

Experts disagree on the extent of note-taking and the use of electronic recorders because each can be intrusive and unreliable. Use the means best suited to you, the interviewee, the situation, and the report you will prepare. Note-taking or recording makes it possible to recall figures, dates, names, times, details, and quotations accurately.

Note-Taking

Weigh carefully the pros and cons of note-taking prior to the interview.

Note-taking increases your attention to what is being said and how, and this shows respondents you are interested in what they are saying and are concerned about accuracy. William Zinsser writes that this direct involvement enables the interviewee to see you working and doing your job.¹⁸ When you take notes according to the structure of the interview, you have your notes clearly organized when the interview ends and you can easily locate information you need when writing your report or story.

Note-taking has disadvantages. When respondents speak rapidly, you may be unable to record exactly what was said. It is difficult to concentrate on questions and answers and to maintain eye contact while writing notes, so you may fail to hear or probe into an answer because you are busy writing rather than listening. The interviewee may become anxious or curious about what you are writing, be reluctant to talk while you are writing or feel a break in communication while you are focusing on your pad. During an in-depth interview with a newspaper publisher, one of our students discovered that whenever she began to write, the interviewee would stop answering until she stopped writing, apparently to let her catch up. Before long, he arranged his chair so he could see what she was writing.

Follow these guidelines when taking notes during interviews.

Note-taking should not threaten the interviewee.

- Ask permission to take notes and explain why note-taking is beneficial to each party.
- Show your notes occasionally to the interviewee to reduce curiosity and anxiety, check for accuracy, and enable the interviewee to fill in gaps and volunteer information.
- Maintain eye contact by making note-taking as inconspicuous as possible.
- Use abbreviations or a personal shorthand like when sending text messages.
- Write down only important information, key words, and the gist of some quotes.
- Take notes selectively throughout the interview to avoid signaling that the interviewee just dropped a “bombshell” quote or causing the interviewee to become cautious.
- If an interviewee is answering too rapidly, ask the person tactfully to slow down, or to repeat an answer. Ask a stalling question such as “Tell me more about that” to give you time to get caught up.
- Immediately following the interview, fill in gaps, check for accuracy and objectivity, complete abbreviations, and translate your handwriting.
- Review your notes carefully to identify the points, information, and quotations that are best for your report.

Maintain communication while taking notes.

Recording allows interviewers to listen and probe more effectively.

Recording

A recorder provides a complete and accurate record of *how*, *when*, and *what* an interviewee says. It enables you to relax, concentrate on what is being said and implied, and then create effective probing questions. You can hear or watch what was said and how it was said hours or days afterward.

A recorder may add an intrusive element to the interview.

Unfortunately, recorders can malfunction or prove tricky to use. Batteries can die. Our students have used recorders during lengthy interviews for class projects only to discover disks or memory sticks were blank when they tried to review them later. Some parties view recorders as intruders in interviewing situations and fear the permanent, undeniable records they produce. It takes time to transcribe and review lengthy recordings to locate facts, reactions, and ideal quotes.

Follow these guidelines when recording interviews.

Ask permission before using a recorder.

- Reduce interviewee fears and objections by explaining why the recorder is advantageous to the interviewee, why you want or are required to use a recorder, how the recording will be used, and offering to turn off the recorder when desired.
- Reduce mechanical difficulties by testing the recorder prior to the interview.
- Be familiar with the recorder and practice with it in a simulated interview setting.
- Research appropriate state laws before using a hidden recorder or recording interviews over the telephone. The law generally allows one party to record a second party (no third parties) without permission, but 12 states prohibit the recording of conversations without the consent of both parties, including California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Washington. Twenty-four states have laws that pertain to the use of hidden cameras. An excellent source on legal aspects of interviewing is a guide published by the *Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press* (<http://www.rcip.org>).
- Ask permission before recording an interview to avoid possible lawsuits and to establish goodwill.
- Set ground rules with the interviewee ahead of time such as wearing a microphone, having a recorder nearby, looking at the lens of a camera instead of the light, limiting background noise and interruptions, and speaking loud enough for the recorder.

Managing Unique Situations

Three situations affect role relationships and necessitate changes in the ways each party usually prepares for and participates in interviews. These are the press conference, the broadcast interview, and the videoconference interview.

The Press Conference

The press conference is unique because several interviewers are involved simultaneously and the *interviewee* determines purpose, subject matter, time, place, length, and ground rules for the interview. It may be called with little warning and offer minimal indication about what will be addressed. The interviewee may start with a prepared statement or presentation and then answer questions. Ground rules may include topics or issues that are off limits to questioning, and whether answers may be quoted or the interviewee cited by name.

If you have little notice of a press conference, try to determine from your records and experiences and contacts with other sources which issue or topic is likely to be

addressed and the interviewee's position. If possible, prepare questions in advance knowing that some may be irrelevant, declared off limits, or asked by other interviewers who are recognized before you. Assess your relationship with the interviewee. If the person likes and trusts you, you may be chosen to ask the first question or be one of a few who are recognized during the question period. If your relationship is negative, the interviewee may refuse to recognize you, give a superficial or hostile response to your question, or say "No comment" and turn quickly to another interviewer.

The interviewee controls the press conference.

Be on time and make yourself visible by sitting as near the interviewee as possible and in the center so you are likely to be noticed during the question period. Note what is said and not said in the statement and answers to questions. Your purpose and that of the interviewee may not only be different but also at odds. The interviewee may want to use the situation and interview for self-promotion, promotion of a new product, public relations, free advertising, or to place a positive spin on an issue or action. Your job is to get to the truth of the matter and to cut through the "smoke and mirrors" presented in statements and vague generalities, allegations, and unsupported claims in answers. The interviewee *needs you*, so this gives you some control of the situation.

Do not be intimidated by the situation or the status of the interviewee. Journalist Tony Rogers writes that "It's your job to ask tough questions of the most powerful people in our society."¹⁹ Once the question period begins, it is likely to be a free-for-all with raised hands, interviewers jumping to their feet, and shouted questions. When recognized, ask your most important question first because it may be the only question you get to ask. Because you will probably be unable to probe into answers, ask a double-barreled question to get two answers in one. You may not get to your prepared questions. Listen carefully to answers to other interviewers' questions for valuable information and a follow-up you might ask. Aim at clarifying and getting new information from these answers. Protocol may enable the interviewee or a staff member to end the press conference without

Outside forces influence broadcast interviews.

warning, perhaps to avoid or escape unwanted exchanges and issues.



■ The broadcast interview presents unique problems for both parties.

The Broadcast Interview

The broadcast interview poses unique challenges to both parties. It may take place in a field, along a street, in a studio, or in your home. The places are endless, and interviewee and interviewer may be miles and time zones apart. The interview may be on a real or figurative stage in which both parties must engage in "performing" for outside forces such as live audiences, viewers, and listeners that may constitute "a three-way interaction."²⁰ This virtual third party may lead the interviewer or interviewee

to adapt questions and answers to it. The interviewer needs to attain answers and reactions as well as sound and pictures that play well on the air. The interview may be live, and anything may happen. There are no “do-overs” in live broadcasting, and interactions may be in full view verbally and nonverbally of those who have tuned in.

Being familiar with the physical setting can eliminate many surprises.

Enhance your efficiency and performance and reduce nervousness by practicing in pre-recorded situations that emulate the real thing. Do a thorough debriefing to determine what you did well and where you need more work. Know who you will interview, when, and where and by becoming acquainted with the program format and targeted audience. Be thoroughly familiar with the physical setting, including seating for interviewer and interviewee, technicians and other support staff, and audio and video equipment. When possible, test out the equipment. Pay close attention to the briefing concerning time limits, opening and closing signals, microphone use, and camera locations.

Assist the interviewee in making the interview a successful interaction. Brief the person (or persons) in advance. Explain the basics such as wearing a microphone, having a recorder nearby, looking at you rather than the camera or staff, speaking loud enough to be heard, and if more than one interviewee is present, the importance of one person speaking at a time. Caution the interviewee about content or responses that may produce negative reactions from listeners and viewers.

The “staging” of the broadcast interview is critical to its success. The interviewer or director determines the framing of shots—whether the interviewer or interviewee will face the camera left or right, eyelines (interviewee’s eye level with the interviewer’s), whether shots will be mid-shot or medium close-ups, and whether to select a sequence of shots. Other decisions involve lighting, props, background (not dark clothing on a dark backdrop, not an overly busy background), and limiting noise such as shuffling of papers, heating and cooling systems, bell towers, nearby interactions, and foot traffic. These decisions make the broadcast interview more complex than a simple face-to-face interview.

Know and play your role in the interview.

As you conduct a broadcast interview, make it seem that the interviewee is conversing only with you by maintaining eye contact and taking limited and necessary notes. Put the interviewee at ease from the start with some informal conversation before broadcast begins. Open with easy questions, preferably open-ended ones. Fred Fiedler notes that “the live interview may last no more than seconds or a few minutes and allows little time to ask challenging questions.”²¹ Ask questions and do not make statements; your job is to get information, not give it. Know your questions well enough to ask from memory or a few small cards to make the interview look and sound spontaneous and professional. Avoid “dead air space” for any length of time but tolerate silence that gives the interviewee time to think and answer. Do not jump in too quickly with another question.

Be persistent in getting at the information you need, but there is a big difference between tenacity and incivility. Sparks recommends that interviewers should be aggressive with charm. Some interviewees and their advocates will accuse you of bias and rudeness.²² Make the interview worthwhile by showing respect and making your questions relevant and neutral. Pay close attention to the interviewee, and take a break if you notice signs of fatigue, excessive nervousness, increasing emotions, confusion, or anger.

Spontaneous questions generate spontaneous answers.

Some utterances and actions cannot be broadcast or may be embarrassing, such as profanities, obscene gestures, poor grammar, too many “uhs,” “you knows,” “know what I means,” and excessive “blood and gore.” Some newspaper reporters, when being crowded out by cameras and microphones, have shouted obscenities to shut down their electronic counterparts and get closer to the action. A state legislator told one of the authors that he would purposely insert profanities into answers to prevent reporters from using them on the air.

The Videoconference Interview

Videoconference interviews are becoming quite common and share many similarities with face-to-face interviews. There are obvious differences, however, so let us focus on what you need to know and do when taking part in videoconference interviews.

Rule number one when you are planning for a videoconference interview is to eliminate or minimize distractions. Choose a setting that is uncluttered and void of large patterns, designs, or colors such as red. Control the movement of others in the background. Turn off your cell phone. Dress appropriately for the situation while avoiding plaids, stripes, and white shirts or jackets. Clothing may range from professional business attire to casual. Select jewelry that does not make noise or catch light.

As the interview commences, avoid noises such as taping on the desk, moving papers, or playing with a ball point pen or other objects. These small noises may be loud and distracting when transmitted electronically. Hesitate slightly before asking or answering questions to handle the transmission delay in receiving audio and video. Look straight into the monitor or camera so you appear to maintain eye contact with the other party. Focus all of your attention on the other party. Avoid excessive or repetitive body motions or stiffness so you are and appear to be relaxed and enjoying the conversation. Speak naturally for a conversational interaction. The microphone will pick up your voice so you need not raise it. Let your voice and face show energy and enthusiasm. Remember to smile. The other party will focus on your face because it is most visible on the screen.

Managing Difficult Interviewees

Because informational interviewers often probe into emotions, attitudes, reactions, and causes of actions or inactions, you must be prepared to handle difficult interviewees in difficult situations. Journalist Wendell Cochran warns, “If we aren’t proficient at asking the right questions at the right time, we’ll miss on accuracy, fall short on context, and stumble on fairness.”²³

Emotional Interviewees

Silence is often better than talk with emotional interviewees.

Respondents may burst into tears during interviews, and the problem is not helped if an interviewer blurts out, “I know just how you feel.” Tactful and sincere reactions such as the following may help.

It’s okay to cry.

Take your time.

Do you need a few minutes?

Remain silent until a person regains composure and is ready to continue. If you have a close relationship with an interviewee, you may hold the person’s hand or place an arm across the shoulders as comforting gestures.

Treat others as you would like to be treated.

Be sensitive to people who have experienced tragedies by not invading their privacy. How you broach a sensitive topic at a sensitive time is a serious ethical issue. Reporters are notorious for asking thoughtless questions such as, “How do you feel about your child’s death?” or “Is the family devastated by this tragedy?” John and Denise Bittner suggest that you ask only direct and necessary questions. “Remember, people in crisis situations are under a great deal of stress,” they write. “A prolonged interview won’t provide additional information; it will only upset people.”²⁴

Managing Hostile Interviewees

When encountering a hostile interviewee, try to discover the reason for the hostility. A person may be angry, depressed, or frightened because of circumstances beyond his or her control or responsibility, and you are a convenient outlet. Or a person may be hostile toward you because of who and what you are or the organization you represent. A nondirective approach may reveal the cause.

You appear to be very angry this morning.

You seem upset.

Would you like to talk about it?

Large male interviewers may appear threatening to interviewees.

There are many ways you can avoid or reduce hostility. Do not invade the other’s space, make unwarranted demands, or present a threatening physical presence or manner. Use neutral and open-ended questions. Substitute better-sounding words for antagonizing ones. Remain silent to permit the interviewee to offer full explanations or to blow off steam. Go to another topic if the current one is producing a hostile reaction.

Phillip Ault and Edwin Emery offer this simple rule: “Treat the average person with respect, and he [she] will do the same.”²⁵

Reticent Interviewees

Be prepared for the “silent types.”

A person may be **unable** to talk because of a personality trait that has nothing to do with the interview, and you cannot alter this predisposition. Often, however, a person is **unwilling** to talk or reveal much when doing so because of your position (supervisor, authority, investigator) or your reputation, bad experiences with similar interviews, risk to self-image or reputation, or a setting in which others can hear what is taking place.

When interviewing reticent persons, use conversation starters such as asking about pictures, awards, or arrangement of furnishings in the room. Begin with easy-to-answer questions on nonthreatening topics. Become less formal. If open questions do not generate in-depth answers, use closed questions (an inverted question sequence) until the party is ready to talk. Use silent and nudging probes. Realize that no tactic can get some reticent people to talk openly and freely; they simply do not talk much.

Controlling talkative persons may be more difficult than getting reticent ones to open up.

Talkative Interviewees

Unlike reticent interviewees, talkative interviewees may talk for long periods of time without seeming to take a breath. They give unending answers to open questions and lengthy answers to closed questions. Try to avoid awkward interruptions by using non-verbal signals such as leaning forward, nodding your head, stop note-taking, or glancing

Be tactful and sensitive in using nonverbal signals.

at your watch. Phone interviews pose problems because you have few nonverbal signals to halt answers. The best you may be able to do is use only targeted, closed questions with less verbal maneuverability and look for natural openings or slight pauses to insert a question such as:

That's very interesting, now I was wondering . . .

Speaking of fall break, let me ask you . . .

I'm glad you mentioned that because . . .

Evasive Interviewees

Discover why a person may be evasive.

Interviewees often attempt to evade answering questions that probe into feelings or embarrassing acts, make them take stands, or incriminate them in some way. Evasive strategies include humor, real or fake hostility, ambiguous words, rambling answers that avoid the point of questions, and quibbling over key words. An interviewee may reply to a question with the statement, "It depends on what you mean by. . . ." A common tactic is to counter a question with a question, or revolve a question onto the interviewer:

Well, how would *you* answer that?

What do *you* think we should do?

Tell me about *your* private life.

Be patient and persistent.

Interviewees answer questions not asked but ones they want to answer. Be persistent in questioning by

- Repeating or rephrasing questions.
- Laughing and continuing with your questions.
- Going to other questions and coming back to this one later.
- Resorting to leading or loaded questions that evoke meaningful responses.

If you believe an interviewee is being dishonest, listen carefully to determine if answers square with the facts from your research and previous interviews. Observe nonverbal cues but be aware that clever respondents know how to *appear* honest, including excellent eye contact. Pat Stith writes that when an interviewee "says 'to be honest' or 'to be perfectly candid' the hair ought to stand up on the back of your neck. Almost always these phrases are followed by fibs."²⁶

Two experienced FBI agents, Joe Navarro and John R. Schafer, recommend that interviewers look for "clusters of behavior, which cumulatively reinforce deceptive behaviors unique to the person being interviewed."²⁷ Nonverbal behaviors include fidgeting feet, increased eye contact, rapidly blinking eyes, leaning away, irregular breathing, folding arms or interlocking legs to use less space, and lack of gesturing or finger pointing. Verbal cues include what Navarro and Schafer call "text bridges" such as "I don't remember," "The next thing I knew," and "After that." Stalling tactics may include asking an interviewer to repeat a question or using phrases such as "It depends on what you mean by," "Where did you hear that," and

“Could you be more specific?” As an interviewer, strike a balance between being gullible and suspicious.

Confused Interviewees

Be understanding, helpful, and adaptive to confused interviewees.

Respondents may become confused because of tension a situation generates, unfamiliarity with a topic or issue, the wording of your question, or how you react nonverbally. Try to manage confused interviewees without embarrassing or angering them. Restate or rephrase a question tactfully or return to it later when the interviewee is more relaxed. Unfamiliar words or technical jargon may be the culprit such as this interaction between an attorney and a witness.²⁸

Attorney: Is your appearance here this morning pursuant to a deposition notice which I sent to your attorney?

Witness: No, this is how I dress when I go to work.

Be careful of your nonverbal reactions. Broadcast journalists who get strange responses rarely exhibit a smile or shock when that happens. They go on to the next question or topic as if nothing embarrassing has happened.

Dissimilar Interviewees

Gender and cultural characteristics are generalities and may not apply to a particular interviewee.

Our society is becoming ever more diverse, so it is likely that you will interview persons who are highly dissimilar to you in age, gender, race, ethnic group, experiences, and political, religious, and social beliefs and attitudes. Journalist Wendell Cochran asks us, “How do you deal fairly with someone whose views are anathema to you?”²⁹ Both interviewers and interviewees may stereotype one another. When one of the authors was interviewing funeral directors for a book on grief counseling, it became apparent that several assumed he must be an atheist because he was a college professor.

It is tempting for us to stereotype hyphenated ethnic groups such as Irish-Americans, African-Americans, Arab-Americans, and Hispanic-Americans and expect them to interact and respond in particular ways during interviews. At the same time, some ethnic groups have developed ways of interacting with others. Research indicates that African-Americans prefer indirect questions, consider extensive probing to be intrusive, and prefer more frequent and equal turn taking. Mexican-American respondents rely more on emotion, intuition, and feeling than midwestern European-Americans. Persons of rural backgrounds value personal know-how, skills, practicality, simplicity, and self-sufficiency more than those of urban backgrounds. Adapt your questions and structure to different interviewees and be aware of gender and cultural differences that may motivate interviewees and explain the answers you receive.

While avoiding stereotyping according to gender and age, be aware of important characteristics that might affect an interview. Contrary to common assumptions, men rather than women talk more during and monopolize interactions but also provide minimal answers (yeah, nope, fine, okay). They tend to make direct statements (less beating around the bush), answer questions with declarations, and get to the point sooner. On the other hand, women tend to answer questions with questions and be less direct. Elderly interviewees may be less trusting not because of age but because of experiences

and perceived insecurity. The elderly who are retired, live alone, or have few social interactions may be communication starved and very talkative during interviews.

Closing the Interview

Close the interview when you have the information you need or your allotted time runs out. If the interviewee has agreed to a 15-minute interview, complete the interview within this time or prepare to close the interview. The **interviewee** may grant additional minutes when you signal your time is up or you obviously need only a few more minutes. If the interviewee appears reluctant to expand the time, close the interview positively and arrange for another appointment.

Begin a closing with a clearinghouse question— such as “Is there anything else you would like to add?” or “What have I not asked that you think is important?” The most thoroughly prepared interview may miss something important that did not occur to you before or during the interview. Express appreciation for the interviewee’s assistance, and make the closing a dialogue. **The interviewee must be an active party from opening through closing.**

Remember, the interview is not over until both parties are out of sight and sound of one another. An interviewee may relax and be less on guard when the interview appears to be coming to an end and reveal important information, insights, and feelings, some of which may alter your understandings and impressions established during the body of the interview. Journalist Pat Stith writes that “some of the best stuff you’re going to get will come in the last few minutes, when you’re wrapping up the interview, packing your stuff, and getting ready to leave.”³⁰ Observe and listen.

Preparing the Report or Story

Make it a habit to check all sources.

The final stage is to prepare the **report** or **story**. Review the information and observations obtained through your interviews to see if you have obtained the information necessary to satisfy your purpose. This means recalling interchanges, reading notes, and listening or viewing recordings. Sift through words, statements, facts, opinions, and impressions to locate what is most important to include in a report or story. Check answers with other sources if there is reason to suspect an interviewee gave inaccurate information.

A critical decision is what to include in your report or story. If the interview or press conference covers several topics or raises a number of issues, decide if your information warrants several stories or one lengthy one that covers everything. Time and space in your report are key determiners. What is truly important for others to know? Include important announcements, revelations, allegations, denials, and positions as well as significant quotations, stories, sound bites, and changes in labels: from accidental death to murder, explosion to terrorism, etc. Once you know what you have obtained from the interview stage, editing begins. If the report is a verbatim interview for publication or dissemination, determine if grammatical errors, mispronounced words, expletives, slang, and vocalized pauses such as “uh” and “you know” should remain. What about repetitious statements, long and rambling explanations, and simple, unintentional errors? Readers and listeners may enjoy the account with all of the warts showing, but

both interview parties may be embarrassed and lose credibility and the relationship damaged beyond repair.

Be honest, accurate, and fair in reporting interview results.

Make sure questions and answers are reported in context, and preface them so readers and listeners have a clear understanding of each. Include proper qualifiers, and do not overstate or understate unfairly an interviewee's opinions, attitudes, intentions, and commitments. Arrange information in order of importance. Include quotations to enliven and support your story or report. Follow all ground rules and exclude "off the record" information, be careful of making assumptions, and check carefully all sources and reports.

The Interviewee in the Interview

Since all of us are interviewees at least as often as we are interviewers, let us turn our attention to becoming effective respondents in informational interviews.

Do Your Homework

Know the interviewer as well as the interviewer knows you.

Thoroughly brief yourself on topics that may come up during the interview, including recent events, current issues, pending decisions, and relevant laws. What is your connection to these? Check your organization's policies, positions, and involvements and understand your authority to speak for your organization. Should you be an interviewee in this situation?

Become familiar with the interviewer, including age, gender, ethnic group, education and training, special interests, and experiences. What are the interviewer's attitudes toward you, your organization, your profession, and the topic: friendly or hostile, trusting or suspicious, interested or disinterested. Some interviewers have little to no knowledge or expertise on a topic while others have engineering, management, economics, law, or science degrees or have developed a high level of expertise on topics such as energy, stem cell research, or foreign policy. What is the interviewer's reputation for fairness and honesty in questioning techniques. Observe the interviewer in action by watching the person reporting the news, reading reports of interviews, and reviewing story angles the person likes to take.

Appreciate the impact of upward and downward communication in interviews.

When an interview takes place without warning, be sure the opening reveals the identity of the interviewer, the interviewer's organization, length of the interview, information desired, and how the information is to be used. A thorough opening, including small talk, orients you and gives you time to think and prepare answers strategically.

Understand the Relationship

Understand the relationship prior to the interview.

Do a thorough analysis of your relationship with the interviewer. What is your relational history? How similar are you? How willing and eager are each of you to take part? How much control will you have over the interview? Does each of you perceive the other to be trustworthy, reliable, and safe? Be aware of the problems that may result from upward and downward communication because of status differences between you and the interviewer. For example, where does each of you fit into the hierarchy of an organization?

Know the Situation

Assess the many situational variables that will impact the interview.

Be informed about the interview situation. If it is a broadcast interview, become familiar with the media format and how you might help by providing good visuals. Diana Pisciotta, an expert in strategic communication, warns that “An appearance on CNBC or an interview on NPR can help to make or break your company’s reputation.”³¹ She suggests that if the interview is not “live,” you should pretend it is because your interview might be picked up by the Internet or other media outlets. There is no substitute for practice, rehearsal, and role playing to prepare you for the broadcast interview. Dress for the camera; appear to be excited and engaged; be animated because body language enhances your voice, credibility, expertise, and authority; keep your eyes on the interviewer rather than the camera.

Consider establishing ground rules such as time, place, length, which topics are off limits or off the record. Be realistic in demands. If you demand that all important topics be off limits, there will be no interview. Occasionally you may request to see questions in advance to prepare well-thought-out answers with accurate and substantial data.

Anticipate Questions

Be as prepared to answer as the interviewer is prepared to ask.

Anticipate questions and think through possible responses. What might be the most important information to divulge or conceal? How should you qualify answers? What evidence can you provide for assertions and claims? How might you reply to questions you cannot answer because of lack of information, need for secrecy, protection of sources, legal consequences, or organizational policies and constraints?

In this age of litigation and media involvement in every issue, increasing numbers of interviewees are undergoing training in how to handle questions. Prosecutors, attorneys, and aides prepare witnesses and clients (including presidents of the United States and CEOs) to answer questions in court, congressional hearings, board meetings, and press conferences. Seek help if you are facing a difficult encounter with a trained and experienced interviewer.

Listen to Questions

Listen carefully to each question, and follow these guidelines for responding effectively.

Listen and Think before Answering

Fully engage the brain before opening the mouth.

At scenes of accidents, crimes, or controversies, persons make statements they soon regret. African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans are often accused of crimes they did not commit because interviewees claimed to see a black or Hispanic man in the area where a crime took place. *Listen* carefully to what is being asked. Listen for words you do not know or may misinterpret. Two pieces of advice are worth taking: Keep it simple (particularly in broadcast interviews that operate under tight deadlines and think in terms of 2–3 minute segments and 7-second sound bites) and if you don’t know an answer, do not try to make something up.

Be Patient

Do not assume you know a question before it is completed. React only after fully hearing and understanding each question. Do not interrupt the interviewer.

Focus Attention on the Question of the Moment

Do not continue to replay a previous answer that is history or anticipate a future question because you will fail to hear the current question.

Concentrate on the Interviewer and the Question

Watch for nonverbal signals that complement the verbal and reveal the interviewer's feelings, attitudes, and beliefs. Focus eyes and ears on the interviewer. This is particularly important in broadcast interviews that involve several persons, studios, cameras, monitors, and microphones and field interviews that involve spectators, noise, traffic, and distracting objects.

Do Not Dismiss a Question Too Quickly as Irrelevant

The interviewer may have a very good reason for asking a question, and it may be one in a series leading up to a highly important question. An interviewer may be using an inverted funnel sequence, and you will get an opportunity to respond at length later.

Answer Strategically

A good answer is concise, precise, carefully organized, clearly worded, logical, well supported, and to the point. There are many strategies for responding to questions.

Becoming hostile reduces you to the level of the interviewer.

- Avoid defensiveness or hostility.
 - Give answers, not speeches.
 - Give reasons and explanations rather than excuses.
 - Be polite and tactful in words and manner.
 - Use tasteful, appropriate humor.
 - Do not reply in kind to a hostile question.
- Share control of the interview.
 - Insist on adequate time to answer questions.
 - Do not allow the interviewer to “put words in your mouth.”
 - Challenge the content of questions that contain unsupported assertions or inaccurate data or quotations.
 - If a question is multiple-choice, be sure the choices are fair and include all reasonable options.
 - Ask interviewers to rephrase or repeat long, complicated, or unclear questions.
 - Answer a question with a question.
 - Search reflective and mirror questions for accuracy and completeness.
- Explain what you are doing and why.
 - Preface a lengthy answer by explaining why it must be so.
 - Preface an answer by explaining why a question is tough or tricky.
 - Provide a substantial explanation why you must refuse to answer a question or simply say “No comment.”

- Rephrase a question: “If what you’re asking is . . .” or “You seem to be implying that . . .”
- Take advantage of question pitfalls.
 - Reply to the portion of a double-barreled question you remember and can answer most effectively.
 - Answer a bipolar question with a simple yes or no, when it suits you.
 - Reply to the open or closed portion of an open-to-closed switch question that is to your advantage.
- Avoid common question traps.
 - If a question is leading, such as “Don’t you agree that . . .,” do not be led to the suggested answer.
 - If a question is loaded, such as “Are you still cheating on your exams?,” be aware that either a yes or a no will make you guilty.
 - If an apparent bipolar question offers two disagreeable choices, such as “Did you go into medicine for the prestige or for the money,” answer with a third option.
 - Watch for the yes-no pitfall, such as “Do you want to die?” and answer or refuse to answer politely.
- Support your answers.
 - Use stories and examples to illustrate points.
 - Use analogies and metaphors to explain unknown or complicated things, procedures, and concepts.
 - Organize long answers like mini-speeches with an introduction, body, and conclusion.
- Open your answers positively. The authors of *Journalistic Interviews: Theories of the Interview* offer these examples of interviewee responses:³²

Negative

You failed to notice

You neglected to mention

You overlooked the fact

You missed the point

Positive

May I point out

We can also consider x, y, z

One additional fact to consider

From another perspective

Summary

You are involved in informational interviews nearly every day, sometimes as interviewers and sometimes as interviewees. Be prepared for either role. Length and formality vary, but the purpose and method are the same: to get needed information as accurately and completely as possible in the shortest amount of time. The means are careful questioning, listening, observing, and probing. The interviewer must remain flexible and adapt to

each interviewee, situation, and response. This chapter has presented guidelines for structured informational interviews that call for thorough preparation and flexibility. The nature of each stage depends upon the situation and the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee.

Interviewees should be active participants in informational interviews. When given advance notice, interviewees should prepare thoroughly. They should share control with the interviewer and not submit meekly to whatever is asked or demanded. And they should know the principles and strategies of effective answers. Good listening is essential.

Key Terms and Concepts

Broadcast interview	Hostile interviewees	Reticent interviewees
Confused interviewees	Icebreaker questions	Status difference
Dishonesty	Key informants	Strategic answers
Dissimilar interviewees	Metaphorical questions	Talkative interviewees
Emotional interviewees	Off the record	Videoconference
Evasive interviewees	Press conference	
False assumptions	Research	

Probing Role-Playing Cases

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Seeking Disability

The Department of Veterans Affairs recently discovered that a staggering 45 percent of military veterans returning from duty in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were seeking compensation for service-related injuries. In addition, they are claiming as many as 11 to 14 ailments compared to fewer than four on average for World War II and Korea. You are a broadcast journalist interested in developing a series of reports on invisible veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and have made appointments with four physicians at a veteran's hospital to learn more about the nature and severity of these ailments, why the number is so high for these two most recent wars, the causes of these ailments, and ways these ailments can be reduced for future combat veterans.

A Career in the Commercial Space Industry

You entered a university studying aeronautical and astronautical engineering the year the space shuttles were retired and NASA shuttered many of its space launch facilities in Florida. During your sophomore year, the first commercial rocket sent a commercial vehicle to the international space station to take needed supplies and return with worn-out and no longer needed equipment. In addition, all astronauts sent to and returned from the station now ride on Russian vehicles. You are going to interview two professors and two Ph.D. students in your major about future careers in the space program. The interviews will take place in the interviewees' offices at the university.

Political Campaign Directors

You are majoring in political science and have an interest in entering politics in the future, first at the local level. You want to discover what it is like running for political office at three levels: local (mayor or city council), regional (state or national representative), and state (governor, U.S. Senate). Specific concerns are funding, party support, getting nominated, conducting a campaign, working with the ever-present media, and the use of the Internet and social media. You have made arrangements through key informants to interview three persons who have managed local, regional, and state political campaigns.

Surviving Summer before Air Conditioning

Every year in July and August, you hear weather reports about how hot it was in the Midwest during the summers of 1936 and 1937. Most high temperature records were set in these two years before there was air conditioning. You've heard your grandparents born in these years talk about how many infants died shortly after birth and how the hospitals tried to cope with temperatures in the 100s. For an oral history project in a library science class, you have decided to interview four persons who experienced these conditions as teenagers or young adults to discover the problems they encountered, how they managed to work and sleep, and what they did to try to stay as cool as possible. The interviews will take place in a lounge area of a retirement facility.

Student Activities

1. Select a 20- to 30-minute interview from C-SPAN. Study it carefully to see if you can detect an interview guide of planned major points and sub-points. How were these points turned into questions during the interview? How effectively did the interviewer employ probing questions when needed? How well did the interviewer avoid common question pitfalls? Which techniques did the interviewer use in the opening, and which did the interviewer use in the closing? How did the interviewer involve the interviewee in the opening and closing?
2. Interview a newspaper journalist and a broadcast journalist about their interviewing experiences and techniques. How does the nature of the medium affect interviewers and interviewees? How does the medium affect interview structure, questioning techniques, and note-taking? What advice do they give about note-taking and recording interviews? How do the end products differ? What constraints does each medium place on interviewers?
3. Record a televised press conference in which one person is answering questions from several interviewers. How is this situation similar to and different from one-on-one interviews? What stated or implied rules governed this interview? What skills are required of interviewers and interviewee? How did the interviewee recognize interviewers? What answering strategies did the interviewee use? What questioning strategies did interviewers use?

4. A growing number of interviewers are turning to the Internet to conduct probing interviews. Develop a moderately scheduled 20-minute interview on a topic that will require fairly lengthy answers and then conduct one face-to-face interview and one employing Skype. Identify the advantages and disadvantages of each with respect to relationship building, communication interactions, depth of answers, self-disclosure, probing questions, spontaneity, and ability or inability to observe and hear the interviewee's answers.

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