Interviewing summary tips and questions

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(Some material based on documents from College Media Advisers, Richard Conway of Nassau Community College, and Jim Killam of Northern Illinois University)

Planning

* Ask what you see as the source’s contribution to your story. What, specifically, do you want or expect this person to tell you?
* Where possible get an appointment; don’t just drop in. Tell the source what you are working on and why you want their interview.
* Research the source first. Get their bio, look for public records e.g. [SearchSystems.net](http://publicrecords.searchsystems.net/) (fee-based, usually), learn something about their field and surprise them with it.
* Come up with at least 10 good questions before you interview. Also recognize that you need to be flexible and look for the unexpected.
* Whatever the site, look over lighting, trying for primary source behind your shoulder, and primarily either natural, incandescent or fluorescent sources. Ask to rearrange tables and seating. Don’t make your position subordinate.
* Whenever possible interview the person while they are doing what you are talking about. Get a “sense of place.” Take note of items in their environment that can add to the story and be used for conversation.
* Be sure you have a working recorder with fresh batteries or power outlet. If video, be sure any external condenser mike also has power. Do a test.
* Record a TV interview, try taking notes, and compare your notes to the recording.
* Ask for a follow-up interview whenever possible, and use that to script out your questions for the second interview.
* Ask for relevant documents. Get a copy of the brochure they give to clients, the newsletter that they read or produce.
* Tell them that you do not allow pre-publication checks, but that you might call back with a question about what they said.

Interview style

* Be on time.
* Be professional. Don’t fumble notebooks or test a recorder during the interview.
* Be comfortable. Start with icebreakers that might include comments on items in the room, clothing, getting their name and correct spelling, and their official job title.
* Be conversational. Tell them something about yourself and what you know about their work, but learn to be quiet when necessary. For recorded interviews, don’t reply with non-verbals (Uh-huh, ya). In other words STFU.
* If you are recoding, get the recorder or camera set up and begin conversing so that the device gets forgotten. If taking notes, try to keep doing it, even if there’s nothing you plan on using. Develop a shorthand for notes (e.g. AOT = as opposed to). See handout from Lane DeGregory (NewsU webinar that we missed on March 21)
* DeGregory sees an interview as being like a blind date. So, her steps are
  + Check them out (do the research)
  + Make your move (pitch your idea to them; talk about talking; establish trust; let them pick the place; what’s in it for them; say you are a writer, not a reporter)
  + Put them at ease (fit in with their surroundings re your dress, etc.; don’t bluff; share something about yourself; bring 30+ questions; try kids, cars, dogs; eye contact; ask What were you thinking then, not how were you feeling)
  + Get intimate (record smells, taste, touch; do they have a journal/Facebook to show you; ask “Why” a lot; get on the floor with little kids)
  + The morning after (what did I forget to ask; leave something there and come to pick it up [ethical?])

The questions/questioning

* After the icebreakers, try GOSS: what Goals do you have in your work, what Obstacles have you faced, what Solutions have you used or are foreseen, what Started this organization or idea. This is similar to a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats)
* Try some of Lane DeGregory’s “Carving out Character” questions [handout]
* Cover the basic who, what, when, where, why, how.
* Ask questions at higher levels of abstraction that involve analysis, synthesis, evaluation.
* Ask about feelings, not just thoughts or facts.
* After each question ask “How do you know that?” where appropriate.
* Avoid closed-ended questions unless looking for a specific fact. Try Brian Storm’s two-step questions for better quotes: “How long have you worked here and what do you enjoy most about it?”
* Ask the superlatives: most, least, best, worst.
* Ask for translation or elaboration: “Are you saying that …” or (Terry Gross) echo back what they just said but paraphrased as a question: Source: “I think poverty is the root of the problem.” You: So, you’re saying that you think poverty is the underlying single factor that leads to poor nutrition?
* Ask them to define non-standard, technical or overly academic content in their own words.
* Use simple pauses, “I see,” “Uh-huh” “Tell me more” when you think there’s more or a better way to say it.
* Use devil’s advocate questions or statements: “I’ve heard some people say that Irish music all sounds the same, that it’s just sort of diddly-diddly shit. How would you respond?” Note how you attribute this to other people, as Lane DeGregory advises
* Get data. Ask how many clients in the program succeeded in meeting their goals. How many meals do you serve in a week?
* Go through all your prepared questions, even if they seem off-topic.
* If you get silence or no response, wait a bit first, then confront the fact: Are you uncomfortable answering that? Why?
* Always ask “Is there anything else that I forgot to ask?” or “that you want to ask or tell me?” Try that after you put down your notes or turned off the camera.