

How to conduct amazing interviews



FLAME

Writing Centre

Introduction

Interviews are one of the most powerful, important, and useful research tools that any student can use. Interviews can be carried out in pursuit of dozens of assignments or projects on campus. This handout will focus on two situations: interviews of experts for research papers as well as interviews of people for documentary (or documentary-style) film productions.

The art of carrying out excellent interviews requires conceptualizing interviews as happening in three phases: the **preparation phase**, the **interview phase**, and the **follow up phase**. Helpful tips in each of these stages are mentioned and described below.

Preparation

- Make sure you identify the correct person to speak with. You would never want to set up an interview only to find out that this person is not the expert you hoped they would be.
- Know their work. People you interview want to know that you know something about them. Take time to review their work. If you don't have a ton of time, at least familiarize yourself with two things they've written: their most important work and a very recent piece they've written.
- Let them pick a time for the interview that's good for them. This way, they will be stress free and will be able to give some mental attention to the interview.
- Tell them about how long it will take. If you'd like to talk with them for 10 minutes, say 10 minutes. If it's 30, say 30. If they are expecting 5 minutes but you're going on for 45, things will get awkward.
- Tell them about how much time you'll need for prep after you arrive. Sometimes, an interview subject will see you and expect the interview to start right away. You might need some prep time before you even arrive.
- Make sure the medium of the interview is clear. If you just say that you'd like to "interview" someone, they will assume that it's over the phone or on Zoom. If you want to do something different, like an email interview, be sure to say that so that it's clear.
- Speaking of email interviews, email interviews are something we HIGHLY recommend for all kinds of reasons. Not only can your interviewee respond whenever they have time, but you can also avoid having to do very tedious transcribing from a recording.
- For live recorded interviews, avoid all small talk before the recording has started. Sometimes, as you're setting up, the other person will start speaking about things that you want them to talk about later. You can gently cut them off by saying something like, "Oh, this is great stuff. I want to record it. Just give me a minute to finish the setup."
- Make sure all phones and other noises are off including things like loud fans or loud ACs.

- Lastly, have your questions ready ahead of time. For email interviews, have no more than 5 questions. For recorded interviews it's Ok to go up to 10 or 12.

The Interview

- Try to avoid sending the person the questions ahead of time. This applies to an in person interview. If you are doing an email interview then of course you'd send them ahead. Sometimes, the person insists that you sent them and in that case, just send them.
- Make sure you have water and if you're interviewing someone live, that they do too.
- The first question you ask should not be your most important question. Interviewees need time to warm up, just like everyone else.
- Make sure to keep eye contact with your interviewee. If you have to jot down a note, do it very quickly and get back to eye contact.
- Enthusiastically support what they are saying, but do it silently. So not with the normal small sounds that we make when we're following what someone's saying.
- The most useful way to start a question of yours is to make it a non-question by starting with "Please tell me about..." This creates an open-ended question and encourages the person to take the question any place they want to.
- Be ready to veer off in a direction that you didn't anticipate. Very often the best moments in an interview are the unscripted ones.
- If your interview subject says something great but doesn't say it cleanly or clearly, it's totally Ok to ask them to repeat it.

The Follow Up

- Make sure to write your interviewee a thank you note after the interview whether it's in person, on Zoom, or over email.
- If you are using editing software to edit the audio or video of your interview, make sure that no sentences or words are cut off in the middle. It sounds very unprofessional and suspicious if an interview is cut mid-sentence. Better to not use it than to over-edit it.
- Make sure to use a proper citation if you are using a quote from your interview in a paper. The correct MLA style Works Cited citation for an interview looks like this:
Last name of person interviewed, First name. Interview. By Interviewer Name. Date of interview.

Final Thing

For email interviews you should be sending either 3 or 4 emails. The first email is only to ask if you can interview the person. Make sure you introduce yourself properly and tell them how the interview answers will be used. The second email is when you send them the questions—usually no more than 5 for an email interview. The third mail would be sent if you have a follow up on any of the answers they gave to the second email. And the fourth one is to say thank you.