

Elm Tips: Interviews

Types of interview questions to think about:

- **Icebreakers:** A comment or inquiry about a personal effect; talk of current events or weather; talk of mutual interests or acquaintances; use of the respondent's name; use of good-natured kidding or banter.
- **First Moves:** A continuation of icebreakers because they lead to questions you want to ask; report to respondent what people are saying about him or her; defuse hostility; look for humor or irony, if appropriate.
- **Filter questions:** Filter questions establish a respondent's qualifications to answer questions. It is useful whenever you are interviewing a person with unknown credentials. They enhance conversation with highly qualified sources and weaken it with poorly qualified sources.
- **Routine factual questions:** Who, What, When, Where, Why and How
- **Numerically defining questions:** Statistics, concrete and dynamic—How many? Can you make a comparison? (He walked 120,000 miles, a distance equal to almost five times around the world at the equator.).
- **Probes:** The probe encourages the source to explain or elaborate. You can be passive (“Hmmm...I see....”), responsive (“Really! how interesting!”), mirroring (“Thirty-three arrests...”), silence, developing (“Tell me more about....”), clarifying (“Does your boss know about them?”), diverging, and changing (“I'd like to move along to another topic....”).

Note Taking

Let's be honest: you don't have time to take a class on stenography and shorthand. Never fear! As you conduct more and more interviews, you'll start to develop your own, effective style of note taking.

Look for ways to shorten words while taking notes – drop vowels, use symbols, abbreviate commonly used words (bc for because, etc. for etcetera).

Make sure you can read your notes an hour later when you're typing them up!

When taking notes during an interview, don't feel like you have to write down every single word. Listen for key information and catchy quotes. When the subject says something you may want to quote, get it all down, even if it means a pause in your questions. Some reporters even ask throwaway questions so they can finish writing.

Email

Avoid email interviews as much as possible. They're impersonal, and you won't get nearly enough information if you don't talk to a source face-to-face. Here are some guidelines for email, though:

- Use it for making contact with people and setting up interviews.
- You can ask follow-up questions over email to quickly check information.
- Be professional. Keep in mind that anything you write may be forwarded elsewhere

Reporting for Accuracy.

The process to achieve accuracy ends with editing and proofreading, but it starts with reporting. Ask yourself:

1. Did you use primary sources? You should base most of your reporting on primary sources – official documents, reports, and interview with eyewitnesses, leaders and spokespersons for groups or people who have direct knowledge of a situation or event. Secondary sources, such as other news articles and people who don't have direct knowledge of the topic, should be used for background research.
2. Did you double-check all names? Ask each person you interview to spell out their name, even if it's a common one. Did you get their year and title correctly?
3. Did you double-check phone numbers, addresses, and URLs?
4. Did you double-check dates and times? Make sure that all dates and times, especially for upcoming events, are correct.
5. Did you use credible sources? Check out the people you talk to. If a source gives you suspect information, confirm it with another source.
6. Did you double-check math and numbers? Every number in a story – whether you got it from a source or calculated it yourself – should be verified.
7. Do you have varying versions of events? If one person says something and another source contradicts it, go back to the first source. If both sources stand by their statements, look for more sources. Or include both accounts with proper attribution and note the discrepancy.
8. Did you check documents? If the president says we passed our Board review, ask to see the documents. If an alleged crime victim says she reported a crime to the police, ask to see the police report. Whenever a document is available, seek it out.