

Guidelines for Conducting Interviews

1. Be fully prepared on the topic before you start to do interviews. Know the relevant dates related to the history of the topic. Also, master the information on websites related to the material in your interview.
2. Learn as much as possible about the person, or representative of a company, you plan to interview beforehand. If you think the person is likely to have a vita or resume, ask for a copy at the time you set up the interview. Also, know as much as possible before you start about the interviewee's connection to the organization you are researching.
3. Be honest upfront about your intentions – tell who you are, why you want to interview this person, and what you plan to do with the interview after it is completed. If you plan to put tapes or transcripts in your media center, you need to let the interviewee know. If you plan to put all or part of the interviews on a website, you need to let the interviewee know.
4. Make sure your equipment works and you know how to use it.
5. There's a lot to be said for doing interviews in pairs. You will get higher quality answers when both interviewers are asking the questions.
6. Show respect for the interviewee by dressing properly for the interview. Dress at least as well as you normally do for school. If you do the interview off campus, it wouldn't hurt to dress the way you would for a professional job interview.
7. Ask the person to sign a release form just before you start the interview. Go over the release form with the interviewee, reminding the interviewee again just how you plan to use the information you gather.
8. Spend a little time before you turn on the recorder just carrying on small talk and establishing rapport with the interviewee.
9. The focus of the interview should be matters relevant to the project topic, but first ask the interviewee to talk about himself/herself: where the interviewee grew up and went to school, what the interviewee does for a living, etc. This will help you build rapport with the interviewee and you will get more relevant information from the interviewee the more they trust you.
10. It's wise ahead of time to write out a list of questions you want to ask. There are probably a dozen or so basic questions you would want to ask everybody you interview from a particular organization. Then there will be other questions that are unique to a particular section of the project, or the interviewee's background. But be prepared to take the conversation in unanticipated directions if the interviewee tells you something interesting and relevant that you didn't expect. The best questions in the best interviews are likely to be the follow-up questions after the interviewee begins answering your prepared questions. This means you have to be a good listener. Also, be ready to jump in with a follow-up question, asking for more details, or asking why the interviewee feels the way he or she does.
11. Make sure your questions are as neutral and unbiased as possible. Ask open-ended questions which tend to be more objective and less leading than closed-ended questions. Open-ended questions typically begin with words such as "Why" and "How", or phrases such as "Tell me about...". Often they are not technically a question, but a statement which implicitly asks for a response. Do not ask leading questions. Leading questions subtly prompt

the respondent to answer in a particular way. Leading questions are generally undesirable as they result in false or slanted information.

12. Realize that an interview is not a normal conversation. You are not supposed to do half the talking. Your job is to ask the questions. Most importantly, you need to be a good listener. If you want someone to give you a good interview, you have to look and act as though you care about what the interviewee has to say.
13. Start with the easy, uncontroversial questions. You want to be empathetic, but you also want to get the interviewee to tell you something worthwhile. Save the tough questions for near the end of the interview. The interviewee may mention something about a controversial event, or something that is a source of embarrassment for the interviewee, you would be wise to hold the. In such cases be prepared to ask a follow-up question, such as “What do you plan to do in the future?” or “How did that make you feel?”
14. If the interviewee asks you to turn off the tape recorder before he/she answers a question, respect the interviewee’s wishes. You may learn something that you can use as background or that will tip you off to something you can ask a later interviewee. But try to persuade the interviewee to put as much as possible on tape. If you plan to let the interviewee review the tape or transcript before you make it public, you can tell him/her that it will be possible to remove any incautious remarks later. Ethical issues in interviews are as complicated as they are in life in general, but the Golden Rule is always a good guideline – “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” If you think the interviewee has said something that could be damaging to the interviewee or anyone else, you may have an obligation to make sure that the interviewee is aware of the potential consequences.
15. One of the toughest things in any interview is dealing with the occasional interviewee who makes offensive or insensitive remarks. If you think the comment is relevant to the project, you could ask a follow-up question, like, “Why do you feel that way?” Or, “Do you think other people feel that way?” But in many cases the best advice is just to move on and get the interview back on track. Also, it’s probably very rare, but if an interviewee should make an improper, suggestive remark to you, be sure to report it to your teacher and other school authorities.
16. As you conclude, be sure to thank the interviewee for talking to you. It also doesn’t hurt to follow up with a thank you note.
17. After the interview, do a quick evaluation of the experience: When and where was the interview conducted? Were there any unusual circumstances during the interview – background noises, distractions, etc.? Did the interviewee tell you anything you didn’t know? Are there other sources that corroborate what the interviewee told me? How reliable do I think the interview is? Realize that interviews are often least valuable for basic facts – when something occurred, who was there, etc. But they can be invaluable in telling you what the interviewee thought or believed about those basic events in the school’s history.