

Ten Tips for a Better Interview

1. **Be prepared!** Always read up on the subject you are reporting about and the person you are interviewing. Your source will appreciate your effort, and you will be able to skip questions that can be answered by an assistant, book or document. When scheduling the appointment, ask your source to suggest documents or other sources of information about the topic you will discuss. The interviewee will appreciate your interest and often share valuable documents before the interview. Make sure your tape recorder has batteries that work. Bring an extra tape as well as pens and notebook.

2. **Set the rules of the interview right up front!** Be sure your subject understands the story you are working on (this will help keep the interview on track). Additionally, the interviewee must understand that everything they say is "on the record." It is best to establish these ground rules when making the interview appointment. Although most government officials have enough experience with the media to indicate when something is "off-the record" or "on background," other experts may not understand the differences. Remember that an upfront clarification may be required (especially when your source's job or life could be endangered by being quoted).

3. **Be on time!** The worst impression you can make on a source is being late for the interview.

4. **Be observant!** Observe details of the place and of your interviewing partner; this can add color to your story. If you are interviewing people in their home or office, be sure to get a good look around and note what you see. For example, they may have some old photos that show them in a more personal light. You may start an interview with assumptions about a person and leave with a completely different impression. However, this may be exactly what your source intended. Perception is a tricky business! Try to talk to others, colleagues or friends of your source, to get a bigger picture.

5. **Be polite.** Don't rush your source! It is important to establish a polite rapport and a level of comfort for the interviewee. Some interviewees, on the other hand, need a couple minutes to become comfortable talking to reporters. Even though you may only have 30 minutes for an interview, you should not rush your subject. If you sense the interviewee is in a hurry, adjust your timing accordingly. Keep in mind, everyone is different. Taking the time to get to know your sources will prove valuable, especially when you need to call with follow-up questions or use them as a source for future stories. If the interview goes well, it may even go beyond the scheduled time. Give yourself plenty of time between appointments to avoid scheduling conflicts.

6. **Listen but don't be afraid to interrupt when you don't understand!** Keep your audience in mind! One reason you are conducting this interview is to explain it to your readers. If your subject uses scientific jargon or explanations only his/her peers would understand, politely interrupt and ask for further explanation. Never be embarrassed about not knowing something.

7. **Silence is golden.** Sooner or later you will have to ask the tough questions that your subject may be loath to discuss. When you start asking those provocative questions, the answers most likely will be short, useless or carefully worded. You may not get an answer at all. If this occurs, look your source in the eye and don't say a word. In most cases, your opponent will begin to feel uncomfortable and begin to share information again. If this doesn't work, ask for sources who might be able to answer your question.

8. **Maintain eye contact!** A reporter who spends most of the interview bent over taking notes or looking into a notebook can be as disconcerting as a tape recorder in an interviewee's face. While taking notes and recording the interview, maintain as much eye contact as possible. Learn to take abbreviated notes looking down only once in a while so you can focus on your interviewee. This will make the interview more like a conversation, and enable everyone to be more relaxed.

9. **Before your leave... ask your source if there is anything that you might have forgotten to ask.** Perhaps the interviewee is burning to tell you useful information, but you did not even think to ask that question. Don't leave without getting a contact number or e-mail address and a good time to call with follow-up questions. Always ask for other sources. Colleagues or friends of the interviewee may be more knowledgeable or willing and able to speak to you. Thank your source for spending time talking with you before you leave.

10. **Review your notes right after the interview!** Don't wait until the end of the day or later in the week to review your notes. Go over them right away, while everything is fresh in your mind, filling in your shorthand and elaborating on your observations. Skip that date for drinks with your office pals until after you have reviewed and organized your notes.