

Handout 4: About Journalistic Interviews

About Journalistic Interviews

Preparing a Journalistic Interview

What is the topic, and what will be the approach to it?

- Why is the topic of interest to you / to listeners?
- Is anything unclear to you, do you need more background info?
- Are there any contradictions / conflicts latent to the topic?
- What aspect do you think most important / relevant to current events?

Who will be your interview guest?

- Who is competent on your topic? (you may have to research this!)
- If the topic is controversial: which side does your guest represent?
- What makes your guest interesting for a radio interview?

In choosing your guest, you are also choosing the perspective onto your topic.

Some useful criteria:

- *Do you want opinions from people who are not normally heard in other media?*
- *What aspect of the topic, or which side of the controversy would you like to present?*
- *If you are approaching an official institution, there may be one person designated for such interviews (press representative / speaker)*

Establish contact

- Tell your potential interviewee who you are and what station you represent. Explain what you would like to conduct the interview about (topic / main aspects), and about how long it will be.
- Don't give away your questions: spontaneous answers are usually the best ones! *Exception: if your guest is an inexperienced speaker, you may tell them what question*

you would like to begin the interview with (and then do so). Also, sometimes prominent guests such as political figures ask you to send your questions to them in advance.

Planning your questions

- Write down questions that come to mind (brainstorming) and then begin re arranging them!
- Decide what the main question is that you would like to have answered. Usually, this main question is not asked directly, because it's too large or too complex. Instead, you break it down into smaller, indirect questions. Still, this main interest will give you a structure for the conversation.
- Remember to narrow down the topic for the interview to a certain aspect.
- What will be your opening question (see tips below)?
- Are there any facts / figures that you should have on hand to ask your guest about?
- Make notes for your questions rather than writing them out: this will make your interview more lively.

Do you have all the facts you need? Anything you would like to look up?

Imagine the interview situation, going through it or as a role-play with a colleague.

Don't be afraid to ask critical questions, just do it politely.

The Interview Itself

- You are the interviewer: create a productive conversational atmosphere / show your interest
- Take on the responsibility of leading the conversation – do it for your listeners!
- Ask short, clear questions (exception: questions with built-in background info)
- Ask only one question at a time
- Address your guest personally, and with respect
- don't begin questions with „hmmm“ or „yes“ (puts distance between you and guest)
- Avoid global statements and suggestive questions, also questions that are too 'closed' or to 'open' (explained below)

- Ask about particular events and experiences rather than general opinions
- (when working with a mobile unit) Keep the microphone in your hand, never pass it on to anyone! The microphone symbolizes the fact that you are responsible for the # conversation.

Listen very carefully to what your guest says, and respond with your questions, rather than sticking to a prepared plan! You can repeat a question if your guest did not understand it right away, or tries to skirt the question (this can happen particularly with experienced partners such as politicians, who might want to avoid giving a straight answer!).

Don't hesitate to ask a question to which you already know the answer: you are asking for your listeners, not for yourself; and perhaps you want your guest to explain something in his or her own words. If your guest uses abbreviations or 'insider lingo', translate for the listener!

What makes an interview interesting?

Good questions will get you good answers!

A good interview has a **main focus**, something you want to find out. Keep this focus in mind, even though you may never ask about it directly, but rather will break it down into 'smaller' questions that give your guest more leeway in his or her answers.

Here are a few thoughts about kinds of questions, and how to use them:

Ask one question at a time!

Ask open questions

Open questions give your guest enough space to answer as he or she sees fit. These are typically questions that begin with 'how, why, what'.

Instead of asking, "*was the protest rally successful?*" (which could give you a YES-NO answer) ask, "*how would you sum up the effect of the protest rally?*" But be careful with questions that are too open. "*What was the rally about?*" is too open: you lose your hold on the conversation, and your guest feels as if he/she has to explain everything at once. Better: "*What events led to this protest?*" "*Why did local groups support the planning?*"

Avoid closed questions

Closed questions are those that can be answered with ‘yes’, ‘no’, or a simple fact. They are usually not productive in an interview, since they interrupt the flow of conversation. And they may even be impolite, because they limit the guest in his or her freedom to explain things.

Often these are questions you might want to ask in a preliminary talk in order to get together some background facts as a basis for open questions in the interview itself.

There are exceptions – sometimes it is important to ask point blank: did this local politician vote FOR or AGAINST the new security regulations at the school....

One constructive way that closed questions can be used is to introduce a new facet in a conversation: “*Were you involved in the protest rally?*” Then, “*What was your impression?*”

’Loaded’ questions are not suitable for interviews!

A question is ‘loaded’ when it has a particular cast, suggesting a certain answer or interpretation, or implying that ‘this is the way things must be’. Ultimately, these are not questions to be answered freely, but invitations to confirm clichés or prejudices.

Asking a refugee, for example, “*As a migrant, don’t you sometimes feel homesick?*” would not be very diplomatic to begin with, but – worse – it also suggests that a very complex situation like that of refugee can be reduced to a simple label (like homesickness – what is that, anyway?). Depending on the context, the suggestion might even be that the refugee *should* feel homesick = *does not belong here*, etc.

Questions using “or” often lead in this unfortunate direction: They limit the guest to one of two interpretations (while neither may, in fact, apply). Sometimes, everyday words and assumptions just don’t capture a person’s reality. Asking someone, “*Is music your profession or your hobby?*” will nearly guarantee that more interesting answers cannot come up: maybe it’s their passion, their companion, their comfort, a substitute for words?

”Or”-questions tend to offer categories, ‘pigeon-holes’, labels: and sometimes a lot can depend on one word, particularly when it makes a guest feel entirely misunderstood!

It’s a good idea to prepare an opening question and a final question.

And if the interview goes well, you may not need the final question after all.