

INTERVIEWING TIPS – MACAULAY HONORS SEMINAR

Although interview techniques are pretty standard; tips about how to conduct them vary. Here are a few to consider.

PREPARATION

Any interview starts with What? Why? Who? When? Where? How?

Before an interview, make sure you have prepared these questions to yourself as a matter of sketching out what your interviewee has to offer according to your goals.

1. What is the interview for? The answer to this should be both your topic and the final product, whether it's a video, audio interview, or text. So, if you're conducting an interview on waste management, for example, think about what specific questions will you ask the person you're interviewing.
2. Organize the story. Even if it's not a story in the traditional sense, every interview tells a story. Try to map out the story as a whole by asking what do I want to say, who are the people I need to interview? What other visual elements do I need? To map a story you can write all these points down, or create chart of how things connect to one another. Some people take really detailed notes so that they are easy to follow once you get started. Whatever you do, keep in a place you can keep referring to in the process, and have the final in your hand when you conduct the interview.
3. What? Once you have a map as stated above, ask again What? Why? Who? When? Where? How?

WHAT. What kind of interview do I want? Short format, expert, user (in the example of the waste management topic, will you also interview someone who is affected by the issue? A worker? A building, city dweller? An advocate of a specific practice? This also answers the *Who*?

What do I need?

How much time do I need to secure an interview? If it's someone that is well known ask yourself if the interview is feasible, and if so, what are your strategies for getting a hold of them. People who are not well-known also have many obligations, so also take into consideration the time it will take you to schedule an interview.

Equipment: Make a list of the obvious pieces of equipment needed for the interview. For a video interview, the list would include a video camera, a microphone, and a well thought out plan on the lighting you may encounter on location.

An audio interview will require a recorder (consider the many types of microphones depending on where the interview will take place), or use could use a smartphone and a default audio recording map, or an added app that gives you more texture. In all instances, you must check the equipment before you go into the field: Does the video camera have batteries, does it record well, are the settings correct; the same checklist applies to an audio recorder. To be sure, to test your equipment, you have to record for at least 3 minutes, and play back. Prior to any interview, allow for a few seconds before you begin with your questions.

*Keep in mind that for a video interview, you also need to think about audio, so test levels and playback if you have a chance to make sure that it's audible at the very least. Shoot for sharp and clear as a standard.

WHEN.

When should I have the interview? Choose the right time that works for both you and the interviewee, but always give priority to the interviewees' time constraints – and don't be late! In fact, always be early so you can have plenty of time to test the equipment on site (regardless of whether you're using a smart phone, or a professional camera).

WHERE.

Location: Where will the interview be conducted? If it's a video interview, ask, what is a visually compelling backdrop? Where does it make sense in visual terms, to hold the interview? Feel free to state with simple elements. For example, if it's an activist speaking on environmental justice, is there a poster or banner that is readily available that you can place in the place where the interview is taking place; can you meet them by the river they are organizing to get the federal government to clean?

If it's an audio interview, you might also want to take inventory of the sound scape and it may strengthen or compromise the interview. A bit of background noise, may give the listener a more visual or real sense of location, but it can also be distracting.

Choose a good place is where the interviewees feel comfortable to spend time talking with you; respect their choices and privacy.

Places related to people, events featured in your story so that you could have an overall picture for your own notes, and to tell the story (think visually or pay attention to the sounds scape if it's a sound piece).

WHO.

Who will you need to approach, how will you find the right people to give you the "story" you're looking for? Think of people you know will be inclined to take the time to give you an interview. Contact them via email with a formal request explaining what your project is about, and follow-up with a phone call. T

HOW.

Have some basic facts of those you will interview. If possible, do some research on them, people they have worked with, their affiliations, read any previous articles they were interviewed for or wrote. Use the web for general information, but you're interested in the very topic you think this person is best suited to talk about, so focus on that. Remember you don't have to be an expert in the fields but necessary to know some technical terms or some backgrounds of the subjects.

Inform your interviewee about the length of the interview and the equipment you will be using (video camera, audio recording, etc).

Remember they might ask for the questions ahead of time, which you should send and note that things may change a bit once the conversation/interview is under way.

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

Before getting started, have them sign a release form, and briefly explain what it states.

Beginning an interview means finding answers for: What? Why? Who? When? Where? How? Be direct and succinct, but don't rush your interviewees, take it step by step.

Always introduce yourself: Who are you, what are you doing, what is this for, and always ask your

interviewee to introduce themselves on camera, or on the audio recorder. You can ask, *please tell us your name*, what type of work do you do (this is different than *What do you do for a living?* as the issue you are interviewing this person about might not be through a paid position, or even related to their job).

You don't have to start asking questions right away. You can warm things up without taking too much time before delving into the material. Try to be conversational without adding your voice (avoid interruptions or inserting your opinions into the conversation unless you want this as a stylistic element. It is a conversation! BUT don't be too informal. The main point: make people feel comfortable, trust and talk to you.

Ask your questions but don't stick to them: When things are "warmed up", start off with your prepared questions, but you don't have to stick to them all the time, but keep in mind the story map and major topics. Again questions should be short, easy to understand and develop.

1. Focus. you get two goals at once, make the interviewee talk to you more and pick up new and interesting information that can pop up anytime during conversation.
2. Take notes. Write down whatever you can while keeping your recorder/camera is running. It helps you to compile all the information later to choose what you need for your story.
3. Find something NEW: keep your ears to new things, new perspectives and angles.
4. Feature a diversity of views and people: look for different opinions, perspectives, and viewpoints to reflect different sides of an issue or different thoughts on a person.
5. Show respect: respect their privacy and make them feel they can trust you. Respect differences. You might interview people from different cultures, religions which are unfamiliar to you, be respectful as you get them to explain things you might not fully understand, or find yourself making assumptions of – or, know that people (the broader public) have misconceptions of.
6. Don't be too clever: Don't try to be outsmart your interviewee, though you should always feel comfortable showing your knowledge of a subject for the sake of moving the interview along.
7. Listen actively: Be attentive to the interviewee's words, but also feelings (through their body language, language, the way they behave...) and tailor the interview accordingly. You can switch off the equipment to check in, take a minute and then continue the interview if it's appropriate.
8. Control your feelings: you will have different feelings, emotions in different situations: sadness when interviewing a homeless person, fiery when interviewing someone who has overt racist opinions, etc. Be sure to control your feelings, be soft and strong at the right times, and don't forget that you are with this person to tell a story.