

## 15 Tips on Interviewing an Expert for a Story

by Arun Sinha

A good interview with a source does wonders for your story. It puts flesh on the bones, it makes a dry subject come alive, it adds sizzle to the steak.

All interviews carry an element of uncertainty because the interviewee can always go off the script. Still, writers control much of the exchange. Those who know what to do before, during and after the interview stand a better chance of securing salutary results. Below, my distilled wisdom from years of interviewing corporate executives and subject-matter experts for copywriting projects.

1. Make an appointment. People will rarely talk on the spur of the moment. Tell the source how long you expect the interview will take. Once you settle on a schedule, be punctual. Executives want to know you value their time.
2. Outline your story as best you can before the interview. You'll have a better idea of what information you need from your source to fill out the piece.
3. Do your homework on both interviewee and subject. There is such a thing as a stupid question. If you ask one, be prepared for a short, uncomfortable interview.
4. That said, if you don't understand something, ask for an explanation. As long as you do this infrequently, the expert won't mind.
5. Write down your questions and number them in the order you want to ask them. Make sure your questions follow a logical sequence.
6. Cut down on the small talk before the interview. Both you and the interviewee know why you're there. Get on with the agenda. But if there's any controversy surrounding the subject, take time first to build rapport with the source.
7. Keep questions short. Save the multi-part questions for presidential news conferences.
8. Ask your question, then stop talking. Don't try to fill in any silences.
9. The best questions are open-ended — like those that begin with what, why and how.
10. Try not to show your erudition off. The expert always knows more than you.
11. Repeat key answers back to the interviewee to show you understood them.

12. After your questions are over, invite the source to add more information. "What else would you like to cover?"

13. Write down the interviewee's name — check the spelling and pronunciation — and job title or rank. Ask how he or she would like to be identified. "Should I write Bob or Robert?"

14. Transcribe your notes ASAP after the interview. Highlight key facts, quotes, stories. Waiting for even a few hours may cause you to forget the tone of a remark or a pause before an answer. And if you're like me, some of your scribblings may be incomprehensible.

15. If you take a photograph, or are handed one, get names and job titles of the people in it, from left to right. Note the context of the photograph, as that will help write an interesting caption.

Finally, it's worth repeating: Let the expert speak! Talk Less, Listen More.

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