This handbook will show you how to get the best out of an interview - whether you're an experienced journalist or beginner. It outlines the techniques and shows you how to go beyond the PR to get to the story.
The centre for investigative journalism (cij) came into being in 2003 to address a deepening crisis in investigative reporting.

The cij provides high-level training, resources and research to journalists, researchers, non-governmental organisations, academics, graduate students and others interested in public integrity and the defence of the public interest.

The cij is a non-profit organisation and runs international summer schools, training programmes in basic and advanced investigative techniques and organises public meetings – all designed to raise and sustain the standards of investigative reporting. Our handbooks, archive material, web and audio resources have helped bring additional investigative tools to journalists and the community unable to attend cij workshops and training programmes.

The cij offers particular assistance to those working in difficult environments where freedom of the press in under threat and where reporting can be a dangerous occupation.
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interviewing techniques

A good interview depends upon a good interviewer. If you ask rambling, incoherent questions, you should expect to get vague and meaningless replies.

Everything depends on you and your skills to get the best from the person you are interviewing. The more important the interview the more difficult it is, but good preparation can help you through.

These notes are designed to guide you. If you have no experience in conducting interviews you need to start with interviewing for beginners. If you have some experience you can skip this section and go straight to adversarial interviewing.

Whichever section you use, you need to consider the following general guidelines before the interview:

• Be prepared – research is crucial. Plan your questions in advance. Keep to the point and don’t interrupt. Unless the interview is for background information, make sure you get to the point within two or three questions.

• Recording? Agree in advance if you are on or off the record. Check your equipment in advance if you are recording the interview.

• Do you need release forms?

• Arrange a good venue – background noise is generally not a good idea.

• Confirm the time and place with your interviewee.

• Be polite, but firm, at all times.
Setting up the interview
The type of interview will determine how you go about setting it up. A victim of crime, or someone with a personal story, may not answer the door or the telephone, but you can write, advertise or use an intermediary; just stay polite and clear about what you are trying to do.

A corporate response to an accusation of company malpractice, or a response from a local government or government official, will require a formal approach, usually through a press office.

Email is unreliable as an approach – but can be useful for confirmation of arrangements. If you telephone to arrange an interview and are promised a return call, don’t wait too long for that call. Take the initiative and call back. Take your time. Be persistent, but don’t be a nuisance.

Be realistic about what you are asking for – 15 minutes will be a long time for a government minister; a crime victim might want you to stay all day. Always arrive on time, otherwise you will be wasting your agreed time apologising, and not thinking about the interview ahead.

At the interview
Remember the points made at the start of these notes – be prepared, be polite, and be comfortable. Sitting next to someone on a sofa is not a good idea – better to sit at a table face to face. Think about the seating as you walk into the room.

If the interview is informal choose your moment to get out your notebook or tape recorder. If it is formal, get going quickly.

Maintain eye contact. This is difficult if you are taking notes, but remember to look up occasionally, and always look at your interviewee when you are asking a question. If you simply read your questions your interviewee will know you are not confident.

Your questions must be easily understood, clear and to the point. Practice in advance.

The interviewee’s answers must be easily understood, clear and to the point. If they are not, rephrase the question and try again. Some interviewees need to order their thoughts and will be happy to have a second go. Listen carefully to the reply - does it really answer your question? If not, try again.

The interview is not about you. Don’t get impatient or frustrated even if the interview isn’t going as well as you hoped. In an informal interview, resist telling bits of your own story, or over sympathising with their difficulties.

Silence isn’t a bad thing. Let the interviewee finish and pause, then
ask your next question. You don’t need to fill the gaps.

Include questions to which you know the answer, it may help you cover the basics, and you may discover you don’t know the whole answer. If your interviewee is bemused by the simplicity of the question, don’t take offence. You don’t need to but you can explain – I just need this in your own words, not mine.

Look interested, be interested. Is this the answer I want? Do I understand this? How will I use this? Once the interview is over it is very difficult to go back for a second time. If you have done your research and to your surprise you are not hearing what you expected don’t panic or give up or sit back or change the subject - go with it. Don’t try and shoe horn an interview into a preconceived story. The surprise might turn into a better story in the end.
Adversarial interviewing is very different from the friendly or objective intentions of interviewing someone for their personal experience, or an expert in a particular field. An adversarial interview is intended, like a lawyer in a court room, to secure evidence of wrong-doing from the potential wrong-doer. Against a thoroughly prepared interviewer with the command of the key facts and a thorough knowledge of the subject, most interviewees will find the going tough. But don’t misunderstand the word adversarial – it does not mean aggressive.

In the interest of good journalism (fairness) the person or institution against who you are making allegations will expect to have the opportunity to refute or deny them. A good journalist will want to be seen to offer this opportunity to put the other side of the case.

On some stories this will be the first time the person or organisation will know that questions are being asked. Some will simply refuse on the advice of their PR advisors to agree to an interview. More likely they will offer a “spokesperson” or press officer rather than the person at the top, or the person you want to challenge.

Think twice before you decide to ambush an interviewee; for example, asking for an interview on one subject and then bringing in another, or door-stepping an executive. It might look good on someone else’s television programme but it might go horribly wrong for you. A skilled politician will know how to duck the unexpected question and your effort and preparation may just come to nothing.
Plan a few “soft” questions to ease the start of the interview, for yourself as much as for the interviewee. Your first question could be the correct title and name of your interviewee, the name they want to use for the interview, correctly spelt, and their job title.

or

Get to the point. Against an experienced politician or businessman, no amount of softening is likely to have an effect. They have probably done this many times before, time is precious, and if they want to avoid the question they will. In a very serious case they understand that if you, the interviewer make them look like what they in reality may be, they will lose face, position, money and sometimes everything.

If necessary rehearse the interview with a colleague. This may help order your questions, and plan a response to an evasive answer. If your colleague is also prepared he or she may be able to think up the evasive or obscuring answer for which you need to be ready.

Before the interview -

research

Everything depends on good background research and preparation; with notes carefully organised so that errors do not creep in.

… and rehearse.

Prepare a list of the key questions, and the answers you hope or expect to get. Assemble the key facts to support each and any charge or allegation you will put to the interviewee.

Be precise. A difficult interview may be totally undermined by a question that is open to misinterpretation.

Avoid questions with several parts – break them up, take each part in turn.

Avoid double negatives – they can confuse. “isn’t it true that you didn’t pay the money back ” can prompt either an answer about the money, or the truthfulness of the statement. “Is it true that you did not pay back the money” is much simpler and clearer.
To what extent should you tell your interviewee what questions you want to ask in advance?

Usually, a request for an interview will indicate the subject and the key areas to be covered. This may prompt a request to provide actual questions. Any request to vet the actual questions must be politely refused. If the only possibility of getting the interview is to supply the questions, you have to decide whether to go ahead or not. It may be better to go ahead, but make it clear that you reserve the right to ask additional, follow-up questions.

Any request for the right to see the finished article in advance of publication or to hear the broadcast in advance must be politely declined. An interview controlled by the interviewee is by definition not controlled by the journalist. Tell your editor about the demands that are being made at this stage.

If your interviewee declines the interview but provides a statement you, have to consider with your editor the appropriate way to deal with it: “we asked for an interview but no one was available, although the following statement was faxed to us [reads]”, is the standard way in which UK broadcasters deal with the situation.
This depends on the purpose of your interview.

A backgrounder can always be off the record. But ask to go on the record if you want to (always take your equipment).

If you have agreed the interview is on the record and the interviewee asks to go off the record while it is underway you must note this or make it clear on your recorded material, and respect that request. You can of course, having heard the off-the-record comment or information, then try and persuade your interviewee that all or part of this should be on the record, and ask an appropriate question. Or you can use it but as “unattributable”, so that they become an anonymous source. Off the record comments can inform your script or your write-up, but it must be clear that the information has not come from the interviewee. If it looks or sounds as thought it has, you will be in difficulty. Off the record comments can of course inform a question to someone else, but without revealing your source.
If the interviewee won’t answer the question, or answers another question but not the one you asked, you are entitled to say, “It seems you didn’t perhaps understand the question” and then repeat it. You can repeat the question as often as you think you need to, particularly if you are with a politician. But don’t get aggressive.

If the interviewee is not willing to answer at all, and says so, you should have prepared and rehearsed for this eventuality. In a sound recording for television or radio, their refusal to answer, whether directly said or indirectly implied, will be heard and can be skillfully used in your edit. On paper it may look less promising but you can write: so and so declined to answer questions about such and such. Whatever you write should not change the sense of the failure to respond – it is just a failure to answer a question, you cannot then interpret the meaning of that failure - that is for your audience to judge.

A refusal point blank to answer questions that are being legitimately put might prompt you to abandon the interview. Sometimes this can be effective.

Never let your own exasperation with the interviewee show, or get the better of you.

A refusal to answer may be better dealt with by making it clear that you are going to put all your questions regardless, so that both your interviewee and your audience know that you did at least ask the questions. If you don’t ask you are open to the challenge that the question was never put – even though you tried and feel you have right on your side it won’t look good.

Don’t exaggerate. Adopt a cool, unflustered stance taking as much time as you need, having extracted all emotive adjectives and descriptions from your questions in advance. The point about an interview is to get an answer – your questions are just a means to an end.

Get a complete answer. Words like recently, a few, many are not specific enough.

Yes or No don’t provide you with much colour, but may be the sort of skillful answer a professional PR person will use to maximum effect. Anticipate – and prepare the follow up question.

If you are told your information is incorrect, don’t assume it is. Be
prepared: if I am wrong I apologise but ... and into a follow up question.

Listen carefully to the answer rather than starting to think about your next question – a skilled interviewee may give you an answer which sounds like what you want to hear, but when you reread your notes, or listen to your tape you will see how they have ducked it with clever words. You can take your time between questions to help you.

If you don’t understand the answer say so, it’s better than pretending you do out of embarrassment. Remember to ask the questions to which you may already know the answer, to get the answer confirmed.

Don’t interrupt, unless they have gone into a long irrelevant ramble. Make a note to ask the question again and, if necessary, make it clear that you want a shorter more concise answer. You could say: I hear your explanation, but perhaps you could rephrase your response. I’m reluctant to edit all that into a short clip.

Guard against your emotions. Any emotional signal you emit – raised eyebrow, shrug, smile – will be picked up by your interviewee. You are human so this may reflect your response. But be careful. Know the boundaries.

Don’t let the interviewee schmooze you. You are there to find things out, not to soothe their egos. You must remain independent and objective. This is not a friendship. Don’t fall for flattery.
There is often a moment at the end of the interview when the interviewee’s guard goes down, and he or she will say something unexpected. Keep your tape recorder on and your brain engaged. They are still on the record. If appropriate ask if a further question can be put.

If you didn’t check titles and name spellings at the beginning do so now.

Always ask for a phone number/email in case you want to check something and leave your phone number/email or card for them.

You may need a release form to be signed for use of material on television or radio. This is particularly true with long interviews which will be cut into a documentary programme. It is isn’t necessary for a corporate or political spokesman – they agree to the interview and agree to its use by you in whatever way you decide. They have the right to complain if they don’t like the way you have used it.

The interview may be just as important but your technique will be very different.

Be rigorous. You still need to ask difficult questions. Just because someone tells you they are a victim of crime, that doesn’t necessarily mean they are. Be wary of people who exaggerate. But at the same time, it is very important to show respect – they deserve it just as any other interviewee. Don’t rush and don’t exploit. If you are asking a question you wouldn’t be happy for someone to ask you, you have gone too far.

Make it clear that you can’t advance their case if you are not sure of the truthfulness of their story.

Some people lie, or tell half truths – for all different sorts of reasons, not necessarily bad ones. Ask yourself what is the evidence for what they are telling me. Imagine retelling this story when you get home or back to the office – what will people ask you. Will they be easily persuaded of the veracity of what they hear?
Most media outlets have strict rules on covert recording.

Practice is vital – if you have a secret camera strapped to your chest, the pictures won’t be much use if you can only see the sky or the pavement. And if the sound is muffled and inaudible you have wasted your resources.

If your subject suspects you might be secretly recording and asks the question directly you are probably bound to say no to protect yourself. But that will lead to difficulties in using the material. The answer “no” is an inducement to the person to continue, believing there is no record of the conversation. British media lawyers will be reluctant to agree to the use of the material, unless there is an overriding public interest.

A good journalist will use their material honestly. You cannot alter the sense of a question or reply after the interview is over. Tell your story, and then give the response of those against whom you are making allegations. Readers and listeners are intelligent. They will know where the truth lies. You don’t need to tell them it lies with you.
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We would really value your thoughts and feedback on this handbook. Please write to us at [info@tcij.org](mailto:info@tcij.org).

If you would like to suggest a new topic for a handbook, or know journalists/authors who could help write one, drop us a line at the above address.

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