

## Chapter 5

# Interview Techniques



*Getting people to tell you what they know can be very difficult*

DETERMINING WHO HAS THE INFORMATION you need for a story is often straightforward. It may be the victim of an attack, the officer who made an arrest or the official who oversees an organisation.

But getting people actually to tell you what they know can be far more difficult.

There are many reasons for people not to share information with you:

- The victim of a disaster may be traumatised.
- A politician may be busy or simply tired of speaking to journalists.
- A local citizen may have a general distrust of the press, may have had a bad experience previously, or may find the formality of an interview off-putting.
- A potential whistle-blower may fear that talking could put him in danger or jeopardise his career.
- Many sources will be less than forthcoming because they have something to hide.

The underlying approach is to have confidence in your public role as a journalist. The issues you are working on are of public importance, and your right and responsibility to obtain information is a central component of any democratic society. You don't want to belabour the point, but you are working in the public interest, and this should give you confidence to press on.

Beyond that, every journalist adopts his or her own manner for getting people to talk. Some reporters may be abrupt, challenging a source to give a crisp and clear reply; others may be more conversational, seeking to coax information out slowly.

In general, the best method is to put people at ease, show respect and attentiveness, and be honest, serious and straightforward. No one wants to talk to someone they feel they cannot trust.

Careful preparation is essential. Avoid asking a busy source basic factual information you could obtain elsewhere. Boring or annoying a source is not a good idea. Demonstrating your understanding of a topic - not by talking endlessly yourself but through thoughtful and informed questions - will command respect in return.

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It is important to know what you want to ask, and to pose your questions in a structured way. Following the chronology of an event is the most straightforward, and often best, method. In many cases, especially for short news articles, you should know the kind of quotes or replies you are seeking to fill out your article. But if an interview shows that the story is developing differently, do not try to force it into your earlier assumption.

If you need to ask difficult questions, it is typical to begin an interview with more friendly queries, building trust and a relaxed atmosphere, before driving in on harder issues. If you are seeking to query someone about a contradiction, try to get him to express it first, and then try to explain it. If you confront him bluntly, he may just go into denial.

In all cases, your information should be well documented, especially if you are asking critical questions. “Going fishing” with a large unsubstantiated allegation is not only bad form, it loses you the opportunity to solicit valuable information or at least a usable response. Your source will be able to dismiss the charge too easily and may also bring the interview to a precipitous close.

It is essential to observe excellent habits of accuracy and transparency in dealing with people you interview. This means keeping a note of the exact time of every conversation and making a log recording all calls, messages left and faxes sent to a party (e-mails create their own records). This is especially important to be able to prove that you have made a reasonable effort to obtain a fair comment before publishing a critical article, particularly in the case of a legal dispute. If a source disputes quotations or information you have attributed to him, your editor may ask to see your notes.

Remember that many sources speak to journalists not only to impart information but also to obtain it. They are willing to tell you something, if they feel they are getting back some fresh facts in return - and perhaps an inclination of what you learned from whom. This is not necessarily a problem as long as you do not break confidence with other sources and only share information you intend to go public with anyway. But try to avoid being used by your sources.

Indeed, if you build a critical case carefully, the subject of your story will have to talk to you and will want to talk to you. If you

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gather your facts responsibly and credibly, and demonstrate trustworthiness, even a source you are going to criticise in print will want the opportunity to hear your arguments and information first, and to provide a rebuttal. But this is only as long as they have confidence that you will treat them honestly by fairly portraying their views in the story.

Even if a source is forthcoming with information, a reporter must assess its accuracy. That means listening carefully. But, of course, do not accept everything as the truth. People may want to mislead you, they may believe they know something they do not, or they may pass on hearsay and rumour as fact. Sometimes they may try to tell you what they think you want to hear.

Healthy scepticism is one of the reporter's best tools and should be second nature. But do not act accusingly. Take the role of seeking better understanding. "How do you know that?" can sound accusing. It may be better to find a more sympathetic tone that makes the person want to share his or her knowledge. Express interest in how knowledgeable your source is and how he or she could know such things. Avoid intimidating them, and they may be more likely to explain if their information comes

from their own knowledge or from another source. When you do challenge your subject, do so with facts, not opinions.

Asking a person to explain how something happened when other reports or sources show other possible causes or effects may give that person a greater sense of importance. Remember different people may have differing views of an incident, so you may need to clarify where people were standing. Someone might say the left wing of a plane hit the ground and another might say the right wing. It could depend on whether they were in front or in back of the plane.

Remember too that a truthful person may omit or forget relevant facts and seemingly minor details that would help clarify the information. This is another reason for getting clarification (as well as for multiple sourcing).

Careful listening may also help you assess if a person is fabricating events. Ask sources to start at the beginning and tell you what happened in order. Ask straightforward, factual questions and don't pre-empt their answers. Often allowing for a bit of silence compels the source to think, and answer more truthfully. If something seems unclear or incorrect, come back

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to the subject later, and ask the same simple question again.

Most of all, seeing through the fog of misinformation requires keeping an open, curious mind. Do not jump to conclusions. Life is much more complicated, and far more interesting.

### Interview Strategies

- Ask your questions and let the news source talk. When you are talking, you are not getting information.
- Your attention makes the source feel more important, even valuable - a feeling everyone likes. But be attentive to them, not showy or off-putting.
- Demonstrate empathy, without compromising yourself. Show that you understand the person's position, even if you don't agree with it.
- Some people never get to talk. They are always spurned, their presence ignored, their opinions discounted. Treat such people sensitively and they are likely to be more open with information and offers of help.
- Journalism demands accuracy. Paying strict attention to the

person interviewed will avoid making errors. Don't hesitate to check unclear notes with the source. It is better to admit that you can't read your handwriting than to garble your facts.

- Watch for inconsistencies and important facts. You might not get a second chance to spot them.

If a source refuses to speak with you, a useful strategy is to address them shortly before publication with a specific list of questions in writing, indicating the nature of your reporting. Explain clearly that you wish to hear their views, and give them a firm deadline. Often when the subject of an article sees the information you have uncovered, they will feel compelled to reply to get their side of the story across.

## EXERCISES

To recap, in this section you have learned:

- Sources are people too, and have many reasons for not talking.
- Always be sceptical, but do not sound like an accuser or a cynic.
- You learn more by listening than by talking.
- Show empathy, but do not suggest that you are taking sides.
- Start with soft questions to put people at ease before getting to tough ones.
- Listen for nuances and inconsistencies in answers, and probe them.
- Use your senses - especially your eyes and ears - in assessing the truth.
- Research and prepare your questions carefully; know your source well.
- Keep questions short and to the point but give people time to think.
- Listen to the answers, do not harass, and always keep an open mind.

Look at the following examples and discuss with your colleagues how you would react:

1. In an exercise in Chapter Four, a government official leaked part of an official report outlining safety problems at a country's nuclear reactors. As part of your investigation you managed to find the senior manager of a nuclear plant who was ready to "blow the whistle" and go into details of what he claims is an extensive cover-up programme aimed at hiding the danger from the public.

The whistle blower agrees to meet you at a hotel for an interview but sets four pre-conditions:

- a) That you come alone.
- b) That you do not tape the conversation or take notes.
- c) That you guarantee that you will never reveal his name even if the government prosecutes you.
- d) That your news organisation will compensate him financially if he loses his job as a result of the story.

He is very nervous and tells you on the phone that he is worried he is being followed and could be put in jail and tortured for revealing state secrets.

- Do you agree to his four conditions?
  - What is the balance between the risks and benefits of the potential story?
  - Who would you talk to at your news organisation before proceeding?
2. A low level official at a relief agency calls you and says he wants to tell you the “real story” of bribery in the organisation and how western aid is being siphoned off to corrupt government officials. He says the story is dynamite and you have to pay him \$10,000 for it since he was sacked from his job last week and has to feed his family. He will meet you for an interview if you agree to his demand.
- How do you proceed? Would you interview this man and would you agree to his terms?
  - What are the potential pitfalls?
  - If you think this story is worth pursuing, what other routes might you take?

### ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

*Violence – A Guide to Ethical Reporting about Victims & Trauma*, by William Cote & Roger Simpson, published by Columbia University Press.

“Getting the Most from Your Interview”, from the Project for Excellence in Journalism:

[www.journalism.org/resources/tools/reporting/interviewing/themost.asp](http://www.journalism.org/resources/tools/reporting/interviewing/themost.asp)