



THE DOCUMENTED ESSAY Using the Interview as a Source

Interviewing is an excellent way to gather information that would not otherwise be available in written form. It may be required that you conduct an interview with an expert in a particular field as the main reference for your essay or as a supplement to other books and short texts that you have gathered in your research. Interviewing is not only a resourceful way to add to your knowledge of a subject—be it grasshoppers or politics—it is also a way to learn about professions and professionalism, possible career choices, and even to make valuable contacts for your future.

An interview is a meeting between two or more people, in which a prepared interviewer asks questions and records the answers (by audio or video recording device or through notes) of a specialist. The specialist's responses can include technical information, statistical data, research, personal information, anecdotes, philosophical/political/social reflections, definitions, advice, and opinions. Keep in mind the difference between an expert's oral opinions, which are often given informally in an interview, and his/her carefully considered written opinions, which would appear in a professional journal or book.

GETTING STARTED

Like any other writing assignment, the interview is comprised of several stages:

Deciding on the Purpose of the Interview

You need a **clear idea of the purpose for your interview** before you can make a choice of whom to contact. Once you've decided on the purpose, **write it down in one or two sentences**. In addition, you should **do your background reading and literature search first**; then you'll be more likely to have specific, concise questions to ask and you'll be able to fit the questions into a coherent list.

Determining the Appropriate Person to Interview

Many times your subject or your objective in writing about the subject logically points to the proper person to interview. For example, if you are writing about Medieval manuscripts, you would most likely interview a professor or writer in that field or an authority from a museum; if your subject is the mating habits of iguanas, you may decide to go to the zoo in your area and find an authority in zoology who could help you.

Some sources available to help you determine a suitable person to interview are the directories and bibliographies in the library; professional societies; your instructor or previous instructors in related courses; local businesses involved with some aspect of your subject. As always, a Google search is just the beginning of such a choice-making process.

Requesting the Interview

After determining the name of the person you want to interview, you must request the interview. You can do this by telephone, email, or letter. (If you choose to write a letter, make sure you leave yourself enough time as correspondence by mail is slower than the other two alternatives.) Since your interviewee is doing you a favor, try to accommodate yourself to her/his schedule. A 30-60 minute time period is standard, but the decision rests with the person you are interviewing.

Learn as much as possible about the person you will be interviewing as well as the company, institution, or agency in which s/he works. When you make contact with your interviewee, explain who you are, why you are contacting her/him, including the reason you chose this person for the interview, the subject of the interview, that you would like to arrange an interview at this person's convenience, and that you will allow the person to review your draft.

Preparing for the Interview

Prepare a list of specific questions to ask your interviewee. The more specific you are, the better information you will receive. For example, in an interview with a marine biologist, such a broad, general question as "What are you doing about ocean pollution?" will not elicit specific and useful information. Such broad questions also show your interviewee that you did not do a sufficient amount of research; however, specific questions immediately verify that you have spent considerable time gathering and reviewing relevant information about the subject or the person. For example, "You wrote in an article several years ago that acid rain is destroying the algae in the ocean. Has anything been done recently to relieve this problem?"

Conducting the Interview

You should consider recording the interview, but ask permission in advance because some interviewees will not permit it. If you do record, make sure the battery of your recording device is fully charged. Regardless of whether you record, you must plan to take notes.

- Review research and questions before going to the interview.
- Arrive at your destination a few minutes early.
- Make your purpose for the interview clear at the outset.

Once you've established your purpose, begin with an appropriate question and listen carefully to the answer, writing down key words that will remind you of the points being made. Don't feel bound by the order of your questions; however, do use a list of questions to keep the interview on track. Some answers may prompt additional questions: be ready to recognize and ask them. If your interviewee strays from the subject, use a specific and direct question to guide her/him back to your overall purpose.

- Don't be afraid to admit that you don't understand something, and ask for examples and definitions of terms. Sometimes you'll find it useful to read back specific responses to confirm that you have clearly understood what was said.
- Be objective. Don't offer your opinions on the subject. You are there to get information, not to debate it. You will impress the interviewee and receive better information by the type of questions you ask and how carefully you listen and adapt to the demands of the interview.
- Try to keep up with your interviewee and don't ask her/him to slow down. Therefore, at times, you will be writing brief, memory-jogging notes that will help you recall the conversation later. If you are using a recorder, do not let it lure you into a relaxation of discipline so that you neglect to ask crucial questions.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

As soon as possible after you finish conducting the interview, use your memory-jogging notes to help you mentally review the interview and record your detailed notes. It is important to perform this step while the interview is still fresh in your memory.

If you have recorded the interview you will not, in all possibility, need to transcribe the entire recording. The recording will be most helpful as a way of filling in your notes. You will, however, have to listen to the entire recording in order to decide what information is most useful for your essay.

- When you write up the interview, **be sure that you quote accurately.**
- As a courtesy to your source, send a brief thank-you along with a copy of the document you write based on the interview.
- Keep a record of the date and place of the interview as well as the name and title of your source. Include this information in the **Bibliography** or **Works Cited** list of your report but not in the **References** section of an APA-documented paper.

CITING SOURCES

MLA Documentation Style

When you paraphrase or use a direct quotation from your interview source, you document it in your text the same way you would cite a single author of a book (surname) although you do not use page numbers. If you have included the interviewee's name in the essay to introduce the quotation or paraphrased information, you need not put the name in parentheses at the end of the passage. Instead, identify the source as follows (Personal interview) if you feel it is necessary. Also, if the entire essay is dedicated to the one interview and there are no other sources, you need not make citation throughout the essay. Simply record the interview on the **Works Cited** list as follows: list the interview alphabetically (if you have other sources) by the specialist's surname, state that it is a personal interview, and give the date of the interview.

Naylor, Gloria. Personal interview. 27 July 2014.

APA Documentation Style

Personal communications—including interviews, email, discussion groups, telephone conversations, letters, memos, etc.—are not listed in the **References** section at the end of your paper. However, in your text you should include the initial(s) and surname of your communicator, with the exact date of the interview.

C. G. Sherwood (personal communication, September 29, 1986) has specific suggestions about the market in Belgium.

or

It is important to keep in mind the cultural differences between countries, especially in this case the difference between the United States and Belgium (C. G. Sherwood, personal communication, September 29, 1986).

Chicago Documentation Style (Note and Bibliography Style)

References to personal interviews should include the name of the interviewee, the name of the interviewer, a description of the type of interview conducted (i.e., tape recording), the place and date of the interview, and, if applicable, the depository of the transcript.

Oliver, Mary. Interview by [your name]. Los Angeles, August, 21, 2014.

or

Walker, Kara. Interview by [your name]. Tape recording. Chicago, September 5, 2014.

