Chapter 11

Interviews

Objectives
After completing this chapter, you will be able to:

- Explain the purpose of gathering background before an interview.
- Create interview questions and topics based on background research.
- Identify the differences between shooting an interview that is aired live and shooting an interview that will be edited into a package story.
- Explain the function of B-roll.
- Recognize effective techniques for conducting an interview.

Professional Terms
background
B-roll
lead

Introduction
The interview is the most common element of television news. Nearly every story involves either an on-camera or off-camera interview with someone involved in the story (a major participant or person affected by events). Light-hearted interviews may be simple and require little preparation, such as man-on-the-street interviews asking people what they bought for Valentine’s Day. Interviews with reputable individuals that address serious topics require considerable preparation and should provide viewers with in-depth information. Reporters who competently conduct substantial interviews lend their credibility with peers and viewers increases with each successful interview.

This chapter addresses how a reporter should prepare for and conduct a successful interview, the journalistic skills involved in a productive on-camera conversation, and technical aspects of recording an interview.
Preparing for an Interview

Once the assignment editor or news director assigns an interview to a reporter, the reporter must become acquainted with the topic and the interviewee. A topic that is relatively unknown to the public is probably also unfamiliar to the reporter. Properly preparing for an interview involves thorough research and development of informed and well-crafted questions.

Research

As with a regular news story, research is the first step in preparing for an interview. All the information gathered through research prior to conducting an interview is called background. Thorough research demonstrates to the interviewee that the reporter put forth effort to obtain knowledge about the topic. Sufficient background allows the reporter to hold up his end of the conversation with an interviewee, rather than absentmindedly asking questions without interest in the answers.

The sources available for research depend on how well-known the interviewee is. While much of the research for some interviews may be accomplished by talking to a few people (Figure 11-1), other sources for background research may include residential, business, and government agency listings in the telephone directory, the library, the Internet, newspapers, and magazines. Additionally, the reporter should always research what has already been reported by other media outlets.

Research for a story about a successful gymnast named Michael Christopher, for example, who sustained a serious injury at the last gymnastics meet may involve finding the answers to the following questions:

- What is Michael’s past gymnastics record?
- Which event Michael was participating in when the injury occurred?
- How common is this injury?
- How did Michael’s injury occur?
- What is Michael’s prognosis?

Figure 11-1. Speaking directly with people who are knowledgeable or involved in a topic is a common research resource for interviews.
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This information could be gathered during the interview with Michael, but having thorough background information allows the reporter to better formulate the interview questions. The reporter may find this information in previous media reports, on Web sites, earlier newscasts, or in sports stories of newspapers. Michael’s family or coach may also be helpful sources while researching this story. In this example, the reporter should also get information on the type of injury Michael sustained and the coach’s opinion of how Michael’s gymnastics future may be affected by the injury. If information about Michael’s injury is available to the reporter, talking to a sports medicine professional may provide details about the nature of the injury and the approach doctors typically take for treatment. However, the reporter is unlikely to get information from Michael’s personal doctors due to privacy issues.

While researching a person or topic, a reporter may encounter technical or topic-specific jargon. When speaking to the gymnastics coach, for example, words or phrases specific to the sport of gymnastics may be used. The general public is probably not familiar with these phrases. The reporter must become acquainted with this jargon in order to research and conduct an effective interview. In researching the gymnast story, the reporter might visit a gymnastics practice to observe the particular gymnastic event and the environment in general.

Taking the time to gather appropriate background for a story prevents insulting the interviewee and sends the message that the interview is important. By properly researching the topic or person, the reporter can avoid asking questions the interviewee may interpret as uninformative or offensive. For example, asking Michael, the gymnast, about executing backward flips on the balance beam is not appropriate because men do not perform on the balance beam—it is a women’s event. Intelligent questions will flatter the interviewee and contribute to building rapport, which helps the person want to carry on the conversation. If the reporter has not properly prepared for the interview, the interviewee will sense the reporter’s lack of interest and knowledge; the reporter will find it very difficult to get candid, in-depth answers.

Preparing Interview Questions

A good reporter does not let an interviewee control the direction of the interview. Developing a list of interview questions based on the background obtained helps the reporter remain in control during the interview. Given the background research, the reporter should also be able to anticipate some of the interviewee’s answers to the questions listed. This allows follow-up questions to be developed before conducting the interview. Questions that can be answered in just a few words should be avoided. With proper preparation, a reporter can formulate questions that are more likely to provide good material for sound bites, such as

- “What will probably be the next step?” (prediction question)
- “How do you feel about . . .?” (opinion question)
- “Tell me just how this happened.” (narration question)

Some of the planned questions may not be asked as written or may not be asked at all during the interview. However, having a list of interview questions can certainly save a stalled interview. Figure 11-2.

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say that a reporter should never go into an interview with a list of questions, but even Barbara Walters has a few index cards visible in many of her interviews. An interview may go in unexpected directions that can be more interesting than the direction originally planned. Reporters are free to follow the unplanned direction with questions. During Presidential press conferences, White House press corps reporters can be seen actually reading their questions to the President off of cards. These questions are carefully prepared and worded to get the most information possible from the President’s answer. For student journalists, writing the questions before an interview helps to mentally prepare the student interviewer.

After questions are written and thoroughly reviewed by the reporter, the questions can be shortened to just a few words that represent specific topics or categories the reporter can explore with questions. For example, a reporter is preparing for an interview with a broadcast attorney about issues related to music copyright releases for television. One of the items on the list of interview questions is, “If I produce a video yearbook, is it legal to include popular music in the audio track?” The abbreviated topic for this question may simply be “video yearbook.” Since the entire interview is about music releases, the two-word topic is enough to remind the reporter to ask the question during the interview. The reporter can formulate questions on the spot, rather than appearing to read questions off of a page. Reading questions word-for-word from a list is uninteresting and does not engage the interviewee or the viewers—the interview will quickly fall flat.

**Scheduling an Interview**

Once background work is complete and the interview questions are formulated, the reporter must contact the interviewee and schedule the interview.
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Professional phone etiquette should always be observed. During the phone conversation, the reporter should speak confidently about the interview topic, having the knowledge gained through background research. How to approach an interviewee varies from topic to topic, person to person, and reporter to reporter. Experience is the best teacher in this area. The following are some possible approaches for capturing an interviewee’s interest and cooperation.

- “I am doing a story on <the subject> and have information about <be specific>. I’d like to hear your side of the story.”

- “A friend told me that you have a technique for saving all the small slivers of soap that remain when a bar of soap is almost used up. As a consumer reporter, I’d like to let the public know…”

- “I’d like to do a human interest story that focuses on your gymnastics career and recovery from your injury.”

- “I just saw a story in the local paper about the art award you won. I’d like to do a feature about you and show how you create your stained glass pieces. I’m sure our viewers have no idea exactly how these works of art are made.”

- “I was looking through our old yearbooks for a possible story about how sports have changed, and I noticed that your father was on the state championship football team in 1985. Now, you’re our quarterback! Can I do an interview with both of you about playing football at this school?”

- “We all know you as one of our math teachers, but I heard you were on the winning paintball team last weekend! Most of the students here would be surprised to find out that you play paintball, and play it quite well. I’d like to do a story about you. Could we set up an interview and maybe go out to the paintball field to talk about your strategies?”

Not all interviews are completely pre-planned. For example, a reporter might do a story on a local band playing a popular venue. After the reporter completes the stand-up, he may decide to approach a few patrons to ask their opinions on the band or the performance. The reporter creates questions on the spot for these interviews.

Shooting an Interview

Sometimes, an interview happens on location with little preparation time. Even on short notice, the goal remains to provide quality video and audio signals. The reporter and camera operator should arrive at the location prior to the scheduled interview time to allow for proper setup, Figure 11-3. For example, lighting instruments must be in place and turned on, and the camera operator must have the camera set up and white-balanced before the interview begins.

In general, journalists conduct two types of interviews for broadcast:

- An interview that is either aired live or recorded to be shown in its entirety, without editing.
- An interview that is designed to be edited into a package story. An interview that is either aired live or recorded to be shown in its entirety may be very formal and lengthy. This type of interview takes place
Figure 11-3. Proper setup is necessary for every shoot to capture quality video and audio.

on a set in a television studio or at a location related to the topic of the interview. To shoot an interview on location, the crew arrives in advance and arranges portable lighting instruments to ensure the lighting is even in the interview area. Each person involved in the interview, including the reporter, is outfitted with a microphone (probably a wireless lapel mic) that likely goes into an audio mixer. In some cases, more than one microphone can be fed into a camera to provide even audio. More than one camera may be used for this type of interview, and the shots switch between cameras in the final, broadcast interview. The reporter is treated as on-camera talent during the interview, and must look and act accordingly. This type of interview may also be conducted as a shorter, live-feed interview from a remote location that is broadcast during a newscast. In this situation, the reporter and interviewee stand together in front of one camera, with the reporter’s handheld microphone shared with the interviewee—the reporter alternately points the mic at himself and the interviewee.

In an interview designed to be edited into a package story, the reporter is not usually seen asking questions. Instead, the interviewee’s answers are recorded so the responses can be used as sound bites in the package. This type of interview is short in length and is shot with one camera. The interviewee is the only person wearing a lapel microphone. If the reporter uses a
handheld microphone, the shot should be framed to show very little, if any, of the microphone. Raw footage of the interview includes the reporter’s voice asking questions, as picked up by the interviewee’s mic. However, the reporter’s voice will be edited out, so sound quality of the reporter’s question is not important. These interviews are usually shot using only natural lighting. However, a reflector or on-camera light may be used to fill shadows on the interviewee’s face.

Reporters and photographers position themselves differently when interviewing one person to obtain sound bites for a package. The reporter faces the interviewee with his back to the camera, so that the reporter and interviewee can make eye contact, Figure 11-4. The photographer stands behind and slightly to the side of the reporter, and shoots the entire interview as an over-the-shoulder shot. The photographer can zoom in slightly to frame the interviewee’s face so it fills most of the frame, while leaving enough room below the interviewee’s chin to add a lower third graphic. The shot should leave only a little head room and some nose room on the side of the screen that the interviewee is facing. Remember: the interviewee should be making eye contact with the reporter, not the camera. The resulting visual effect is that the viewer is a spectator to the conversation between the reporter and the interviewee—the viewer is not addressed directly. Photographers may get creative with the shots for this type of interview, such as including related items in the foreground or background of a shot for impact or clarification. However, what the interviewee says is the most important part of the shot for a sound bite. If the camerawork is too creative, the visual image will override the verbal message.

**Interview Audio**

Depending on the type of interview conducted, one or two lapel mics or only one hand-held mic may be used. Regardless of the interview type,
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Figure 11-5. Representational video of school busses in front of a school provides a visual that is related to the school funding news story.

In the editing room, the interview is cut into pieces of the most relevant information that will fit into the allotted time, and shots of the interviewee speaking will be full of jump cuts. These jump cuts can be removed and covered with B-roll, only if there are appropriate B-roll shots available. Using the same piece of video twice or more in a story because inadequate video was recorded while on location is considered highly unprofessional. There is usually no time to revisit the location and shoot more B-roll, so the final product will suffer without sufficient footage.

Conducting an Interview

Reporters have many options for conducting the interview itself. Each interview requires different methods depending on the reporter’s relationship with the interviewee, the topic, and the personalities of the reporter and the interviewee. The following are some suggestions for conducting a successful interview. As reporters gain experience, they also develop their own collection of effective interview techniques.

Putting Interviewees at Ease

If an interviewee is nervous, make small talk while the camera operator is setting up the equipment. This allows the interviewee to see the reporter as a person instead of a threat, and keeps the interviewee’s attention off of the camera. A good reporter can perceptively choose small talk topics—the interviewee’s car or job, an unrelated news item of interest, or things the reporter and interviewee have in common.
Begin the interview with “easy” factual questions that confirm the background research. The reporter should not put the interviewee on-the-spot at the beginning of the interview. If the interviewee feels that he is being attacked, he may end the interview abruptly or become very guarded and defensive. Tips for combating talent nervousness are further addressed in Chapter 19, Production Staging and Interacting with Talent.

**Asking and Listening**

Reporters should word all questions neutrally and state all questions in an even, objective tone of voice. Neither the interviewee nor viewers should be able to detect a reporter’s personal feelings about the topic of discussion. Questions such as “You didn’t really do that did you?,” “How could you act so irresponsibly?,” or “How could the Republicans ever vote against such a wonderful Democratic piece of legislation?,” reveal the reporter’s personal opinions and feelings. Also, interview questions should not contain words or phrases that imply a value judgment (“irresponsibly” and “wonderful”). A reporter should report, not judge.

The reporter should be engaged in conversation at all times with the interviewee. Under no circumstances should the reporter look at the index card of abbreviated question topics while the interviewee is answering a question. If the reporter looks at the cards while the interviewee is speaking, both the interviewee and the viewers are made aware that the reporter is not listening and is being rude.

**PRODUCTION NOTE**

Some beginning reporters rely too heavily on their notes and are so concerned with asking the next question on their list that they don’t listen to the answer being given. Looking at your notes while the interviewee is giving an answer sends the message: “I’m not listening to you because I’m thinking about something else.” The lack of eye contact immediately dampens the interviewee’s enthusiasm and he will probably cut his answer short. Relying too heavily on notes may also cause you to miss information in an answer. Perhaps the interviewee is giving information now that you planned to ask in another question later. Because you are looking at your notes, you aren’t listening. When you later ask the planned question that has already been answered, your credibility as an interviewer is ruined.

The interview should “feel” like a natural conversation that viewers are allowed to listen to. The reporter should listen carefully to the interviewee in order to take advantage of opportunities for pertinent follow-up questions. An interview that is purely question and answer is often deadly boring and, in some cases, can feel like an interrogation to both the interviewee and the viewers. Never interrupt an interviewee’s answer. For interviews that will go through post-production, the editing process can interrupt the interviewee, if necessary. If conducting an interview live, the reporter must exert more control to keep the interview within the allotted time.
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Allow a short pause between the end of the interviewee’s answer and the beginning of the reporter’s next question or comment. In doing this, the reporter does not “step on” the words of the interviewee and avoids ruining the recorded answer—making editing much easier. Every noise the reporter makes while the interviewee is speaking will be heard during a live interview or will create a headache while editing the piece. Any sounds made by the reporter may cause the entire SOT to be unusable in the package.

An interviewee may say something that is not very clear during an interview, and asking him to say it again often results in the exact same, unclear words being repeated. Instead of repeating the question or asking another question, the reporter may try to remain silent and seem puzzled by what the interviewee just said. When interviewees “feel” silence, they typically react by talking more, which may serve to explain their point more clearly. The expanded explanation may provide a much better sound bite than the interviewee’s original response.

Interviewees may try to deflect questions they do not want to answer by talking around the answer and trying to lead the interview in another direction. By simply repeating the question, the reporter can remain in control of the interview and note that the interviewee did not answer the question. If the question is avoided a second time, the viewers will realize the interviewee is dodging the question. To avoid this, the interviewee will likely answer the question when repeated. This technique is particularly effective when interviewing politicians.

Near the end of an interview, the reporter should confirm any questionable impressions picked up during the interview and ask for clarification on points, as necessary. When the interview concludes, the reporter should ask the interviewee if there is anything he would like to add. The reporter might say, “What is the most important point you’d like to make for our audience?” Quite often, the interviewee will concisely sum up the main point of the interview, which may provide the reporter with the best sound bite of the day. If the interview has been cordial and polite, this may give the interviewee a chance to address something the reporter had not thought to ask about. If the interviewee’s response is valuable, it can be used. If the response is not valuable, it can be removed during the editing phase of production and it cost the reporter only a few minutes of time.

Body Language  

The reporter’s body language must communicate interest in the interviewee’s answers, Figure 11-6. Eye contact is one of the most important ways to convey interest. The reporter should maintain eye contact with the interviewee as much as possible. The reporter can keep eye contact with the interviewee while he’s talking, react to what the interviewee has just said with a follow-up question or comment (if appropriate), and thoughtfully glance down at a notes page for a prompt to the next question, if necessary. A glance down at the notes page is a logical pause that indicates a shift in the train of thought and does not unduly slow the pace of the interview. If the reporter must look away, the only direction to look is toward the page or index card of questions. If the reporter looks in any other direction, the interviewee will want to see what the reporter is looking at and turn his head in that direction, as well.
With experience, a reporter may be able to look directly at the camera (and viewers) during an interview. However, it is tricky to do this without seeming awkward. Also, looking at the camera is not appropriate for all types of interviews. Looking at the audience implies to the interviewee and the viewer that everyone should be in on this conversation, like family. Some interview topics do not lend themselves to this type of informality and may seem inappropriate or even offensive.

The reporter should give positive nonverbal feedback, such as nodding, smiling, and maintaining eye contact, while the interviewee is speaking. This feedback often fuels the conversation and keeps the interviewee talking.
Wrapping Up

The interview is a primary element of many news stories. Before an interview takes place, the reporter needs to know enough about the interview topic to hold up his end of the conversation/interview. The quality of answers given in an interview is directly related to the reporter's ability to prepare, establish rapport, and ask the right questions. It is incredibly important that a viewer watching an interview feels that the interviewee is treated professionally, fairly, and politely. Reporters should always try to maintain a good relationship with their interviewees, as they may need to contact the interviewee for follow-up or another interview.

Review Questions

1. What is the purpose of gathering background for an interview?
2. List some examples of technical or topic-specific jargon that a reporter may encounter when researching for an interview.
3. Identify the benefits of preparing a list of questions in preparation for an interview.
4. What are the two types of interviews that journalists conduct for broadcast?
5. What is included in the lead information recorded at the beginning of an interview?
6. How is B-roll footage used in a news story?
7. Explain how a reporter should phrase interview questions.
8. What is an effective method in getting interviewees to clarify a response without repeating themselves?
9. What is one of the most important ways a reporter can communicate interest in an interviewee's answers?

Activities

1. Watch a local newscast and make note of each interview included in the news program. For each interview noted, indicate whether the interview was aired live or edited into a package. Was there a sound bite from the interview used in the newscast or in teasers for the newscast? Be prepared to share your findings with the class.

STEM and Academic Activities

Technology

1. Identify several forms of technology that can be used when researching for an interview. Explain how technological advancements have changed how research is performed.

Mathematics

2. Keep a log of newsworthy and interesting information you hear of or read about over the course of three days. Determine what percentage of news and other information you receive comes from television, from print media, and from the Internet.
3. Create a list of interview questions for an on-the-street (or in-the-hallway) interview with another student about an upcoming event at your school. Phrase your questions so that the interviewee responds with more than just a few words.

4. View a recorded two-person, student interview. Did the interview feel like a natural conversation? How often did the interviewer look at notes? Did the interviewer remain objective throughout the interview? Did the interviewee appear to be at ease? Were there any moments when the body language of the interviewer or interviewee communicated more than their words?