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## The Basics of Conducting Interviews for News Stories

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### The Basics of Conducting Interviews for News Stories

Conducting interviews for news stories is an important skill for any journalist. A "source" – anyone a journalist interviews – can provide the following elements that are vital to any news story:

- basic factual information
- perspective and context on the topic being discussed
- direct quotes
- ideas on how to approach the story
- names and contact information of other people to interview

### Things You'll Need

- a thin reporter's spiral notebook (can be purchased at most office supply stores)
- several pens and a pencil if it's winter (pens freeze in cold weather)
- a tape recorder or digital voice recorder (optional)
- a video camera for interviews you plan to webcast



Hillary Clinton is interviewed by reporters

*Department of Defense public domain photo*

### Preparing for the Interview:

**Research** – Do as much research as you can. If you're going to interview, say, a cardiologist about heart attacks, read up on the subject and make sure you understand basic terms such as "cardiac arrest." A well-prepared reporter inspires confidence in the person being interviewed.

**Developing Questions** – Once you've thoroughly researched your topic, prepare a list of questions to ask. That will help you remember all the points you want to cover once the interview is underway.

### Keys to a Successful Interview

**Establish a Rapport** – When starting out, don't abruptly launch into your questions. Chitchat a little with your source. Compliment them on their office, or comment on the weather. This puts your source at ease.

**Keep it Natural** – An interview can be an uncomfortable experience, so keep things natural and conversational. Instead of mechanically reading out your list of questions, weave your queries naturally into the flow of the conversation.

Also, maintain eye contact as much as possible. Nothing is more unnerving to a source than a reporter who never looks up from their notebook.

**Be Open** – Don't be so focused on getting through your list of questions that you miss something interesting.

For instance, if you're interviewing the cardiologist and she mentions a new heart-health study that's coming out, ask her about it. This may take your interview in an unexpected direction – but if it leads to something interesting, so what?

**Maintain Control** – Be open, yes, but don't waste your time. If your source starts to ramble on about things that are clearly of no use to you, don't be afraid to gently – but firmly – steer the conversation back to the topic at hand.

**Wrapping Up** – At the end of the interview, ask your source if there's anything they want to discuss that you hadn't asked about. Double-check the meanings of any terms or words they used that you're unsure about. And always ask if there are other people they recommend that you speak with.

**A Note About Note-taking** – Beginning reporters often freak out when they realize they can't possibly write down everything the source is saying, word-for-word. Don't sweat it. Experienced reporters learn to take down just the interesting stuff they know they'll use, and ignore the stuff they won't. This takes some practice, but the more interviews you do, the easier it gets.

**Taping** – Recording an interview is fine, and generally it's best to get the permission of the person you're recording. Taping can be helpful if you're doing a long interview that you'll have time to listen to and type out later.

But the rules regarding taping a source can be tricky. According to Poynter.org, recording phone conversations is legal in all 50 states. And federal law allows you to record a phone conversation with the consent of only one person involved in the conversation - meaning that only the reporter is required to know that the conversation is being taped.

But 12 states require varying degrees of consent from those being recorded in phone interviews, so it's best to [check the laws in your own state](#). Also, your newspaper or website may have its own rules about taping. Again, best to check. And when in doubt, ask permission to tape.

But if you're doing a story that has to be written on a tight deadline, you likely won't have to transcribe a recorded interview. Stick to note-taking for deadline stories.

Finally, ALWAYS take notes, even if you're using a recorder. Every reporter who ever worked has a story about the time they thought they were recording an interview, only to get back to the newsroom to discover that the machine's batteries were dead.

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