

# Interviewing and note-taking

*Courtesy of the ASNE High School Journalism Institute*

Interviewing and note-taking are important skills for a journalist. A reporter who takes good notes and asks relevant questions often writes good stories. Remember, people want to read about people. Keep your subject uppermost in your mind.

## Preparing for the interview

- ✓ Make an appointment. Tell your subject the purpose of your interview. Ask when would be a good time for an interview. Interruptions make for a poor interview.
- ✓ Dress appropriately. When you're interviewing the superintendent, dress as a businessperson. When you're interviewing the coach, casual clothes will work.
- ✓ Do research before the interview. Plan questions to ask but do not limit yourself to those questions. Listen to answers; they may provide information for follow-up questions.
- ✓ Ask the subject if you can use a tape recorder. Do not rely on tape records because they are not as reliable as your notes. If you plan to use a recorder, check batteries and tape before the interview.

## Conducting the interview

- ✓ Be polite and on time.
- ✓ Thank the subject for his or her time. Smile and shake hands. Introduce yourself again, and remind the person of the purpose of your interview.
- ✓ Allow the subject to stray from the topic. You may get another – or better – story that way. However, remain in control of the interview.
- ✓ Make eye contact. Nod, smile and look interested. Now is not the time to zone out.
- ✓ Observe the surroundings. Look for details that set a mood, reveal personality.
- ✓ Give the subject time to answer questions completely. Ask for clarification if you do not understand something. You may also ask the subject to repeat an answer. Ask for details.
- ✓ Get all your information the first time, if you can. Ask if you can call the subject again.
- ✓ Ask, "Who else would be good to talk with?"
- ✓ Double check spelling of all names and proper nouns, titles, addresses, and more.
- ✓ Save controversial questions for near the end, but don't skip them.
- ✓ Ask: "Is there anything else I should ask?"
- ✓ Thank the interviewee.
- ✓ If the interviewee asks if he or she can see the article before it is printed, say that you will check with your adviser.

## Taking notes

- ✓ Develop your own note-taking system. Use abbreviations. Make them up.
- ✓ Jot a question mark in the margin if you need to clarify a point before the interview ends.
- ✓ Always put quotation marks around direct quotes. Don't fixate on quotes.
- ✓ If the subject is saying something you won't use or aren't interested in, don't write it down.
- ✓ Re-read your notes immediately after the interview.
- ✓ Write a three- to five-sentence summary in your notebook at the end of each interview.

## Organizing a story

Now that you've done all the research and reporting, it's time to put the story together. Here are a few steps that will help you organize your story.

- ✓ Look over your notes. What information is important? Who are your most important sources?
- ✓ Determine the focal point of your story. Ideally, you should be able to do this in one word.
- ✓ Once you have determined the point, think about how your story might end.
- ✓ Next, determine how you will reach the end of your story. What information will you begin with? What will come next so that the story is easy for the reader to follow? Make an outline and map out this information for yourself.

- ✓ Be careful not to put all the best information in the beginning of the story. If possible, create a sense of mystery so your reader is given small pieces of the best information along the way.
- ✓ Think about your most important sources. Make sure you mention them early in the story.
- ✓ Keep one idea to a paragraph. Long paragraphs bore readers.
- ✓ Keep related information together. If you don't your story will have no sense of cohesion.