

Module 3:

The art of the interview

At the end of this module you will understand:

- How to identify sources
- How to prepare for an interview
- How to conduct an interview
- How to close an interview



Zahari receives clean needles from an exchange programme in Terengganu, Malaysia

Interview sources

Interviews are at the heart of good reporting, and their importance cannot be overestimated. Whether interviewing face-to-face, over the phone, or via email this chapter will help you get the information you need from your interviewee.

Interviews allow journalists to gain access to unique information that has not been published, and it is certainly not enough to rely on reports, press releases and other published documents for research. Your approach is likely to vary for different types of subjects or sources. Often people who don't usually have an opportunity to publicly voice their opinions are more interesting subjects for interviews. However, don't stick to one source. The more sources you speak to, the better your piece will be. Remember, you don't have to quote everyone you interview and sometimes interviews are useful for your general knowledge and research.

Sources can broadly be divided into four categories:

- Well-known personalities
- Citizens not usually in the news
- Experts or people with strong experience in a particular field
- People speaking on behalf of an organisation or firm

Who to interview

Consider approaching people such as:

- health or development workers with practical experience
- regular citizens who readers can relate to and who often offer a unique angle to your story
- model citizens and leaders, such as popular sports figures, other celebrities and successful professionals, respected political leaders, and influential members of the community
- individuals from population groups rarely covered by the media, but whose special circumstances may make them interesting, such as adolescents, migrant workers or female refugees.

Journalists should be wary of perpetuating stereotypes in news stories, and try to break out of the *usual suspects* trap when searching for people who can provide the human interest angle of a story.

Interview preparation

Making Contact

Approaching a potential interview subject isn't tricky, you just need to be prepared to explain the piece you are writing and where the article will appear, then ask if they would be willing to be interviewed. You may do this over the phone or via email. Or you might be at an event or a conference and be able to just seize the moment. Always treat your potential interview subject with utmost respect – you may need to interview them again in the future. Arrange to meet at a time and venue convenient for both of you. Try to choose somewhere that is quiet and comfortable and provides some privacy if talking about a personal and sensitive subject.

Research

It's always a good idea to do some background research on your source, and have a foundation to build from. Preparing a list of questions that you want to make sure you have answered by the end of the interview is invaluable. However, use the list as a guide for a conversation, rather than a questionnaire.

Journalists almost never give their list of questions to the source before the interview, but use your discretion – if you want the source for your story badly enough, you may provide your source the questions before hand. In that case, be prepared for the source to dictate what you can and can't ask before you even begin. You never know if they'll answer the question if you don't ask it!

Materials

It will be helpful to have on hand:

- Notebook
- Pens that work (include a spare or two)
- Your Key Correspondents ID card
- An audio recorder (you must ask the interviewee before using any recording device)
- Camera and consent form (in case the source agrees to a photograph)
- Extra batteries for the camera and recorder
- Any necessary relevant documentation, such as a map to discuss locations or a recent organisation report



A member of the Ray Drop In Centre Post-Test Club in Rongai, Kenya

Conducting the Interview

Interviews can be daunting, especially if you are not familiar with your subject. Be calm. Remember you are only talking to another human being and that may take some of your anxiety away. Be tactful and polite. Make sure that you know a little bit about the issue before you walk into the interview and be sure to remember a copy of your prepared questions.

Introduction

- Let your source know who you are and whom you represent. Quickly summarise the subjects you wish to discuss.
- Ask for your source's name and check the spelling. Also get details such as family situation, job title and organisation. It's easiest to ask for a business card.
- If you want to use an audio recorder, ask first. Set your recorder as close to the subject as possible after the interviewee has given his or her permission, but draw as little attention as possible to it so that the interviewee is not intimidated by the fact that he or she is being recorded.
- During the interview, write down powerful quotes and information. Sometimes the recording fails so don't entirely rely on technology. Get the quote down by hand. If you are recording the interview, also record the time of the good quote so it is easy to find later and to cross check for accuracy.

Manners

- Be pleasant and polite: follow the usual conventions. If you are not sure what the conventions are for the nationality or ethnicity of your source, find out before the interview.
- Don't be overly familiar: it is usually better to be more, rather than less, formal. Take your cues from your source.

Establishing rapport

- Put your subject at ease: be confident and don't rush to your main point.
- Show interest: listen to the answers and respond accordingly. If you're paying attention, then the interview will be more like a conversation.
- Respond to the interviewee's mood: smile at jokes and be sympathetic to upsetting information.
- Maintain eye contact: take brief notes, even when using a recorder, but make sure the interviewee can see your face rather than the top of your head. Eye contact builds trust.
- If interviewing across a desk, try to keep your notepad below desk level, but let your source know that you have to take notes.



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Two beneficiaries of the Oasis' antiretroviral treatment programme, who were married the day after this photo was taken, Burkina Faso



Outreach on HIV prevention in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Establish the facts

- Be prepared to ask lots of questions: if you don't know something, pursue it. No question is dumb.
- Ask open questions: try to avoid questions where the source can answer yes or no. If you have to ask a yes or no question, follow it up with "why" or something that can go further into the answer.
- Keep your questions brief: generally, short questions starting with who, what, why, when, where and how are best.
- Learn to listen: don't interrupt with further questions until the person has finished speaking. Also, sometimes leaving silent space at the end of an answer yields more interesting information.
- What does the reader want to know? Keep your audience in mind when interviewing.
- You can challenge your source if you don't agree, but do it in a way that is respectful and forces your source to defend his or her position. You could get a surprising answer.
- Leave difficult or contentious questions to the end: begin slowly to build trust.
- Ask for sources of facts and figures: your source may have access to facts and figures that you don't have. Don't be afraid to ask where the facts and figures come from, particularly if you want to cite them in your article. Ultimately you will be responsible for their integrity.
- Ask only one or two questions at a time.
- Consider whether photographs would be appropriate: if so, ask your source for a photograph and get them to sign a model release form.
- Once the source has answered your questions, finish by asking if he or she would like to add something.
- At the end double check spellings and names.

On and off the record

There are a few basic rules about using information provided by a source. Set these out at the beginning of an interview if the material is sensitive.

- ‘On the record’ means that the source’s name can be used, and that the information can be quoted. Ideally, everything remains on the record.
- ‘On background’ or ‘for background’ means that the source of the information remains anonymous. It may be possible to give a vague description of the source (such as “a community outreach worker”), but this is not license to hint at the identity of the source.
- ‘Deep background’ means that the journalist can use the information, but only without any reference to the source. Without being able to attribute the information, you must be very careful about how it is used.
- ‘Off the record’ means that no information from the interview can be reported. However, you may be able to find the same information elsewhere, and you may be able to find someone who will speak on the record.

Difficult situations

Some people may insist that everything they say must be off the record, therefore, you cannot use any information; not even as background.

This rarely happens outside of investigative reporting. However, if you encounter a source who wants to speak off the record, treat that with respect. Push as far as you see fit, but respect your source. Ask your source if they can direct you to another source who will speak on the record.

As a last resort, ask if the information may be used without attributing it to that particular source. But be careful about promising to keep any information secret. If you hear the same thing from somebody willing to go on the record, then you may publish it.

Honour your source’s wishes. If somebody does not want to be named, then you are legally required not to name him or her. This is a particularly important issue when dealing with people with HIV, who may suffer serious consequences from having their status made public.

For the purposes of safeguarding somebody’s anonymity, you may invent a fictitious name and quote directly from an interview provided the person’s identity is not implied. This should be agreed in advance, and the use of a fictitious name made clear to the readers (since you may have inadvertently chosen a name belonging to somebody else).



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Closing the interview

- Double check that you have their contact details: you may need to check something when writing the story.
- Tell them what will happen next: mention when and where you think the story will be published.
- Thank the source for his or her time: this is common courtesy and you may wish to interview them again.
- Provide your contact details: the source may wish to contact you to add something or check on the article.

Lipi, 19, is a DJ with Radio Bikrampur in Munshiganj, Bangladesh, and hosts a weekly radio show focusing on sexual and reproductive health issues

Independence

As with most press agencies, the Key Correspondents network is independent. This means that you can print your articles within the boundaries of ethical and legal reporting.

Although highly unlikely, if a source asks to see your story before you publish it, then politely but firmly resist. Say this is not usual practice, and the deadline does not allow time. You may also explain that your main responsibility is to your audience, and you cannot be a spokesperson for the source. However, you will strive to be fair and honest. Never agree to hand over a hard copy before publication. This is usually seen as an offer to change it, which you may then feel obliged to do.



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Ethics of Interviewing

For some articles, you may need to interview a person living with HIV. Although the details will depend on the person involved, there is often a need to be particularly sensitive to his or her needs and perspectives.

If you are unsure about interviewing people with HIV, you can prepare questions in advance and ask someone with more experience for advice.

The identity of the person being interviewed may well be irrelevant to the story, in which case you can inform the person of this at the outset.

If the person clearly states that you can use his or her name, then there is no need to hide their identity. Always make interviewees aware of the possible consequences of revealing their identities. People with HIV commonly face stigma and discrimination after revealing their status.

An HIV service organisation may act as a safe intermediary for potential interviewees who are afraid of speaking with journalists. The intermediary's role is to ensure that the interviewee is treated sensitively and can shield the interviewee from unfair questioning.

Interviewing Children

Children and adolescents are a commonly untapped source for information and perspectives. Here are a few tips for when your sources are children and adolescents:

- Get permission from the parent or guardian before approaching a child or adolescent.
- Always interview a minor in the presence of a parent, guardian or responsible adult.
- If taking a photo, thoroughly explain first how it will be used and if they consent ask them to sign a model release form.
- Take time – children and adolescents may take time to warm up to you. Be gentle.
- Keep the child's best interest in mind. Children's voices are a valuable contribution to the discourse; however, they are often the most vulnerable group.

Above left: Anu (centre), a transwoman worker for the Malaysian AIDS Council, talks to transfemale sex workers

Above: Sopheak and Sokhom have faced stigma for being in a same sex relationship, Cambodia



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Interviewing young children requires great sensitivity and should be carried out in the presence of an informed adult

Exercise

Conduct a mock interview:

1. Get a colleague or a friend to agree to be interviewed.
2. Do some research on a topic that they know something about and create a list of questions.
3. Using the guidelines in this chapter, conduct an interview.
4. After the interview get your interviewee to provide you with feedback using the following checklist.

Interview checklist:

Did the interviewer do the following?

- Clearly identified self and publication/organisation
- Asked permission to record
- Spoke politely and built a good rapport with the source
- Kept the questions brief
- Maintained eye contact
- Had questions ready
- Asked “open” questions – not “yes” or “no” questions
- Followed the flow of the interview by asking questions not on their list
- Listened to answers without interrupting
- Left silent spaces for the interviewee to fill with answers
- Asked for details, and had follow-up questions
- Asked permission to take photos
- Thanked interviewee for their time and answers

Consent form

I consent for Key Correspondents to use case studies/photos/film/audio of me taken on:

(date) at (place).....

for media, advocacy, educational purposes, through all media including printed documents and websites. (This consent will apply throughout the world.)

Key Correspondents will use the images in a sensitive way in accordance with its charitable objectives.

Name

Signature

Date.....

Address.....

.....

Taken by (name) (Position)

on behalf of Key Correspondents

Further information / restrictions:

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