
SKILLS OF INTERVIEWING

Interviewing is the backbone of reporting. It is a skill, which every reporter must acquire and acquire well. Interviewing is almost certainly the most important way that reporters get the information that forms the basis of their news reports. Like playing a guitar or dancing on a beat, some people seem to have a gift for it, while others do not. Yet for all these activities, there are basic principles to learn, and those who spend the time learning them will be better than those who do not. Being a brilliant interviewer may be an art form; being a competent one is not.

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

A newspaper reporter conducts an interview for mainly two reasons: One, as a research for a news story. Two, as a performance; part of the news report. Based upon these, interviews can be categorised into following types:

One-to-One Short Interview

Suppose you are covering a bomb blast. After speaking to eye-witnesses, it is important for you to speak to a senior police officer, who is present on the spot. By doing this, you will get the required quotes and may be some information too. For example, the presence of a mysterious man in the area, just before the blast.

One-to-One Interview

Ceasefire has just been declared on the Line of Control, between Indian and Pakistan. As a reporter, you may want to speak to somebody, to know the situation on the ground. This may involve fixing up an appointment with the Defence Minister. Such interviews are long and detailed.

Press Conference Interview

Many-a-times, politicians or high ranking government officials call a press conference to put forward their point of view. For example former Chattisgarh Chief Minister Ajit Jogi called a press conference to make his stand clear in the infamous Cash-for-MLA scandal. An arrangement like this is very convenient for the organiser because he is able to address many journalists at the same time. For a reporter this may prove to be an anomaly, because in a press conference, reporters from various media organisations get the same information.

Vox Pop

It is a Latin term meaning 'voice of the people'. Suppose, the Indian Government has refused to let the Indian cricket team play with the Pakistani team, till Pakistan ends what India terms as 'cross-border terrorism'. On an issue, like this, a newspaper may decide to take the view of people into account. So a reporter will speak to a cross section of people and take their views. So someone may say that sports should not be sacrificed at the altar of politics and somebody might be of the opposite view: no cricket till Pakistan stops aiding militants. Similarly, on a budget day, reporters may be sent to know the views of the people. Here, a housewife may complain about the increasing prices of domestic gas, while an executive may call cutting down sales tax on electronic goods as a welcome step.

Grabbed Interview

There are times, when to a reporter, finding a suitable quote, reaction or a comment may seem difficult because the person or the official involved may not be wanting to speak to the Press. At times like these, that person or official gets mobbed by members of the Press Corps. Put under such a trying situation, a word or two may escape from his mouth. That amounts to getting what is known as a grabbed interview.

PREPARATIONS FOR AN INTERVIEW

Fixing Up an Appointment

- The first thing you need to conduct an interview is fixing up an appointment with the concerned person. A reporter needs to call ahead to schedule an interview. And if you think ahead, deadlines almost always allow it. Even on daily newspapers, most articles are not written the day and hour an event occurs. When you call a person, identify yourself by name and publication.

Art of Dressing

Dress with respect for the person you are interviewing. Make sure that you are dressed in formal clothes. Always remember, first impression is the last impression. (There are times, when you may not be taken seriously, if you are not dressed properly. If you are handling beats like Business or Defence, it becomes altogether more important to dress formally) There have been incidences of people refusing to grant interview to journalists who did not deem it necessary to dress for the occasion.

Conducting Research

With the mechanics of setting up and dressing for the interview taken care of, it is time to consider how to

conduct the interview itself. Planning is important here. Preparation allows you to ask good questions and signals your subject that you are not to be dismissed lightly. Read all that is available. Talk to those who know the subject. |

Time Management

(Respect your subject's time. It is probably as valuable as your own. Try to schedule an interview at the source's convenience. Make sure that you reach on time.) If the appointment is for 5 p.m., be there at 4:55. (Sources become irritated when they are kept waiting, and it makes a good impression to be just a few minutes early.)

Establishing a Rapport

(Think of your meeting with the subject as a structured but friendly conversation, not an interview.) (Try to establish a rapport with the person early on.) You may want to wait a bit before pulling your notebook out. This meeting stage may determine how the rest of the interview will go. Do you share a common interest or friend? If so, mention that. (Give some serious thought to the information you want to get from the news source and how to elicit those answers. But don't be so focused on the point of the interview that you jump right in with substantive questions.) An interview is also a social interaction; the best ones start with a minute or two of polite small talk about the weather, Tendulkar's game or castrated bulls on Delhi roads.

Dealing with Questions

(Before you leave for an interview, it always makes sense to make pointers on various issues, would be asking the interviewee. Experts advise against putting questions on paper. Reading from a list of questions guarantees a

mediocre interview. It is one of the clearest signs of a beginner when a reporter arrives with questions all written out.) It is far better to let the conversation follow its own path, with a little steering and nudging from the interviewer.) If you put questions on paper, it will so happen, in most of the cases, that while the person is answering your question, you will be concentrating on your next question. (Focus on what the source is saying, not on what you will ask next. Your next question will be better if you heard the answer to the last one.)

Off and On Record

(Generally, everything a source says in an interview is on the record, which means it can be used in a news article. By identifying yourself as a reporter and making it clear that you are doing a article, you have put your subject on notice that you are asking questions for publication and that whatever the subject says may well wind up in print.) Most of a reporter's work should be fully on the record. After all, your task is to find out things and tell your readers, not find out things and keep them to yourself.

(Sometimes a source may ask to tell you something off the record and you'll need to do a little bargaining. When people say 'off the record,' what they usually mean is that the reporter can use the information but cannot attribute it to the source. A reporter should agree to "off the record" information only if there is no other way to get the information.)

An anonymous source may be better than no source, but it is certainly not as good as an identified source. That is because the reader can judge the credibility of a source only when the reader knows the source's identity. But people have all sorts of reasons for not wanting their names associated with information. People can get in trouble with their bosses if they speak to reporters if they