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Conducting Interviews

Conducting an interview with an expert in your field of research can be a great way to gather additional information for a research project or paper. This handout provides suggestions which will help you plan an effective—and hopefully informative—interview. Remember to clarify your instructor's expectations as you prepare for and present your interview.

Who? Whom will you choose to interview?

- Choose someone who is knowledgeable about the subject in question, and let the person know the purpose of the interview and how you will use the results.
- Make sure the person you choose will have time in his or her schedule well in advance of your assignment due date.
- You must obtain special permission from the university if you plan to interview minors, patients, or prisoners. It may be best to steer away from interviewing someone who falls into one of these groups.

What? What kinds of questions will you ask?

- Prepare a list of concise open-ended questions that will prompt more than yes/no answers.
- Clarify what the person's profession is, what his or her title is, what his or her daily duties may consist of, and then focus on questions related to your assignment topic.
- Keep an open mind and be prepared to pursue a new line of questioning if the interviewee mentions a topic that might make for a more effective paper.
- Don't ask the person to divulge information that could put his or her job at risk. Don't ask questions that may offend the person. (Salary, negative aspects of the job, and office conflicts are probably inappropriate subjects).
- Ask follow-up questions to clarify the interviewee's answers or prompt them to go into more detail.
- Don't be afraid to ask the person to slow down if he or she is speaking too quickly.

When?/Where? When and where will your interview take place?

- You should set a specific appointment time even if you know the person well. You will get better results if the person has had time to think about the interview in advance.
- Choose a location that is free from distractions.



How? How will you conduct the interview? How will you record your findings?

- If time permits, be sure to conduct the interview in person. Body language and facial expression will be lost in telephone and e-mail interviews. E-mail interviews and questionnaires may require the interviewee to do more work than he or she may have time to do, and you may receive short, general answers.
- If you plan to tape the interview, you must obtain permission from the interviewee.
- Test the tape recorder in advance; whether or not you tape the interview, make sure you take good notes. You never know when a recorder might malfunction.
- After you conduct the interview, summarize your key points so you won't forget them before you write your paper.

Why? Why are you conducting this interview?

- Be sure to keep your assignment guidelines in mind throughout the interview process.
- Some instructors may wish to have you focus your interview around a topic rather than simply asking the person about what he or she does. Make sure you keep your assignment guidelines in mind when preparing your questions.

Prepared by Hannah Haas using information from *Writing from Sources*, 3rd ed., by Brenda Spatt (New York: St. Martin's P, 1991). Updated May 2008.