

Script: Reporting & Interviewing
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First – the reporting process. These are the various steps, in order, that you would go through in the course of reporting. Sometimes you may need to hop back in the process to gather more if you don't have everything that you need for a story. First – look for story ideas – sometimes those come from observations or digging and other times from sources. Next, find your sources – who are the best people to talk on this subject? And importantly, are they willing to speak on the record? Next, you'll gather your interviews and then choose the best parts of the interview to use in writing the final story. Next, you'll want to personally edit and then have someone else who also edits for mechanics, clarity and accuracy. There should always be a fact-checking round ... and finally publication.

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When choosing your sources, you'll want to make sure they're the best possible people to include. Sometimes you might interview people you don't include in the final story – and that's okay. Always consider finding experts – but also real people. Real people make stories memorable. If you cover a possible school levy, you'll need the facts from the district but you'll also want to talk to taxpayers, voters and parents.

To make a story balanced and reflective of all viewpoints – look for people who might feel differently about an issue and incorporate diverse sources whenever possible. Would your story benefit from having perspective from someone of another socioeconomic status, race, culture or gender? Probably. Include all relevant sides. I put sides in quote marks because oftentimes there aren't simply two obvious sides... maybe there are more... or maybe people agree on some things but differ on one point. Make a list of all possible perspectives on a story and try to secure all of them. Be careful not to steer too far outside your story focus though – again, you might conduct more interviews than you use.

Do background research online about any source you use to make sure they are who they say – and that they don't have a bias they aren't telling you about. This can be a quick check to see if they may have an outside influence they aren't telling you about... does that researcher do work for an oil company on the side? Is that important to disclose in your story? Also check on real people stories... there have been plenty of examples of people using the media to tell a sad story in an attempt to dupe the audience. Don't get fooled.

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Before heading into an interview, it's a good idea to write out a list of questions. You don't need to stick to them exactly and you may come up with more during the interview – but you'll want to make sure you cover everything. The 5 W's are the very basic questions you need to ask sources – the who, what, where, when, and why. It's surprising how many reporters get so focused on a deep question or an emotional quote that they forget to ask the basics and realize they don't know when that event is happening. Always start by asking the subject for his or her name with spelling and a preferred title. With police and military sources, it's also important to ask for rank. Most of the time, the answers to these questions will never appear in your story as quotes.

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The next layer of questioning is when you'll look for more emotional quotes with longer answers you can use within your story. The quickest way to end an interview and realize you have no usable quotes is to ask close-ended questions. If someone says, "Were you excited when the team won the game?"... an interview subject will probably say, "Yes!" or at best "Sure was!"... Not exactly useful to a story. If you can answer your own question with a yes or a no or a single word, it's probably not a question that will get you a quote.

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What you do want to ask are open-ended questions. Asking "When the team won the game, what was your reaction?" will get you a much better answer than the "are you excited?" type of question. Often times beginning a question with "How" will help get a good answer. Another tactic is to ask someone to describe what happened or what something looked like.

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Interviews should feel more like conversations than interrogations. Think about your source as a teacher you get to ask all of the questions you want to about what's going on. This also means asking follow up questions if you don't understand something or if you'd like someone to elaborate. You might ask someone about their previous answer by asking how they knew something or when it happened in context. Another great follow up question is to ask someone to re-explain something – they might say it in a better way the second time – or might help you and your audience understand their point better. People would rather be understood and won't mind answering a question twice if it will help them get their point across better. Never be afraid they think you're unintelligent – they want you to get it right, too.

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When you go to an interview, make sure you have everything you need. Don't forget an extra pen and a way to record your interview, even perhaps on your cell phone. It's double safety to make sure you get your quotes correct. It's perfectly acceptable to write notes while doing an interview – I usually just mention to the

source I'll be doing so, so they don't feel awkward if I'm not maintaining eye contact with them. Having a recorder will allow you to not feel the need to write down every single word they say and slow the interview down. If you're doing a broadcast interview, make sure you have extra camera batteries and a microphone. Also, make sure you bring any documents or photos that you'd like to ask your source about.

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Sometimes in the heat of an interview, reporters forget to listen. Really listen. They might be taking notes and hearing what's being said... but not processing. It's important to really stay engaged and think about whether you understand what the source is saying so you can ask follow-up questions.

Also – Don't be afraid of silence. Let people talk, process and continue on. It can feel strange, but sometimes it takes someone a moment to say everything they want.

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Take a listen to this emotional interview with an armed robbery victim – notice, the student reporter just let her continue speaking, even when the source pauses.

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This also works well with officials sometimes. In the following example, a union official opened up about how frustrated she truly was with school negotiations when the reporter gave her a moment to simply speak.

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After the interview – you should make sure to get the source's phone number, one that you could use after-hours as well. Explain that you'll only use it if you have additional questions.

My personal rule with stories is to never name anyone without calling them – I ask my students to do the same. It's a courtesy to let them know they'll appear in the news – but on top of that, they may have valuable information for your story – or point out a flaw in what someone else told you. Give everyone the opportunity to respond to what someone else said about them. That might mean making a second call back to an original source.

Always fact-check what your interview subjects told you – sometimes that means checking it against what they told you previously...

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That's what happened in this example ... the governor told our reporter one thing... but had previously on the record said something else. This became a key part of the story in itself.

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Here's the proof of what happened a year prior... in tapes our reporter pulled.

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There are some ethical considerations with interviews. In general – anything someone tells you is fair game for reporting unless you've made an agreement BEFORE they've spoken with you.

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Sometimes people will want to speak off the record before an interview or in place of an interview. Sometimes I say no – especially if it's someone who's a public official who should be on the record with me.

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But other times... someone can give you good information you can use to find other sources or confirm stories for yourself. Just make sure you have an understanding about what is and isn't reportable – and abide by your agreements. Some officials, like attorneys, can't legally or ethically speak to media, but might be willing to help you understand a case or an issue or terminology if you ask them to help you *quote "on background."

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Beware of using many confidential or anonymous sources. You should use them only very sparingly and disclose to readers and viewers what your agreement with that source was and why you made it – for example, "we aren't naming her because she is worried she would lose her job for talking to us." Only use confidential or anonymous sources on stories where they are absolutely necessary and you can make a case for why they should be unnamed.

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Contact information