

# EFFECTIVE INTERVIEWING TIPS RESOURCE GUIDE

(From a journalistic perspective)



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## INTRODUCTION TO WRITERS

Writers, as the DC Voice moves towards more interactive and engaging interviews, and contributors need to be proficient in a variety of journalism skills, specifically interviewing skills. To foster greater exploration, education, and investigation, this document provides skills and tips to help guide you as you prepare, conduct, and present your product.



## **Let's begin**

### **Research the topic and your subject**

- Before any interview, you must research the topic of the interview and your subject.
- Ideally, you should research the topic ahead of securing your interview, ensuring your subject is a good fit to speak on the matter. You want to know enough to be able to ask good questions.
- It's also important to research your subject. Survey their online presence to see where else they've been quoted and on what topics.
- Check their social media in the days/hours leading up to your interview. This gives you something to talk about to break the ice.

### **Determine how the interview will be conducted**

- In-person interviews are ideal. However, sometimes that's not possible—or doesn't make the most sense. Other interviewing options include Phone, Podcast a videoconferencing link (Zoom, Google Meets, Webex, etc.).
- You want to develop a natural rapport and naturally follow up with questions to get more than canned responses from your subject.
- When you reach out to the source, establish the method of interview. If you don't feel strongly between, say, a video and phone interview, it's a nice courtesy to give them the option.
- Once you've established the method, send them any relevant information (e.g., an address, your phone number, a videoconferencing link (Zoom, Google Meets, Webex, etc.).
- If the event is in several days, you can also send them a calendar invite. This will add the event to your calendar and theirs. With videoconferencing interviews, add your phone number to the calendar invite in case anything goes awry with the link or platform.

### **3. Set expectations**




- When you make contact with a source, set expectations.

- Explain what you're working on and why you'd like to speak to them. This gives the source a chance to think about the subject of the interview beforehand.
- Give your source a time limit. For instance, you can simply say, "The interview shouldn't take more than 45 minutes." This sets the interviewee's expectations and helps ensure the interview won't get cut short.
- Explain any follow-up steps. For instance, you can say, "After the interview, my editor may follow up for a quick fact-check to ensure everything is accurate."

#### 4. Consider your interview questions

- When going into an interview, you don't want to read off a list of set questions, but you do want to have several key questions ready to ask. These are questions you know you need to ask to accurately report your story.

Here are a few tips to keep in mind as you brainstorm these questions:

-  **Ask open-ended questions versus closed-ended questions.**  
Open-ended questions are broader whereas close-ended questions may simply elicit a "yes" or "no" response. Here's an example of an open-ended question: How did it feel when you sold your first art piece? Here's an example of a closed-ended question: Did you feel excited when you sold your first art piece?
-  **Ask for specific examples or numbers.**  
It's always best to show versus tell. The more specific, the better.
-  **End any interview by asking, "Is there something else you'd like to cover or share with our readers?"**  
This gives the source a chance to share any additional information. Sometimes you'll get a simple, "Nope!" But other times you'll get some good information or a strong quote. If you're looking for more sources to interview, you can also ask: "Is there anyone else I should speak with about this?" **The source may be able to point you to your next interview.**

#### 5. Start with the basics

When it comes to the time for the interview, start with the basics. This has two purposes:

- You want to confirm certain information is accurate.

You'll get your source warmed up and feeling more comfortable before launching into the interview.

- Ask them to spell their name and confirm their job title (don't be afraid to ask, "What exactly does that mean?"), the name of their company and any additional background information.
- If their age is relevant to the article, confirm. The article may be published later, so you'll want to ensure their age will still be accurate.

**IMPORTANT: Writers, please take note: Opening/Introduction/Conclusion**

Your interview must have an opening/introduction and conclusion (See tip #12).

- Open with Greetings, Hello, Good morning/afternoon, etc.
- My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am a writer with the DC Voice and I'm here with \_\_\_\_\_ councilmember for Ward \_\_\_\_\_.
- Allow the person to tell the audience a little about themselves.
- Begin asking your questions.
- Allow the interviewee time to respond.

Keep in mind you may need to ask a follow-up question to a response that is not on your list.

**6. Actively listen and ask follow-up questions**

- Before Interviewing, Journalists must listen...
- Don't just ask questions—actively listen to your subject's response and be prepared to react with potentially another question.
- You'll have your set of questions as you go into an interview, but always expect to ask follow-up questions. If you don't, you'll miss out on important details.

Active listening is key. Don't get distracted typing (or writing down) your source's every word.

\*\*\*If it helps you focus on the conversation, consider recording the interview. You'll still want to take some notes, and, if it's a long interview, you'll want to note important timestamps. **Recording the interview will free you up a bit to listen.**

\*\*\*NOTE: If you decide to record the interview, always ask for your subject's permission. You can explain it'll help you more actively take part in the conversation. Often, they won't mind. You should record the affirmative response as well. Keep in mind that the interviewee may want to speak anonymously or on background, which means the interview should not be recorded.

For more ethical considerations around interviewing, [review the Online News Association's interviewing guide](#).

## **7. Take the lead**

- As the interviewer, you're in charge, so it's your job to steer the conversation and keep it on track.
- Be mindful of ramblers.
- Don't be afraid to cut an answer off if you have what you need and move on to another question, especially if your time is limited.
- If you find the conversation veering in the wrong direction, remind the source of the purpose of the conversation before reiterating your previous question or moving to the next.

## **8. Avoid talking about yourself**

An interview is a two-way conversation, but it's really focused on your source.

Although it may be tempting to chime in with a personal story or opinion, limit it. It can be great to establish that common ground and rapport at the beginning of the interview, but once you're in it, stay focused on what your subject has to say.

## **9. Ask the hard questions**

As you build a relationship with your interviewee, you may feel hesitant throwing the more difficult questions their way, but that's your job.

- Don't be afraid to ask hard questions. Your subject expects you to and so does your audience/readers.
- Challenge assumptions by asking follow-up questions for more details. Ask questions again but in a different way.

**You have an obligation to your audience/readers to get the facts.**

## **10. Be comfortable with awkward pauses**

- During your interview, become comfortable with awkward silences.
- If you ask a tough question, leave room for that awkward pause. It could get you the answer you seek."
- Even if it's not a tough question but your source gives you a brief answer, wait a few seconds before moving on to the next question. They may feel the need to fill the silence with additional information or think of something they'd forgotten.

## 11. Respect their time

- If the interview is going longer than you anticipated, acknowledge it. Ask the interviewee if they have, say, 10 more minutes. This is a courtesy.
- If they don't have extra time, do your best to wrap up the interview or ask your subject the best way and time to follow up. You may be able to finish the conversation via text or email.

## 12. Show gratitude

As you finish your interview, thank your subjects for their time. This is a simple enough step, but it goes a long way.

- ✚ Conclude the interview with: Thank you \_\_\_\_\_ for taking time to speak with me and sharing with the DC Voice audience/readers.
- ✚ Let the audience/readers know: For more information about \_\_\_\_\_, you can visit their website or social media (provide address).
- ✚ You may end with: This is \_\_\_\_\_ from the DC Voice. Thank you.

## 13. Follow up

- Before your interview concludes, ask your source how they prefer you to follow up.

You may have additional questions as you continue to report, or you may want to fact-check, so it's nice to know the best, most convenient way to reach out. They might prefer text or email—be sure you have that contact information on hand.

- Provide them with your contact information and encourage them to reach out if they think of anything else they'd like to include or share.
- Finally, once the article goes live, send your subject a link via email. This is a great opportunity to thank them for their time. Also, they may share the article on their social channels.

## 14. Save their contact information

- Did you find a valuable source? Save their contact information!
- Create a catalog or spreadsheet and save their name, contact information, area of expertise and contact preferences. As you build up contacts, continue to expand this database.

## Introduction Script when Contacting ANC/Councilmembers

Hello Commissioner\_\_\_\_\_ or Councilmember\_\_\_\_\_. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am a writer for The DC Voice. The DC Voice was launched over 11 years ago as an online newspaper targeted at reporting on and serving Ward 5 in the District of Columbia. Since then, we have expanded to cover events and community interests throughout all 8 wards and the surrounding DMV communities.

The goal of The DC Voice is to chronicle community-focused events and provide an opportunity for the residents, educational and religious institutions, and businesses in each ward to have a single unifying voice. We also provide a major online presence for all things DC. Accordingly, we incorporate slogans like “Changing the Narrative,” “Always Forward,” and “Notjustanotherpublication.”

I am requesting an opportunity to interview you to discuss your current or future plans for the communities you serve, and the opportunity to attend and report on items discussed at council and ANC meetings and other community events that are relevant to the community.

For additional information, you may contact The DC Voice at 202-629-9793 or email us at [changingthenarrative@thedcvoice.com](mailto:changingthenarrative@thedcvoice.com).

Many thanks for considering my request. Have a great day!

## Suggested Councilmember/ANC Interview Questions

Below are some suggested questions for interviewing Councilmembers or ANC Commissioners. As you research the potential subject and the Ward they serve, be sure to incorporate questions more current/specific to the Ward that may not be listed here. Be prepared to ask between 5-10 questions.

1. What is the role of DC council members/ANC commissioners?
2. What neighborhood do you live in and why?
3. Do you have favorite places to spend time in Ward\_\_\_\_\_?
4. What are the most pressing issues in Ward\_\_\_\_\_ and your role, how have you addressed them?

5. What is the biggest need of the Ward\_\_\_\_ now and what have you done/will do to fill that need?
6. What are your goals for your office and how have you achieved them?
7. What civic organizations or non-profits have you been an active member of in recent years?
8. What's more important for DC or Ward\_\_\_\_ right now: (for ex. building new homes and commercial space or rehabbing/expanding/better utilizing existing homes and storefronts) and why?
9. How do you plan to involve residents in the decision-making process in Ward\_\_\_\_ and what is your opinion on the importance of public engagement in the decision-making process?
10. If someone came to you with a proposal to build a new piece of public infrastructure in DC (road, bridge, etc.), how would you evaluate whether or not that project was worth implementing?
11. How do you approach budgeting for the city's services and programs?
12. How would you ensure that the needs of all citizens are represented by the DC Council/ANC?
13. How do you stay informed about current events and issues affecting the city?
14. What steps do you take to ensure transparency and accountability in the city council's decisions?

\*\*\*Additional tips to remember:

Interviewing helps journalists/writers develop trustworthy, accurate and impactful storytelling. Journalism skills for interviews go beyond asking questions.

**1. Interviews** are a tool for:

- ✚ Collecting authoritative information.
- ✚ Verifying information from other sources.
- ✚ Uncovering and exploring different perspectives.

As writers, you must be prepared through goal setting and research. During interviews, practice active listening skills and maintain the flow and focus.

**2. Reporting**

Reporting is the heart of trustworthy and well-researched journalism. Journalists/writers need the skills to:

- ✚ Identify, observe, gather, assess, record, and share relevant information.
- ✚ Report with empathy and compassion.
- ✚ Conduct thorough journalistic research and evaluate information appropriate to their media.
- ✚ Understand, interpret and share data.

**3. Ethics**

Growing public distrust in the media has drawn new attention to ethical journalism skills.

In 2000, approximately half of U.S. adults [reported](#) having a “great deal” or a “fair amount” of trust in the news media. That figure dropped to 40 percent by 2020. Fortunately, 75 percent of U.S. adults [say](#) the news media can improve their level of confidence.

Producing journalism of the highest standard will earn public trust. To do so, practitioners must demonstrate ethical journalism skills. That means committing to truth, accuracy, fairness, diversity, and freedom of speech.

Writers must understand how to:

- ✚ Apply the best ideals of journalist excellence and ethics to new forms of media.
- ✚ Apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press.
- ✚ Produce inclusive work that illustrates an awareness of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other forms of diversity.

#### 4. Writing

- Writing is another foundational skill. Journalists must master written communication for all media types, from text stories and podcast scripts to photo captions and social media posts.
- Writing skills include understanding the principles of **grammar and punctuation**. Journalists should also know how **to write clearly, simplify complex information, and adhere to a style guide (Provided to you by the DC Voice)**.

#### 5. Digital Journalism Skills

- Journalists must be able to strategically use digital storytelling tools to connect with audiences on various platforms. This means thinking critically and creatively about the best forms of media to serve the target audience.

Here are a few examples of digital journalism skills:

- ✚ Live streaming video on Twitter from a mobile device.
- ✚ Transforming a data spreadsheet into a responsive visualization for a website.

Shooting and editing video into a series of GIFs. Refer to the following link for more information about the series of GIFs - <https://vimeo.com/blog/post/how-to-turn-your-videos-into-gifs/>

#### 6. Mobile Journalism Skills

- Journalism skills include mobile proficiency.

Of the U.S. adults who get their news from digital devices, approximately 7 in 10 [rely](#) on news websites such as the **DC Voice** or apps. That's more than the number who prefer search, social media, or podcasts.

Today's journalists/writers must use mobile devices to connect with the public. To do so, they need the mobile journalism skills to:

- ✚ Take and edit photos.
- ✚ Record and edit audio and video.
- ✚ Report in real-time on social or traditional news channels.

## **7. Editing**

- Editing is also among the most desirable journalism skills. Journalists/writers should know how to critically evaluate their work and the work of others.
- Copyediting is a necessary step in creating excellent journalism. It ensures:
  - ✚ Accuracy.
  - ✚ Fairness.
  - ✚ Clarity.
  - ✚ Appropriate style.
  - ✚ Grammatical correctness.

## **8. Social Media**

The widespread consumption of news on social media means journalists need the skills to:

- ✚ Connect with audiences on the most popular platforms. Most U.S. adults who get their news on social media do so on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit.
- ✚ Report in real-time on the various social platforms. This involves critical and creative thinking about the most appropriate media for each platform.
- ✚ Build a personal brand on social media.

## **8. Video Journalism Skills**

- Modern journalists must know how to create impactful content for video.
- Video journalism skills are both editorial and technical. Today's journalists must be proficient in all of them—from developing a compelling narrative to shooting and editing video on a mobile device.

## 10. How to Write an Interview-Based Article

How do you turn a raw interview transcript into an [article](#) people will want to read? There are five key steps to writing an interview-based article:

- ✚ Review the transcript and plan what you want to include.
- ✚ Decide how you're going to structure your article.
- ✚ Write the interview, editing for clarity and concision as appropriate.
- ✚ Consider whether reorganizing parts of the interview will help it make sense.
- ✚ Proofread your finished interview article to ensure it is error-free.

### 1. Review the Transcript

A transcript is a written, word-for-word copy of what was said in an interview. This provides the starting point for any interview-based article. Before you start writing, you should review your transcript. This will help you identify:

- ✚ What to include and what to leave out when you write the interview.
- ✚ Key details or recurring themes that you want to highlight in your article.
- ✚ Any details that need checking with your subject before publication.
- ✚ It is a good idea to listen to the recorded interview more than once. Hearing the interviewee's voice will help you capture the tone of their responses. If you haven't yet transcribed your interview, you can use an [audio-to-text transcription tool](#).

### 2. Decide How to Structure Your Article

There are two common ways of structuring an interview-based article. One is a literal question-and-answer format, where each question is presented in turn, with the subject's answers following. For example:

***What made you approach writing your latest book in this way?***

*I wanted to play with narrative forms and decided to experiment. To be honest, I was still prepared to scrap the whole idea and start again, though!*

Alternatively, you can use a narrative form. This is where you describe what happened during the interview, using quotes to relay what the subject said, but giving extra detail about what they do, the surroundings, and even your own thoughts and feelings as the interviewer (if appropriate):

*Taylor shrugs when asked about the writing style of her next book, saying she “wanted to play with narrative forms and decided to experiment,” though she “was still prepared to scrap the whole idea and start again” if she had to.*

You can even use a hybrid of the two, framing a question-and-answer piece with narrative sections or your own thoughts at the beginning and end.

### 3. Edit for Clarity and Concision

When we speak, we often use more words than necessary. Sentences become garbled. We use all sorts of [linguistic fillers](#) and [crutch words](#). Sometimes we lose confidence in what we say and trail off. None of this makes for a great read.

As a result, most interview-based articles will be edited for clarity and concision. This might involve making changes along the following lines:

#### Original

*So, um, I was going to start writing...when I started writing the book, I just knuckled down and worked really hard for two months, basically.*

#### Edited

*When I started writing the book, I worked really hard for two months.*

The second version is much clearer and easier to read, picking out the key parts of the original to communicate the same thought more effectively.

It’s important to be careful when editing a transcript, though. You won’t want to accidentally twist the subject’s words or misrepresent them, so keep changes minimal where possible and make sure to preserve the meaning of the original.

If you need to rephrase something more thoroughly for clarity, moreover, you may want to check that the interviewee is okay with any changes you’ve made.

**Always check your style guide or publisher’s instructions**, too, as some are quite restrictive regarding the changes you can make. [AP style](#), for example, suggests only making very minor changes to quotations (e.g., cutting out “umms” and “aahs”).

### 4. Consider Reorganizing Parts of the Transcript

Interviews can go in unexpected directions. The interviewee might go off on tangents. Or the same topic might come up at different points. To make sure your interview article reads smoothly, then, you might need to reorganize slightly.

For example, perhaps your subject speaks about their early years at the start of an interview but slips in an extra childhood anecdote later in a context where it doesn’t fit. Or perhaps you are thinking of cutting part of a response but want to keep an insightful statement that would work elsewhere in the article.

In these cases, it is often fine to move things around if the change of context doesn't misrepresent what your subject has said. However, this is another case where you may need to get the interviewee's approval for any changes.

## **5. Proofread Your Interview Article**

Whether you are publishing an article yourself or submitting it for publication, always proofread your finished interview to make sure it is clear and error-free. You should also check you haven't changed the meaning of anything your subject said.

You could even use a proofreading service at this stage. As another resource, Click on the following links to learn more about [article proofreading service](#) and [transcript proofreading service](#).