



Introduction to News Writing and Reporting

Lecture 4

Interviewing Skills – Preparation, Questioning, Listening

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Fig. 1. “Journalist in an interview,” Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.



Fig. 2. “Journalist preparing questions and reviewing notes before an interview,” Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.

By the end of this lecture, students should be able to:

Define interviewing skills and explain their importance in journalism.

Identify the objectives of an interview, including gathering facts, opinions, and human perspectives.

Differentiate between types of interviews, such as informational, opinion-based, personality-focused, investigative, and follow-up.

Demonstrate effective preparation by researching topics, interviewees, and defining the purpose and angle.

Apply questioning techniques effectively, including open-ended, closed-ended, probing, and hypothetical questions.

Conduct interviews professionally, building rapport, practicing active listening, and maintaining neutrality.

Use recording and note-taking methods accurately for documentation and verification.

Handle difficult interviewees with tact, patience, and strategies to encourage cooperation.

Implement follow-up and clarification techniques to resolve ambiguities and verify information.

Recognize and adhere to ethical considerations, including informed consent, privacy, and non-manipulative practices.

Understand legal considerations, such as recording laws, defamation, and confidentiality protections.

Interpret non-verbal communication to gain deeper insights from interviewees.

Learning Outcomes

01

Master Core Skills

Define interviewing importance, identify objectives, and differentiate interview types for effective journalism practice.

03

Ensure Ethics & Quality

Implement ethical standards, legal considerations, and evaluation methods for responsible reporting.

02

Develop Techniques

Apply questioning strategies, conduct professional interviews, and handle difficult interviewees with tact.



Fig. 3. “Two journalists conducting an interview in a studio setting with recording equipment,” Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.

Why Interviewing Skills Matter in Journalism



Interviews are the core tool for news gathering — they reveal stories through people's voices and experiences.

Mastering preparation, questioning, and listening transforms routine Q&A sessions into compelling narratives that captivate audiences and uncover truth.

Fig. 2. “Journalist preparing questions and reviewing notes before an interview,” Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.

Preparation: The Foundation of a Great Interview

Deep Research

Study your subject thoroughly: background, recent news, social media presence. Jodi Kantor's Obama interview exemplifies this approach.

Strategic Questions

Prepare a focused list of 3-4 high-yield questions rather than conducting a fishing expedition.

Logistics Planning

Choose quiet locations, test equipment thoroughly, and arrive punctually to build trust.

The Three Ps of Interview Preparation



Past

Explore relevant achievements, career milestones, and formative experiences that shaped their perspective.



Personal

Identify core values, character qualities, and underlying motivations that reveal authentic insights.

Use the S.T.A.R. method to structure preparation and anticipate how interviewees might respond to challenging questions.



People

Understand relationship dynamics, professional influences, and key connections that drive their decisions.



Fig. 4. "Illustration of a journalist actively listening and taking notes during an interview," Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.

THE STAR METHOD

Letter	Meaning	Description
S	Situation	Describe the context or background — where and when the event took place.
T	Task	Explain what your responsibility or goal was in that situation.
A	Action	Detail the specific steps you took to address the task or challenge.
R	Result	Share the outcome — what happened, what you achieved, and what you learned.



Fig. 4. “Illustration of a journalist actively listening and taking notes during an interview,” Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.

THE STAR METHOD

How It Works (Step-by-Step)

Situation – Set the scene

Example: “At my previous job as a marketing assistant, our social media engagement had dropped by 30% over three months.”

Task – Define your role or challenge

Example: “I was responsible for finding a way to boost engagement and improve our online visibility.”

Action – Explain exactly what you did

Example: “I analyzed audience data, redesigned our posting schedule, and launched interactive weekly polls.”

Result – Show the positive impact

Example: “Within six weeks, engagement increased by 45%, and our follower count grew by 20%.”



Fig. 4. “Illustration of a journalist actively listening and taking notes during an interview,” Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.

THE STAR METHOD

💡 Why It's Useful

Keeps your answers **clear, concise, and structured**.

Helps interviewers see **how you think and behave in real situations**.

Ensures you **demonstrate real achievements**, not just skills in theory.

🗣️ Example Question + STAR Answer

Q: “Tell me about a time you handled a difficult teammate.”

A (using STAR):

Situation: “During a group project at university, one team member wasn’t contributing to their section.”

Task: “As team leader, I needed to ensure everyone’s work was submitted on time.”

Action: “I spoke privately with them to understand their challenges, reassigned their tasks to align with their strengths, and set mini-deadlines.”

Result: “The teammate became more engaged, and we completed the project two days early, earning an A.”



Fig. 4. “Illustration of a journalist actively listening and taking notes during an interview,” Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.



Crafting Effective Questions: The Art of Inquiry

- 1 Start Small, Build Trust**
Begin with comfortable topics to establish rapport before diving into complex issues.
- 2 Ask for Real Examples**
Request specific, lived experiences rather than hypotheticals or broad generalizations.
- 3 Lead with Priority**
Ask your most important question first to capture key insights before time runs short.

Fig. 5. "HD hand taking notes," Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.

The Six Key Questions Every Journalist Should Master



Fig. 6. “Visual representation of the STAR method in interview preparation,” Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.

These six questions are essential because they ensure accuracy and completeness in reporting. They also guide the structure of a news story, especially when using the inverted pyramid style, where the most important facts come first. In addition, they help journalists maintain objectivity by focusing on verifiable facts and not opinions.

For example, in the headline *“Fire Destroys 20 Homes in Nairobi Estate”*, the answers could be:

Who: Twenty families living in the Umoja Estate.

What: A fire destroyed several residential houses.

When: Early Thursday morning, around 2:00 a.m.

Where: Umoja Estate, Nairobi.

Why: Initial reports suggest an electrical fault caused the fire.

How: The fire spread rapidly due to closely built wooden structures; firefighters arrived 30 minutes later.

In practice, journalists should always begin their reporting by answering these six questions. If all can be answered accurately, the story is likely to be clear, informative, and credible.



Fig. 4. “Illustration of a journalist actively listening and taking notes during an interview,” Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.

Active Listening: The Secret to Going Beyond the Script

Full Attention

Avoid reading notes constantly to catch unexpected revelations or emotional cues that could lead to breaking news.

Body Language Awareness

Monitor tone, gestures, and facial expressions. Your own reactions can influence their responses.

Spontaneous Follow-up

Pursue interesting tangents that emerge naturally to uncover deeper, more authentic stories.



Fig. 7. "Illustration of a journalist actively listening during an interview," Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.

Handling the Interview: Do's and Don'ts

✓ Treat with Respect

Show warmth and professionalism regardless of the interviewee's status or your personal opinions.

✗ Avoid Confrontation

Frame tough questions as conversations to reveal truth, not battles to win arguments.

✓ Stay Focused

Keep questions concise and purposeful rather than overwhelming with too many topics.

✓ Professional Closure

Always thank your interviewee and confirm your recording quality before ending the session.

Real-World Example: Jodi Kantor's Obama Interview

1

Deep Research Phase

Kantor studied the Obamas' relationship history and public statements about marriage equality extensively.

2

Strategic Questioning

Asked a layered question about equality in their marriage that required thoughtful, personal reflection.

3

Breakthrough Result

Uncovered candid, unrehearsed insights that no other journalist had previously obtained from the couple.

This demonstrates the powerful combination of thorough preparation, targeted questioning, and active listening in action.

Fig. 8. "Illustration of a reporter asking open-ended and probing questions," Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.





Master Interviewing, Master the Story

- **Prepare Thoroughly**
Research deeply and plan strategically for every interview opportunity.
- **Ask Smart Questions**
Focus on real experiences and follow the unexpected threads that emerge.
- **Listen Actively**
Your next great story could come from the answer you weren't expecting to hear.

Start practicing today — every great story begins with a great interview, and every great interview begins with mastering these fundamental skills.

Fig. 9. “close up of mic,” Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.

Mastering Interviewing Skills

Essential techniques for gathering firsthand information, uncovering perspectives, and bringing human voices to journalism stories.



Fig. 10. “journalist actively listening and taking notes during an interview,” Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.

Why Interviewing Matters

Accuracy

Direct engagement reduces reliance on secondhand information and ensures factual reporting.

Depth

Reveals motivations, intentions, and context behind events that documents cannot provide.

Human Connection

Personal stories add relatability and emotional resonance to news coverage.

Verification

Allows journalists to confirm facts, clarify contradictions, and challenge assumptions.

Interview Objectives



Primary Goals

- Obtain firsthand facts and details
- Clarify complex information
- Gather diverse opinions and perspectives
- Understand motivations behind actions

Strategic Benefits

- Humanize abstract stories
- Uncover hidden truths
- Build lasting source relationships
- Create compelling narratives

Fig. 11. “Illustration of a journalist actively listening and taking notes during an interview,” Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.

Types of Interviews



Informational

Gather factual details about events, policies, or issues for news reporting and background research.



Opinion-Based

Capture personal views and interpretations for features, analysis pieces, and commentary sections.



Personality

Reveal character and experiences for human-interest stories, profiles, and in-depth reporting.



Investigative

Uncover hidden information and wrongdoing through careful preparation and ethical sensitivity.

Preparation is Key



Research Thoroughly

Study the topic, review documents, and understand context before meeting your source.



Define Purpose

Establish clear objectives and story angle to guide your questioning strategy.



Craft Questions

Prepare focused questions mixing open-ended and closed formats for comprehensive coverage.



Plan Logistics

Arrange location, equipment, and timing while anticipating potential challenges.

Questioning Techniques



Open-Ended Questions

Encourage detailed responses and storytelling. Example: "Can you describe what happened?"



Closed-Ended Questions

Elicit specific facts and brief responses. Example: "Did the meeting take place yesterday?"



Probing Questions

Follow up to clarify and expand responses. Example: "Can you explain why you made that choice?"



Hypothetical Questions

Explore reactions to scenarios. Example: "How would you respond if this happened again?"

Conducting Professional Interviews

Build Rapport

Establish trust through respectful, attentive behavior and acknowledgment of expertise.

Stay Neutral

Maintain professionalism without showing personal opinions that could influence answers.



Listen Actively

Focus on responses, show engagement, and pick up on nuances and unspoken meaning.

Observe Non-Verbals

Monitor body language, expressions, and tone to enrich understanding of responses.

Fig. 12. “Visual representation Conducting Professional Interviews,” Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.



Ethical & Legal Considerations

Ethical Standards

- Ensure informed consent
- Respect privacy boundaries
- Avoid manipulative techniques
- Protect vulnerable sources
- Maintain cultural sensitivity

Legal Requirements

- Follow recording laws
- Prevent defamation risks
- Respect confidentiality
- Understand source protection
- Balance public vs. private interest

An illustration of a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a light-colored shirt and a dark tie, speaking into a black microphone. The background is a light yellow color with some dark green foliage on the left and right sides. A blue rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of the illustration, containing the caption text.

Fig. 14. “Illustration of a journalist on mic, Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.

Master the Art

Interviewing excellence combines thorough preparation, skilled questioning, active listening, and ethical conduct. Practice these techniques to gather accurate, insightful information that serves the public interest.

Continuous Improvement

Evaluate each interview to refine techniques and enhance future reporting quality.

Adapt to Context

Modify approaches for different settings: one-on-one, group, phone, or virtual interviews.

Lecture Summary: Interviewing Skills – Preparation, Questioning, Listening

Interviewing is at the heart of journalistic practice. It is the bridge between the journalist and the source — the process through which facts, opinions, emotions, and human experiences are uncovered and translated into compelling stories. This lecture emphasizes that interviewing is not merely a conversation, but a structured professional exercise that requires preparation, questioning skill, ethical awareness, and active listening.

Effective interviewing enhances the **accuracy, depth, and credibility** of news reporting. It allows journalists to verify information, clarify ambiguities, and provide audiences with well-rounded perspectives that reflect reality more faithfully than secondhand reports.

Preparation is the foundation of every successful interview. Journalists must:

Research topics and interviewees thoroughly to understand context and background.

Define the purpose and focus of the interview to guide questioning.

Prepare well-structured questions and anticipate possible challenges.

Arrange logistics, check equipment, and plan for potential obstacles or sensitivities.

Questioning techniques determine the richness of information obtained. Skilled journalists balance open-ended, closed, and probing questions while avoiding leading or biased phrasing. Open-ended questions encourage storytelling and reflection, while probing questions help uncover underlying motives or details that add depth to reporting.

During the interview, **professionalism and empathy** are key. Building rapport establishes trust and comfort, making the interviewee more open. Active listening allows journalists to notice nuances, emotional cues, and non-verbal signals such as tone, gestures, and expressions that may reveal more than words alone. Maintaining neutrality ensures that the journalist remains an objective conduit of information.

Ethical and legal considerations underpin responsible interviewing. Journalists must secure informed consent, respect privacy, and avoid manipulation or misrepresentation. They should understand relevant recording laws, prevent defamation, and protect confidential or vulnerable sources when necessary.

Recording and note-taking safeguard the accuracy and reliability of collected information. Recordings capture exact phrasing and tone, while notes provide structure and observations for later reference. After the interview, material should be edited ethically — preserving meaning, context, and accuracy without distortion or sensationalism.

Handling difficult interviewees and following up for clarification are part of the process. Calmness, patience, and professionalism help manage hostility or evasion. Follow-up questions ensure completeness, while post-interview reflection allows the journalist to evaluate effectiveness, identify improvements, and refine techniques for future interviews.

Finally, **adaptability** is essential. Journalists must adjust their methods for different contexts — in-person, group, phone, or virtual interviews — while maintaining professionalism and respect across all formats.

In conclusion, interviewing is more than a means of gathering information; it is a disciplined craft that combines curiosity, critical thinking, and human connection. Mastering preparation, questioning, listening, and ethics enables journalists to produce stories that are insightful, truthful, and impactful — stories that serve the public interest and uphold the highest standards of journalism.



Fig. 2. “Journalist preparing questions and reviewing notes before an interview,” Gamma.app, Gamma Technologies, 5 Oct. 2025.

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