

Conducting Interviews

Preparation

1. Do background research. Understand the topic of interest as much as you can.
2. Prepare focused questions from your topic (see suggestions below). These should not be “yes” or “no” questions. Make about 5 questions, and make a list. Put them in some intentional order. This will later guide you in your interview.
3. Decide how you're going to record the interview. You are going to take notes, so bring a pencil, enough paper and a clipboard to write on. If you're going to use a tape recorder (recommended), have a reliable, familiar one ready to go.

Requesting an interview

1. Remember that this assignment requires a Christian perspective. Seek out a person whose Christian faith is known before you make your request.
2. Contact the person by telephone, letter, e-mail, or through another person who knows both you and the potential interviewee.
3. State why you want to have this interview. Identify yourself as a student researcher and your interview as a school assignment. Mention the approximate time it should take, and courteously ask if the potential interviewee has such time. The time shouldn't be too long. Be prepared for a person to say “No.” Many of the best people are also the busiest. Have alternatives for persons to contact.
4. If the person is unable to meet with you in person, try an e-mail interview. However, conducting an interview via email is a last choice. Your first choice should always be face-to-face.

Conducting the interview

1. Dress appropriately, be punctual, very polite, and as professional as possible.
2. If using a tape recorder, ask the interviewee if he or she minds your doing so.
3. Take notes. Even if you're using a tape recorder, you must take notes and fill in what you missed by listening to the tape later. Try to get at least the start of direct quotes in their own words; this is very helpful for referencing the tape later. Any recording is a back-up; the interview itself is the primary source.
4. Observe the interviewee. Body language and facial expression may add another dimension to their answers.
5. Try to stay on track and keep your interviewee on track; also expect some unpredictable new directions. Spontaneous discussions may be very useful.
6. Before ending the interview, summarize the main points (this is where your on-the-spot notes are essential), checking your grasp of the most important ideas. Take extra care to get any corrections or clarifications right.
7. Email interviews do offer special advantages. Since the interviewee may have more time to think and answer, you may be able to get added details. Be professional even in emails. Don't use internet shorthand, like “u r the best!” Email responses may be spaced out over time; this is not ideal, however it can work.

Follow up

1. Go over your information as soon as possible and without distractions. If you used a tape recorder, add to your notes using the tape. Fill in details; get quotes exactly right. Assess whether the acquired information is what you wanted. Note what you think might be missing, which becomes the basis of further research.
2. Decide whether you may benefit from some direct follow-up. If you're missing only minor details, e-mail or phone may serve you better.
3. You owe the interviewee the courtesy of a chance to preview any use you make of his or her statements. Ideally, this should come well in advance of any paper you plan to submit to a third party (teacher or class). This takes planning, so plan ahead!
4. Remember to send a Thank-you letter as soon as possible.

Suggestions for Questions

Design questions to cover at least five areas:

1. Ask about the person's background, credentials, experiences. This allows the interviewee to establish his or her own authority to speak on the topic.
2. Ask about the history or background of the topic and its related issues. What has happened in the past that must be considered for a right perspective on this topic?
3. Ask about the current status of the topic / issues. What is happening today? How have things changed in our fast-paced world?
4. Ask the person to place his views in a broader Biblical perspective. Where do we look in the Bible or in Christian history for principles, models, insights?
5. Ask about recommended reading, and about major thinkers relevant to your topic. Who is on the short list of experts? Which are the most important published sources for this topic?

MLA format for citing interviews

If oral, MLA requires all of the following elements:

name of the person interviewed, kind of interview (Personal interview, Telephone interview), and the date.

Sample:

Berg, Gaius. Personal interview. 29 Nov. 2005.

If digital, MLA requires further information:

name of the writer of the document, a description of the document that identifies the recipient (e.g., "Email to the author"), and the date posted. Any "title" (usually the Subject line of an email) should also be given, immediately after the writer's name and enclosed in quotation marks.

Sample:

Berg, Gaius. "Responses to Your Questions." Email to the author. 29 Nov. 2005.

Helpful online reference sites

<www.kent.k12.wa.us/KSD/KR/RESEARCH/interview.html>

<saulcarliner.home.att.net/id/interview.htm>

<www.cthrb.ca/ArticleResources/email-interviews.shtml>