Pre-interview preparation

The more you prepare for an interview, the better it is likely to go. So how do you prepare?

Your pre-interview preparation should consist of at least three steps:

Step 1- Determine your angle  
Step 2 - Research  
Step 3 - Preparing your questions

Step 1–Determine your angle

Your angle is the **specific** area of your topic you will **focus** on during your interview.

Examples of angles:

*The impact of social media on the mental health of college students.*

*How long-time residents of a coastal community have experienced climate change.*

To help you find your angle, fill out the table below with some possible answers.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| What information am I seeking? |  |
| What ideas do I want to explore? |  |
| What story do I want to tell? |  |

Write out your own possible angle for your interview:

Step 2–Research

Keeping in mind your angle (your specific focus), you will need to research your topic. You do not need to become an expert on your topic, but you need to be informed enough to have a conversation with someone who is.

Use the note-taking chart on the next page to keep track of your research about your topic.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Summary  What seems most relevant to your angle in your research material? | Research material  References, info and ideas related to your angle  Your own questions / comments about material |
| Takeaways  What general points can you take away from your research? | |

It may also be helpful to research your interviewee(s) ahead of time.

Use the note-taking chart below to keep track of your research about your interviewee(s).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Summary  What seems most relevant to your angle in your research material? | Research material  Do an online search of your interviewee(s). If they have a personal or professional website, look it up. If they have a CV, ask them to send it to you.  What references, ideas, info did you find? |
| Takeaways  What general points can you take away from your research? | |

Step 3–Preparing your questions

Based on your angle and your research, generate a list of questions for your interviewee(s).

Here are a few tips when coming up with questions:

* Avoid questions that can be answered by a “yes” or a “no”
* Start your questions with words like “how”, “why” or “what”, which will prompt more detailed and in-depth answers
* Ask questions that invite your interviewee to tell you a story. For example, “Tell me about the flood that happened here this year. How did it start?”

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| Possible questions to ask your interviewee(s): |

Once you have completed a list of questions, make an outline, organizing your questions in the order you want to ask them. In choosing the order of your question, you could consider perhaps:

* Beginning with a question that helps to develop a rapport with your interviewee(s). They are not just experts, witnesses, testimonials, etc––they will appreciate you showing you want to connect with them as a person
* Beginning by asking your interviewee(s) about their personal and/or professional background
* Asking why the topic interests them / why they think it matters
* Asking about any important context needed to understand the topic
* Asking about basic concepts before more advanced concepts
* Asking questions chronologically (i.e. covering past events before present events)
* Structuring your questions around the kind of story you want to tell. E.g.
* How-to
* How it works
* Why I became a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Eye witness experience of an event
* Personal experience with a topic
* And many more!

If you know what kind of story you want to tell, you can also organize your questions into the beginning, middle and end of that story

For example, say your angle is:

*How to interpret scientific studies that friends post on social media*

You could organize your interview as a “how-to” story. You could tell your interviewee about a particular scientific study that your friend posted online and then ask:

Beginning–How would they approach evaluating this study?

Middle–What are some of the hallmarks of a high quality scientific study?

End–Any general advice in interpreting scientific studies?

In the chart below, create an outline of your questions, organizing them in the order you would like to ask them. Remember that most topics are broad and you can’t cover everything in a single interview, so try to pick a specific focus and target your questions there.

|  |
| --- |
| Outline of questions to ask your interviewee(s): |