

6.

A WRITING STUDIES SCHOLAR TEACHES INTERVIEW-BASED WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

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What You Will Learn in This Chapter

In this chapter you will learn some basic principles for conducting personal interviews with other people. You will also learn how to write an essay using this “primary” research as your main source. By the end of this chapter, you should be able to use primary research in combination with secondary research to make a specific claim in response to a research question or problem.

Key Terms

- Primary Research
- Secondary Research
- Interview
- Writing Studies

Conducting Interviews as Primary Research

In the humanities and social sciences, one form of primary research (data that the researcher collects themselves) is the personal interview. In college writing classrooms, instructors often assign primary research projects like the interview in combination with secondary research (existing data in the area you’re investigating) to shed light on a problem, issue, or topic. This is a challenging writing task because it involves several steps that tap into different writing abilities: First you have to figure out who you want to interview; then you have to decide what questions to ask; then you have to conduct the interview and record their responses in some way; and finally you have to write your report and incorporate their responses into your own writing. Despite the difficulty involved, these techniques are used in several different contexts outside of humanities-based research. For instance, journalists write stories based on personal interviews with influential people and/or experts; police officers interview eye-witnesses and write police reports to document their investigations; an auditor investigating the finances of a company may conduct an “audit interview” with employees to learn more about the financial information of the company. In each case, these professionals use interviews to collect information from specific people, and then use writing to put those interviews into context for specific audiences. According to Dana

Lynn Driscoll, interviews “are an excellent way to learn in-depth information from a person.” So what are some basic guidelines for conducting an interview for a research paper in college?

Discovering your Purpose

The first thing you will need to do before conducting an interview is to figure out the purpose of the project. The purpose will vary depending on the assignment instructions, the goal of your project, or the criteria on which you will be evaluated. Nevertheless, there are some basic guidelines for discovering your purpose that apply in almost every scenario. First, you’ll need to ask yourself, why do I need to conduct interviews? What am I supposed to find out from my interviews? For example, is your purpose to collect expert testimonies from people who can provide insight into specialized topics? Or, perhaps you are being asked to conduct an interview that profiles an individual person and their day-to-day lives? Other purposes for interviews may simply be to share somebody’s story or to shed light on an important topic. According to Irving Seidman, in-depth interviewing ultimately is about trying to understand other human beings through their own interpretations of their experience (9). In other words, interviewing is about discovering how real people understand the meaning behind their behaviors and experiences. As a researcher, then, your goal before you embark on an interview-based project is to discover which human experiences would best help you figure out what you want to learn. So let’s try this. See if you can answer the following questions prior to designing an interview-based college writing assignment.

1. According to my instructor, the main goal of this assignment is to _____
2. I am being asked to conduct interviews so I can learn more about _____
3. In order to learn more about _____, I need to learn more about the experiences of _____ and how they attach meaning to _____

As you can see from the questions, before you do an interview project, you need to be able to articulate the main goal of the assignment, the main learning outcome you’re supposed to meet, and the specific people and their experiences that you think will lead you to that outcome.

So, let’s say your first-year composition instructor asks you to interview someone who works in your future industry and then write a paper summarizing the way they write in that field. Let’s also say that you’re an aspiring mechanical engineer. Your answers to the questions above might be as follows:

1. According to my instructor, the main goal of this assignment is to **interview someone in mechanical engineering and write a paper about their writing practices**
2. I am being asked to conduct interviews so I can learn more about **how writing works in the field of mechanical engineering**
3. In order to learn more about **mechanical engineering**, I need to learn more about the experiences of **working mechanical engineers** and how they attach meaning to **their day-to-day activities.**”

In the above scenario, the student’s answers to these questions (in bold) will help them tailor their interview questions to the specific purpose for the project. If you have an interview-based writing assignment, try filling in your own answers and see if it helps the brainstorming process.

Selecting Participants

After you’ve discovered the purpose of your interview project, your next step is to decide whom to interview. Part of this is logistical: What do you have time for? Who among your network would be willing to participate in an interview with you? Do you need to

interview one person, or multiple? Should it be people you know, or do you need to contact people you've never met before? The answers to these questions all depend on the specific assignment.

Say, for example, your composition instructor asked you to interview an expert in the industry you hope to enter after college. If you are an aspiring high school teacher, for example, it might be best to reach out to a former teacher of yours that you still keep in contact with. However, if your assignment was to interview an expert on an important issue impacting your community, there's a chance you may not know anybody in that field. In that case, you would contact local nonprofits and community activists who specialize in that specific issue, and then email or call to schedule an interview with someone. Whatever you do, it is important you understand the connection between the participants you select and the ultimate goal or learning outcome of the assignment.

Designing Interview Questions

So let's say you've chosen an interview participant and they have agreed to be interviewed by you. Well done! This kind of logistical work is a challenging part of the writing process, because you need to cultivate your interpersonal skills and display confidence so that your interview subjects feel comfortable. But now, with an interview on the calendar, you need to come up with some questions. The best way to brainstorm questions is to make broader conceptual connections to your overall purpose, in the same way we did above.

So for example, you may remember that the interview is essentially a way to create new insights into a topic using a real live person's quotations as evidence. In that case, your next task is to determine what kinds of questions would help you create specific insights that the assignment is asking for. As you brainstorm, try to come up with answers to the following prompts:

- In order to learn more about _____, I am interviewing _____
- Some specific experiences I want _____ to elaborate on might be _____

Notice that these prompts are designed to help you make explicit connections between the interview questions and what specifically you want to learn. So, let's say you have an assignment that asks you to interview a faculty member at your university and write a paper about their research. Here's how you might answer the previous brainstorming questions:

- In order to learn more about **faculty research at my university**, I am interviewing **my American history professor**
- Some specific experiences I want **my professor** to elaborate on might be **what her book is about, how she came to be interested in this topic, and why this topic is important for people to understand**

Again, it's important to notice here that the answers (in bold) are directly tied to the topic you want to learn about. From here, you can design interview questions that are directly relevant and interesting for your participant.

Interview Questions to Avoid

While the kinds of questions you ask need to be specific to your overall purpose, there are some kinds of questions that won't lead you in the right direction. According to the Purdue OWL, there are five types of questions you want to avoid.

1. **Biased Questions:** You do not want to ask or word your questions in a way that attempts to lead your participant in a certain direction. For example, if you are interviewing an expert about tax reform, you don't want to phrase a question like: "Wouldn't you agree that we need a flat tax rate in this country?" Instead, phrase it as an opportunity to learn about an issue: "What would you say are some of the pros and cons of a 'flax-tax' policy?"
2. **Questions that assume what they ask:** In the field of rhetoric, this is a common fallacy called "Begging the Question," which is essentially stating or presuming something as a fact when you're actually trying to prove or learn more about it in the

first place. So for example, let's say you're interviewing a film historian and you say: "Why is *Citizen Kane* the best movie of all time?" That's begging the question. You can't presume the conclusion of your statement when you're the one actually trying to learn more about it. Instead, ask, "What would you say is one of the best movies of all time?"

3. **Double-Barreled Questions:** A double-barreled question is a kind of clumsy interview technique where you ask multiple questions at the same time. This makes it difficult for participants to answer clearly and effectively. So, for example, let's say you're interviewing your history professor about their research and you say: "How did you become interested in pre-civil war history and what is its main relevance today?" This is "double-barreled" because it asks them to speak on two questions at once. Instead, ask one question at a time, "How did you become interested in pre-Civil War history?" After they answer, you may then choose to follow up with, "What lessons did you see in your studies of pre-civil war history that are applicable today?" or perhaps you can ask a follow-up question specific to their answer.
4. **Confusing or Wordy Questions:** You want to make sure that the questions you ask are worded in such a way that the participant knows exactly how to respond. So for example, let's say you're interviewing a working professional about the kinds of writing they do at their job. They might get confused if you ask them, "What do you think about writing in the workplace?" This is a confusing question because it's so open-ended that they'll likely only provide vague answers. Instead, make sure your question asks about specific things or actions. Try something like, "What are some specific documents you have to produce as part of your day-to-day work as an engineer?"
5. **Questions unrelated to your purpose:** The last kinds of interview questions to avoid, according to Purdue OWL, are questions that are unrelated to what you are trying to learn. When conducting an interview for your writing class, you need to ask yourself if the questions you are asking will help you meet the outcome of the assignment. For example, say you're profiling a director at a nonprofit, and the assignment is to learn more about the issue in the community they're trying to solve. You wouldn't want to ask a question like, "What do you think about the recent election?" While the person's views on this topic might be interesting, the answers are likely not going to help you answer your main research question, and you don't want to waste their time.

Conducting the Interview

Here are a few more tips about conducting effective interviews.

1. Help your participant feel comfortable. Start with a minute or two of small talk so it doesn't feel like an interrogation. Remember, this is a conversation after all.
2. Ask up front if you can record. It is important that your participant knows they are being recorded, and you don't want to hide it from them or ask them in the middle of your conversation.
3. Please know that it is perfectly OK to go "off script" when you are interviewing. While you may have thought long and hard about your questions, sometimes the interview goes into new directions you didn't anticipate. Don't be so rigid that you can't explore a new opportunity as the conversation develops. This kind of flexibility can help you learn new things you didn't even realize you could learn from an interview.
4. Do your research. Before conducting the interview, try to learn as much as you can about the person you're interviewing. What's been written about them already? Have they given interviews in the past? What kinds of questions have they answered already, and how can you ask new or updated questions? Learn statistics about the broader issue you're investigating so you can show your participant that you are interested and knowledgeable about the subject you are discussing.
5. Know the difference between open-ended and yes/no questions. In other words, you need to make sure the questions you ask can get you where you need to go in the interview. If you ask a question that can be answered in only yes or no, that's where the discussion will end. Sometimes, that's OK. For example, the question, "Do you enjoy your job?" is a closed question. It can be answered simply yes or no, and depending on the purpose of your interview, that may be an important insight you'll want

to know. But if you want an in-depth answer, a yes/no question won't work. Instead, ask more open-ended questions that begin with "how" or "why" or "what." These questions give your participant lots of room to explore their thoughts and experiences. For example, instead of "do you enjoy your job," you might ask, "What does it mean to love your job?"

Transcribing and Coding the Interview

After you have completed the interview, now it's time to transcribe it, which means listening to it and writing out exactly what each person in the interview said. The main reason you should transcribe your interview is so you can provide direct quotes from your participant to use as evidence for claims you make in your essay. This is probably the most time-consuming aspect of your project, so make sure you budget appropriately. Here are three tips for effective transcription:

1. **Listen to the entire interview first.** Listening to the interview all the way through before transcribing can help you identify pauses and the general rhythm of the conversation. It can also help you determine who's talking at any given moment/
2. **Come up with a coding system to help you transcribe quickly.** As you transcribe, it is important to develop a coding system so that when you come back to it later you can quickly identify the quotes that you need. Whenever you or the interviewee speaks, for example, write out their name in all caps in the transcription document so that you don't get mixed up when you are writing your essay. Also, when you're typing the words said by each speaker, put their words into paragraphs, or small chunks, and then whenever they pause or move on to a new thought, start a new paragraph. This will help you keep their points organized so that you know which ones to come back to later. As you're transcribing, you'll also want to use ellipses, or "...", to indicate pauses or breaks in speech. And, after you're done transcribing, highlight important points your participant makes, so that you can focus on them in your essay. For example, if you have been creating new paragraphs in your transcription document every time your participant moves on to a new thought or idea, you can highlight certain topics in specific colors. So for example, if you are doing a profile about a person in your community, you may highlight biographical information they shared with you in red, but use a different color for stories they share about their profession, and so on. Then, in your essay, if you want to quote from them, you know which colors to look for in your notes to use.
3. **Make strategic decisions about which portions of the interview you transcribe.** You'll need to be strategic about how and whether you transcribe every single utterance they make ("verbatim") or whether you edit their words as you transcribe ("non-verbatim"). For example, when we are just talking to each other out loud, we don't "sound" like we do when we write. Usually when we speak, we use a lot of "ums," or "likes" or "uhs" as we communicate. According to the University of Wisconsin Writing Center, these utterances are normal parts of speech: "We start sentences and then interrupt ourselves and never return to complete those earlier thoughts." But with writing it's different. When we write something down, we get to go back, edit things, refine ideas, and create a more focused train of thought. Therefore, whenever you're representing other people's speech in your writing, you have to decide whether you will transcribe those "ums" or whether you'll edit them out to appear more like written speech. This is the difference between "verbatim transcription" and "non-verbatim transcription." Use verbatim transcription, or writing out exactly what your participant says as they say it (all the filler words, the "likes" and the "uhs") if your assignment has to do with people's individual language choices, or if your essay is analyzing or considering how humans use language, or the implications of certain kinds of words, etc. However, you may want to use non-verbatim transcription if you are simply using someone's experience to make a broader point and you want readers to see a clear and articulate representation of the interviewee's ideas. Whatever you do, the University of Wisconsin Writing Center encourages student writers to "make sure that you are being consistent with this choice across your article, paper, report or essay." Here's an example below of the difference between a verbatim and non-verbatim transcription, again from the University of Wisconsin Writing Center. There is no hard-and-fast rule about which style of transcription is "best." It's all about what you are trying to accomplish with the interview and whether you think it's important the reader knows exactly how they "sounded" or what their ideas are.

1. Verbatim transcription: Well, you see, I was [pause] the problem, as I saw it, was more of a, a matter of representation, you know? How can I, like, be the one that's just out there just declaring the way things are when I've not even, like, you know, experiencing the whole process for myself?
2. Non-verbatim Transcription: The problem, as I saw it, was more a matter of representation. How can I be the one that's out there declaring the way things are when I've not even experienced the whole process for myself?

Using Interview Data in your Essay

The last part of incorporating interview evidence into a college-level writing assignment is to actually write the essay. At this point, the hard part is over: you've brainstormed about the purpose and scope of the interview, you contacted and scheduled an interview with your participant, you've designed questions tailored to the assignment, and you've transcribed the audio of the interview and coded for interesting and worthwhile quotes you hope to use. Now, all you have to do is write up what you discovered. More than likely, your interview assignment will be asking you to make an argument about a topic, or to analyze a particular phenomenon and then support your claims with evidence from your interviews. Even if you're doing a profile of an individual person, for example, your essay still needs to make some kind of claim or have some kind of common theme using the person's life story as evidence. Whatever the purpose of your assignment, you use an interview source the same way you would use any other source in an essay: to back up a claim or a statement that you make. You are the one making the argument, so if you quote from the interview, the quote needs to be in support of a claim you are making, not the other way around. For example, let's say you're doing a profile of a local teacher, and you are describing her background. You should begin by contextualizing her background with a summary, and then move in with a direct quote that adds context to that summary. For instance, you might write something like this:

Stacey first became interested in teaching when she was just a little girl. "One of my earliest memories is teaching my little sister how to tie her shoe," Stacey recalls.

There are two things to notice here. One, the quote isn't just plopped in, forcing the reader to piece together why it is significant. There is a sentence before the quote that makes a specific point about the person. Second, the quotation doesn't just repeat the statement made before it either. Instead, the quotation provides first-hand evidence in support of the claim you are making about her background. Also notice the verb choice for "recalls" as a way to attribute the quotation. There are lots of phrases for this, like "for example," "according to," "she said," "she described," etc. Try out a variety of these throughout your essay.

Conclusion

Incorporating interviews into your writing-based research project is a great way to focus on the experiences of another person and to put someone's life experiences in the context of broader social and cultural issues. But there is a lot of work that goes into the interview-essay before you can even start writing. First, you need to figure out the purpose of your interview. Then, you need to select participants and design effective questions. After that, you need to actually conduct and then transcribe the interview. And then you can begin writing your essay. By the time you start writing, you will have already spent a considerable amount of time with this subject, which hopefully will help you write and sort through what you want to say.

Moreover, as you write your essay, you need to make specific claims, statements, or interpretations about the subject of your interview, and utilize their words as evidence to back up your claims (much like you would any other academic source). Begin with an introduction, where you introduce the broader topic of the paper in your own words, and then move into separate paragraphs that make specific points about your interviewee or the broader subject your paper is about. Use quotes from your color-coded interview transcript that "back-up" or provide context to the points you are making in those body paragraphs. Make sure the quotes you choose don't just repeat what you are writing either. The quotes you choose need to extend, support, or clarify your writing.

If you've done a good job on your interview-essay, you will come to new ideas, arguments, or insights by putting your own writing in conversation with the quotations of others. Using interview data in your essays can make your writing more exciting and

engaging. It can also help you make sense of big topics through the very specific experiences of individual people. And as we saw in the introduction of this chapter, the skills you develop conducting interviews will help you in a vast array of other fields, from journalism to accounting. Using interviews in your writing classes can also help you develop confidence or expand your personal network. At its core, though, conducting interviews for college-level writing assignments is a great way, at least briefly, to walk in somebody else's shoes. By using writing to see the world through somebody else's eyes, we can think more critically about our world and the diverse ways everyday people navigate it.

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