Before

See yourself as a journalist in the community you cover. Journalists are taught their positions are fourth estates—removed from and watching communities instead of being a part of them. Determine your position among others who take part in it. Grouping interviewees by addressing information gaps alongside the people whose lives you report on. Define your role in terms of relationships rather than sourcing, and see engagement as woven into your process, whether you are a reporter with "engagement" in your title or not.

Have goals beyond publishing a story. Know your values and have goals as a journalist outside of producing story links—examples of topics or questions you're going to ask, outline of what takes place in the interview, and other forms of public-facing documentation. Look at your work in ways you and your newsroom do. They may also value the representation and publication of their story differently than your publication. Acknowledge differences in the value of journalism.

Treat educating others on your process as a part of the job. Find ways to continually inform others about how your newsgathering process or your newsroom works. Give context about how your process involves or clarifies. Discuss any questions they may have about logistics.

Understand power dynamics. Approach your stories knowing the power gap at play between you, the interviewee, and other sources. Accept that objectivity will fall apart if you change your process. Be flexible and anticipate flexibility.

Explain the process from the interviewee's perspective. When explaining steps to publication, help your interviewee see what the newsgathering process will look like from their point of view and how they will be included in it. Avoid using insider-journalism lingo or language that speaks to newsroom needs rather than the interviewee's. For example, instead of saying "I'm going to use your quotes," connect your interviewee to the newsgathering process. This could be interview set-up logistics, your reporting credentials, your deadline, examples of topics or questions you're going to ask, or an outline of what takes place in the interview, or the equipment used.

Validate—don't dismiss—interviewee's concerns. If an interviewee expresses suspicions, hesitancies, or concerns about what you are asking or how you see it, have an off-the-record conversation to discuss your reporting process and the story. Take no equipment.

Approach steps of the newsgathering process as stages of informed consent. A person has to know how a process works in order to give informed consent to participate in it. See the process of approaching a potential interviewee, moving to the interview itself, and having them speak to you "on the record," as multi-step stages of consent-giving that go beyond the singular interview, and having them speak to you "on the record." Be flexible and anticipate flexibility.

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Discuss the goals of the story. Talk about why you as a journalist feel the story is in the public interest or report on. Define reporting in terms of relationships rather than sourcing, and see engagement as woven into your process, whether you are a reporter with "engagement" in your title or not.

Use self-assessment and self-attunement as a tool. Prior to the interview and in future stages of it, check in with yourself about your knowledge and capacity to report the story to inform how you approach and conduct the interview. What does it mean to you that you helped to vary its types of interviews, stories, and settings, and adjust when needed.

Involving others in the sourcing process. Have conversations with your newsroom about approaching interviews and anticipating difficult moments or complications in advance. Communicate intentions and expectations for interviews as a team to facilitate psychological safety from the inside out.
What's Your Process?

During

Use research as a relationship builder. Go into the interview demonstrating that you’ve done work to familiarize yourself with your interviewee in the context of the larger story, and be upfront when you haven’t. Not doing enough research can put people on the defensive.

Discuss the newsgathering process. Tell your interviewee how the interview, reporting, and publication process with your newsroom usually works. Let them know if there are any constraints to the interview, how the meeting is going to be taken, and any connection and interview guidelines. Ask them what they know will change and evolve as reporting continues and talk about what stories are edited for.

Go beyond the “reporter’s spiel.” Explaining reporting, newsroom, and publication processes at the top of an interview can be a lot to cover. Don’t hesitate to create templates or guidelines with information about your newsroom and process. Encourage interviewees to send send interviewees before or after the interview. When possible, show examples of stories you’ve done.

Define the rules and rights of the interview. Talk to an interviewee about how they can stop, start, or pause the interview, and if they can or cannot edit, change, or take something they said during the interview. Let them know how they can ask for questions to be repeated, rephrased, or clarified. Tell them if there are options available for rescheduling or shortening the interview.

Place value on the interview. For private citizens, interacting with the media and being published in a news story are significant life events. How you approach an interview demonstrates an interviewee’s value to the story. Let your interviewee know that it is sincere when you show them respect. Reflect on how certain routines in your process may leave certain interviewees excluded or unvalued.

Give opportunities for correction. It can be intimidating to correct someone you are unfamiliar with in a new situation, like an interview. Make opportunities for your interviewee to correct or clarify how you are interpreting their words. “Did you mean...?” “I’m hearing...” “Does this speak to you?”

Explain the purpose of recording. If you are recording an interview that is not for broadcast, take care in explaining the recording equipment, how the recording file will be used, and whether the recording the interviewee is being on the record. Ask permission to record both before you record, and directly after you start recording. If you are taking notes, explain the purpose of the form.

Lay out what you can and can't do. Your role at the interview is to establish a relationship and do a job — not one or the other — and with these responsibilities come limitations and allowances for interactions. Take opportunities to discuss relevant expectations, boundaries, and parameters of an interviewee’s and your role as interviewer.

Check in. Ask how it feels to talk to you and tell their story. Offer words of affirmation, and know that acknowledgment is more important than trying to make someone feel better.

Introduce questions before you ask them. When possible, state the types and topics of questions before getting to the question stage of the interview. Preface difficult questions and ask for consent before asking sensitive questions. “Is it OK if I ask you about...?” “I’m not interested in discussing...” “If you were doing this story, what headline would you give...?”, “Who else should I be talking to or where else should I go for this story?”, and “What questions do you have about this topic?”

Seek ways to give interviewees choice. Find and give opportunities for choice in engagement — where, when, and how the interview takes place, who is present at the interview, what language it is in, etc. See your role as not “getting” interviewees to do something, but giving them information to decide whether they want to engage. Avoid “forced choice” situations and ensure every step of the process is presented as an option. Ex. Framing an ask as “Can we take a portrait of you, and if so, when?” instead of only “Can you give me a portrait?” — with those responsibilities come limitations and allowances for interactions. Tell them if there are options available for rescheduling or shortening the interview.

Tell your interviewee a chance to interview you. Allow your interviewee to ask questions about you, the story, and your newsroom. Block out time to do so at the beginning of your interview, and give them a heads up when scheduling the interview that they’ll have a chance to ask questions too. See this as establishing trust, rather than transactionally exchanging information.

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Involve your interviewee in fueling your reporting. Ask your interviewee what questions they have for your newsgathering process. Use their answers to help guide your reporting and value the expertise your interviewee is bringing to your reporting. Ex. “If you were doing this story, what headline would you give...?”, “Who else should I be talking to or where else should I go for this story?”, and “What questions do you have about this topic?”

Acknowledge your interviewee’s expertise. You are coming into your interviewee’s life after they’ve acquired the expertise you’re seeking — whether via acquiring credentials or life experience — so be sure to demonstrate recognition of it in your interview. Let them introduce their qualifications on the subject to you, and respect the fact that not everything they said. Ask follow-up questions about how they’d describe the story you’re reporting and that center on their experience.

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Talk about post-publication. Have a conversation about what may happen after the publication of your interviewee’s story. This could include talking about potential audience reactions and digital footprints of the story. Ask how they want to be featured in promotion.

Tell your interviewee how the interview will get used. Set expectations with your interviewee about what other stories or parts of the interview will be used in the final publication, and whether you will be able to take care in explaining the recording equipment, how the recording file will be used, and whether the recording the interviewee is being on the record. Ask permission to record both before you record, and directly after you start recording. If you are taking notes, explain the purpose of the form.

Convey where the interviewee fits in the story’s bigger picture. Let them know if they are going to share the focus with other interviewees or be the main focus. Share relevant information about how you acquired the expertise you’re seeking — whether via acquiring credentials or life experience – so be sure to demonstrate recognition of it in your interview. Let them introduce their qualifications on the subject to you, and respect the fact that not everything they said. Ask follow-up questions about how they’d describe the story you’re reporting and that center on their experience.

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What's Your Process?

After

Double-check and fact-check on meaning. Expand your process, when applicable, to fact-check an interviewee’s meaning of quotes between an interview and publication, rather than solely confirming direct transcription of information. See it as a way to extend “sourcing for understanding” after the interview. Start with something like, “Hey, I was going through my notes, and you mentioned _____. Is this what you meant?”

Burst quotes aren’t just verifiably accurate, but meaningfully accurate. Continually honor the “ethos” of what was shared in the interview throughout the editing and publishing processes; advocate for it when needed. Ask if the final story is representing an interviewee’s scope and intent, and have conversations about it between editors and reporters.

Consider showing or telling the interviewee parts of the story before publication. Implement “no surprises” story processes. Go back to the interviewee to evaluate direct input for the story or the content of the story pre-publication. Analyze what harm or power dynamics are at play in those decisions.

Follow up and set expectations for it. Explain at the end of the interview if you intend to follow up with your interviewee before or after publication, and set known parameters for it. Encourage follow-up as a two-way street and explain how they can follow up with you and what to contact you about. If you know you can’t or won’t follow up with the interviewee before publication, let them know how you can stay in touch after the story is published, and find ways to leave the conversation with an open door.

Send editing and publication updates. Letting your interviewee know the status of the story they spoke to you about demystifies the process of newsgathering. Letting them know when the story is with your editor, when it’s going to be published, when it is published, or even that you’re still working on it, is effective.

Get a final confirmation before publication. When reporting on vulnerable information, return to your interviewee to ask if they are still OK with certain pieces of information being shared in publication before the story is published. Let interviewees change their minds or answers. Budget time in the editing and fact-checking process to go back over information with the interviewee.

Go back to show the story. Return to your interviewee or their community and bring the final story to them when they may not have access to it otherwise — whether the story is broadcast, print, or another medium. Consider when it’s appropriate to share what response the newsroom received about the story.

Explain why someone wasn’t featured in a story. If you spoke to someone for a story but they were not featured in the final publication, go back and explain to them why and how they still contributed to the story.

Encourage feedback. Ask for feedback, reflections, and reactions to the reporting process and your final stories from your interviewees. Talk about whether the story did its “job,” presented future coverage and any questions it brought up. If there is a quandary with the story, ask how it could’ve been done better. Don’t limit the discussion to just talking about accuracy corrections, but include any feedback about what was represented from interviews versus not.

Keep in touch outside of the publication cycle. Find ways to stay connected with past interviewees, whether on social media or by showing up in person. Reach out on future anniversaries, events, or coverage and check in.

Methodology

This tipsheet is the result of a project from Resolve Philadelphia’s inaugural fellow Madison Karas and Director of Community Engagement Derrick Cain, with the help of two dozen interviewees from newsrooms in Resolve Philly’s Broke in Philly collaborative, national journalism organizations, and schools. Special thanks to Angie Bacha and Lydia McFarlane for their bibliography work.

This project’s goal was to aggregate methods used in interviews, a standard point of contact for reporters.

We focused on interactions and conversations that could be used in interview stages by those who practice journalistic reporting. No means is every method in this document expected to be used for every interview. This document contains suggestions of starting points and is not a comprehensive “dos and don’ts” list.

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The Ibe Team
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Sue Robinson, School of Journalism & Mass Communication
University of Wisconsin-Madison Center for Journalism Ethics
Solidarity Journalism Initiative
Solutions Journalism Network
Trusting News
Resources Referenced

“22 Interview Questions to ‘Complicate the Narrative.’” SolutionsJournalism.org. Web. This infographic gives journalists tips on how to improve their interviews and better get to the heart of people's motivations. The infographic asks questions that get to people’s motivations, listen more and better, and expose people to the other tribe and their experiences.

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Lepro, Elizabeth. “How journalists can treat their sources better.” Investigative Reporters and Editors 2021 conference. The questions are framed to gain trust from the interviewers, listeners and notetakers.

Palmer, Ruth. “Becoming the News: How Ordinary People Respond to the Media Spotlight.” Transaction Publishers. December 2017. This book examines people’s motivations for and experiences of being a part of the journalistic process, whether in the newsroom, in the field, or in other settings. The book is centered around the experiences of others. This book explains the importance of the story and the source’s place in that story.

Mazzarotto, Marci. “Ruth Palmer, Becoming the News: How Ordinary People Respond to the Media Spotlight.” Mazzarotto, Marci. “Ruth Palmer, Becoming the News: How Ordinary People Respond to the Media Spotlight.” NPR. 9 March 2022. This book examines the importance of transparency in building trust during an interview. These tips given from NPR editors are meant to help journalists build trust with the interviewee by explaining the importance of the story and the source’s place in that story.

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Lepro, Elizabeth. “How journalists can treat their sources better.” Investigative Reporters and Editors 2021 conference. The questions are framed to gain trust from the interviewers, listeners and notetakers.

Arthur, Allen @lissomeslight. “Before I interview anyone, I ask. ‘Do you have any questions about my process? And if you want to know more about me or something else, I’m happy to answer it if I think someone else wants to know something you’d want me to include.’ This is what on the record/on background/off the record means.” McPRICE. Thursday, 17 June 2022. This article emphasizes the importance of active listening in interviews. In the spirit of full transparency, the article explains every aspect of the interview process to the interviewee in a way that makes them feel comfortable and know exactly what is going on.

Rispoll, Mike. @RispollMike. “I also always found it helpful to explain the process. ‘I’m using a recorder so I don’t misquote you.’ ‘I probably won’t use everything you say but tell me if there’s something you’d want me to include.’ This is what on the record/on background/off the record means.” McPRICE. Thursday, 17 June 2022. This article emphasizes the importance of active listening in interviews. In the spirit of full transparency, the article explains every aspect of the interview process to the interviewee in a way that makes them feel comfortable and know exactly what is going on.
“Talk to Us.” The Chronicle of Higher Education. 2021. This webpage is geared toward people who are being interviewed by Chronicle of Higher Education reporters. It gives them tips on how to approach an interview, and what to expect from the interview. It also explains how the interview is conducted, and ensures that the interviewee is comfortable and trust in the interviewer.

“Terms of Community Engagement.” Resolve Philly. This point from Resolve’s Community Engagement team details what community engagement is and how to achieve it. The goal of community engagement is to ensure that the news is accurate and relevant, and to produce more effective and ethical reporting and storytelling from within.

“Today’s trust tip: Build trust by asking sources what questions they have.” Trusting News newsletter #161. 2022. This newsletter issue covers the importance of journalists asking sources what questions they have to prepare them for an interview. It also outlines the ways in which journalists can assess legal risks they may face when publishing media.

“Showing the audience how journalists approached the story” and “Demonstrating balanced coverage of partisan topics.” The study’s findings were that the first approach improved perception, while the latter only marginally improved perception.

“Further Reading”

Chen, Gina Masullo, Curry, Alex, and Whipple, Kelsey. (2019, February). Building trust: What works for news organizations. Center for Media Engagement. This study tested two approaches to gaining audience trust: “Source-centric” and “Storyteller.” This article addresses how journalists can commit to better transparency, and says that the best place to start is by making a list of questions audience members have had and a list of what the journalist wishes the audience understood.


Mayer, Joy. “Transparency in Journalism is about Answering Audience Questions—Both Asked and Unspoken.” Medium, The Engaged Journalism Lab, 17 Apr. 2019. This article addresses how journalists can commit to better transparency, and says that the best place to start is by making a list of questions audience members have had and a list of what the journalist wishes the audience understood.

Mayer, Joy. “Want a Relationship Based on Trust? Invest in Interactions.” Medium, Trusting News, 7 Apr. 2022. This article addresses how to achieve transparency and build trust, and emphasizes the importance of these interactions as trust-builders between both parties.

Miller, Alex, and Jacob L. Nelson. “Health Care and Journalism Are Facing the Same Crises.” Slate Magazine, Slate, 17 Dec. 2021. As narrative professions, both journalism and medicine gather and present information to help others make informed decisions about their world. This article discusses the impact of the public’s distrust of journalism and medicine and presents more partnerships with the public as a solution to this problem in both spheres.

Palmer, Ruth. “Book Review: Imagined Audiences: How Journalists Perceive and Pursue the Public.” The Chronicle of Higher Education. 2021. This review of Palmer’s book, published in 2021, that explores the complex and changing relationships of how journalists understand their audiences. In Imagined Audiences, Palmer explores the “practicalities,” goals, and, most importantly, the differences between these different forms of journalism. This article focuses on the ways in which journalists can use these differences to inform their work.

Robinson, Sue. “How to Better Cover Community as a White Reporter: Rethinking Relationships with ‘Sources’ to ‘Citizens.’” Citizen, Sue Robinson, PhD, 27 May 2017. This report by Sue Robinson was produced for the Kettering Foundation. It provides recommendations for journalists to commit to “relationship-based” journalism that foregrounds citizens in community life through the “Sources” in order to solve problems within the community. The report specifically analyzes how white reporters covering diverse communities can use the “Citizen” approach.

Sola, Sarah. “‘Sounds like a Well-Trained liar’: Journalists Lose Some Credibility by Calling Themselves ‘Sources’ to ‘Citizens.’” Nieman Lab, 7 Mar. 2022. This Nieman Lab article discusses how the term “storyteller” applied to journalists has a potential negative impact on how readers view information from the writer. Sola suggests a framework for changing this perception.

Silverman, Craig. “How Publishers Should Build Credibility, through Transparency.” American Press Institute. This report outlines the ways in which publishers can build credibility through transparency, and provides a list of key areas of transparency and credibility: showing reporting and sources, collaborating with the audience, incorporating and attributing information, offering disclosures, and correcting website and social media errors.

Verbovska, Marianna. “Advice for Interviewing Survivors of Sexual Violence.” International Journalists’ Network. 27 Jul. 2021. In this article, Marianna Verbovska spoke with Center for Women’s Perspectives Foundation, Marianna Chumalo, on best practices for reporters interviewing survivors of abuse. Chumalo covers body language, deep listening, and allowing the interviewee to make choices in the direction of the interview.