

Tips for Successful Interviews with Community Professionals and Citizen Leaders

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Here are a few reminders about interviewing that will serve you and Evergreen well. Most of them are simply common sense and good manners, but don't underestimate the number of times these practices are overlooked.

1. Plan your introduction: When you make a contact, introduce yourself fully, mention the class you are taking, describe the intent of your questions, and an estimate of the amount of time your questions will take. Attempt to delineate a scope for your project and your rationale for contacting the person. If you are calling the person on someone else's recommendation, it is generally good practice to say, "Susan Smith at the Governor's Council recommended you as a good resource on" Check to make sure you have contacted the right person to answer your questions about the subject you are investigating. It's not impolite to ask, "Are you the right person to provide information on this, or should I call some one else?"
2. Write a script if you need to: If making "cold phone calls" makes you nervous, write out a script, and practice your self-introduction out loud a few times until it comes easily.
3. Program or class visit: If you would like to observe a school classroom or formal program at a museum, for example, you must get permission in advance to do this. Ask what the procedures are for getting permission to sit in on a class.
4. Direct 1:1 interview: Ask for a specific amount of time (say, half-an-hour) for an interview. Always (always!) make sure you have the person's permission to interview them before you begin, and always assume that in your first call, you will need to make an appointment to talk at some point in the future. If the informant volunteers, "Well, now is a good time to talk. Let's do this now," jump at the opportunity! And be ready with your questions.
5. Finding the right person: If a person is not calling back after several tries on your part, see if you can dial "O" or be transferred to a receptionist to get another person in the office or agency. Explain you have been unsuccessful in reaching ----, and is there another person who might be able to help you out? Be polite, but persistent. Just keep trying.
6. Appropriate attire for conducting an interview: If your interview is a visit to their place of work, dress in appropriate clothes of the type your informant will probably be wearing.
7. First impressions: Make it a point to allow extra time to find the person's office so you don't show up late. Shake hands and remind the person clearly of your name. An easy way to begin is to thank the person once again for making some time to speak with you and reminding them of the class you are taking and the name(s) of the faculty.
8. Be sure you record the person's title and department/organization, their phone number and email address. This is important not just for proper citation of sources but also useful in case you want to contact them later or send them a thank-you note.

9. Take some “advance organizers.” If you have several questions to ask a person, take the questions in writing and hand your questions to the informant. Often the informant will see how he or she can answer multiple questions at once, or make connections that you haven’t made. A question-list will keep the interview efficient, and will give your informant the overall framework of your investigation. Keep your number of questions small. In a 1-hour interview, 6-7 questions are entirely enough; tangents will often occur. This isn’t a bad thing: sometimes these digressions will reveal essential or fascinating information you hadn’t thought to ask about.
10. Recording your interview: If you are using any sort of recording device, always ask the informant’s permission to do so. Explain that only you will be using the information gathered.
11. Getting clarification: If the informant is saying something ambiguous or confusing, it is not considered rude to interrupt and say, “Excuse me, but you lost me when you referred to.....” Could you help me understand what you meant by...?” Or, “I was interested in your description of... Could you elaborate a bit on that?”
12. Off the record comments: It probably won’t happen, but if an informant should say something that is “off the record,” it truly is off the record! Turn off your recording device, or conspicuously put your pen down. And, be sure not to quote this information, even anonymously.
13. Be mindful of the time! If you are nearly the end of an agreed-upon time for the interview but still have more questions to ask, address this situation directly. “I see that we have only 5 more minutes. May we extend the agreed-upon time by 5-10 minutes, or may I schedule another time to finish up this interview?” Or say, “I see that we have only 5 more minutes. Which question of the ones we have left do you think we should focus on?” If your informant is the one running over the agreed-upon ending time, again, break in politely to do a time-check, to make sure it’s okay to continue talking.
14. Closing gracefully: always express appreciation for the information gathered, whether it was useful or not. Close your interview with a handshake, a smile, and another thank you.
15. If your informant offers to loan you any kind of material, agree together on the date you plan to return it. And then, return the material promptly with a short note of thanks.
16. Impressions made in an interview matter! Over the years, numbers of my students have gotten internships and jobs that began with informational interviews like these. If you become interested in the organization/agency and its work, you could add to your thank-you note, a sentence that says, “If, in the future, you have a need for an intern in your office/project, I hope you will contact me.”

Human Subjects Policy:

At Evergreen, as at colleges everywhere, there is a “human subjects policy” whose manager keeps records of what kinds of human-subjects research is being undertaken by faculty/students. Most interviews that (1) have to do with information-gathering from professionals about their work and/or (2) are conducted only for the purpose of a college class fall outside the scope of Human Subjects Review, so most of your research will not need formal approval. However, if you are interviewing volunteers or students, if the subject of your research has to do with a sensitive issue, or if you plan to use this information outside of this class, then we may need to get Human Subjects Review approval. Please check with me. I will direct you to the appropriate permission forms and the protocol for approval.