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Interview Tips for New Writers and Journalists

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, August 28th, 2019

As a writer or journalist just launching your career, you're in the midst of an exciting time. You're probably looking for new opportunities that can help you to advance your career, learn new skills, and build your portfolio. While you've likely perfected your writing skills, are your interviewing skills also prepared and polished?

Whether you're interviewing a source for a great story or are hoping to get that dream job writing for your favorite business, you'll need to have some great interviewing skills to navigate the demands of your career. Luckily, many of those same skills that you'd use when interviewing a source can also be applied to interviews for a potential job. By taking some time to develop your interviewing skills and knowledge, you'll be well-equipped for your writing career.

Preparing for a Remote Interview

Taking adequate time to prepare for an interview can help ensure everything goes smoothly. Technology is changing the job market and remote phone or video interviews are now often used as preliminary screenings, but it's just as important to take time to prepare for them as it is to prepare for an in-person interview. If you're holding a phone interview of a source for a piece, preparing for the interview can help the subject to feel comfortable and ensure you're able to capture everything that's being said.

To prepare for your call, find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. Have a glass of water ready and make sure that you have reliable phone reception or that your internet connection is strong and fast enough so that it won't cut out during a video call. If your home's internet is unreliable or slow, now is the time to contact friends or to look into whether your local library has a quiet room you could use for the call.

Technology has a way of breaking down at the worst time possible, so do a quick run-through to make sure everything is working well. If you'll be recording your phone call with an app or program, make sure that it's installed and conduct a test call to make sure that it's functional. Ask a friend to hold a Skype video chat with you and practice answering the call and positioning the screen appropriately. Be sure that you find a non-distracting, well-lit background that allows the other person to clearly see you.

The Importance of Research

Doing some research is an essential step in your preparation. If you'll be speaking with a source,

do comprehensive background research so you can ask well-informed and detailed questions. Reading existing media pieces about the person or the issue you're discussing can help you to make the most of the time that you have so that you can get the information and quotes that will help you to write a quality piece.

If you're preparing for your own phone interview or will be meeting with an employer in person, spend some time researching the company, their mission, and the types of content they create. Try to find some information about the person you will be speaking with, and if possible, speak with others who are employed at or who have worked at the company previously to get a sense of what the interview process was like. During your research, identify and write down some questions that you can ask about the company or the position during the interview.

You may also want to research common interview questions and think about how you would respond to them. While you might not be asked those specific questions, chances are that some variety of the most common questions will come up at some point during the process.

Appearance Matters

Whether you'll be holding a video or in-person interview, you should plan ahead so that your appearance is professional and appropriate. Appearance matters, and even if you're just interviewing a source for a piece, you still want to dress appropriately out of respect for your interview subject.

Start planning your outfit well in advance. Look for clothes that are flattering and fit you well. A waistband that's too tight or a shirt that doesn't fit just right can negatively impact your confidence and distract you. If you're looking for a job, consider investing in one or two professional outfits that make you feel confident.

Don't forget that other factors can also affect your appearance. Getting a haircut or shaving helps to convey that you're put-together and that you take the occasion seriously. You may also want to invest in teeth whitening, since you're more likely to smile and come across as genuine and enthusiastic when you feel good about your teeth. Other little details, like earring choice and concealing tattoos, may help to round out your appearance depending on the workplace.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Finally, take some time to practice for the interview. Focus on how you can deliver your questions clearly and warmly to your source, or have a friend or family member ask you mock interview questions so you can practice your responses. Practice making eye contact, shaking hands confidently, and look for nervous habits, like looking at your shoes or saying "um." Hold these sessions again and again over the course of days or weeks until you're confident and the process comes easily.

If this will be your first time interviewing a source, practice with a friend to make sure that you're comfortable with the process. Decide whether you're taking notes, recording the conversation, or both, and practice listening to responses, making quick notes, and creating and asking follow-up questions. The more you do this, the easier the process will become.

Writers and journalists need to be able to frequently navigate interviews, so spending some time on these skills is sure to pay off repeatedly during your career. With great interview skills, you'll be

able to get a full-time job that allows you to further your education, land that career-changing opportunity, or confidently interview sources for your next piece.

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