

Interview – Checklist

Handout 1 on interviews by Ulrike Werner / translated by Maria Rogahn

In a radio interview the important thing is to encourage the person that you have chosen to interview to give interesting answers. This means that you will have to be aware from the first that a public radio interview is completely different from researching or a private chat. A radio interview is always intended for a third party, i.e. the invisible audience.



In order to make your interview a success the most important thing is to always keep in mind the topic of the interview and to listen closely during the interview. Then you can decide if a question has been fully answered or whether you need to ask additional questions.

A good preparation will give you confidence so that you can engage with your interview guest more closely.

The following thoughts on interview preparation and on how to conduct the interview itself are to help you on your way to a strong interview.

I. Preparing an Interview

Selecting a Topic: What is the topic, from which perspective are you looking at it?

When you are selecting a topic you will usually need more accurate information. Collecting information through talking to people, through books, newspapers, the internet or archives is called "to research". The fastest and best way is to find people who know the topic well and can recommend you an interview guest.

When you are researching you can ask yourself the following questions:

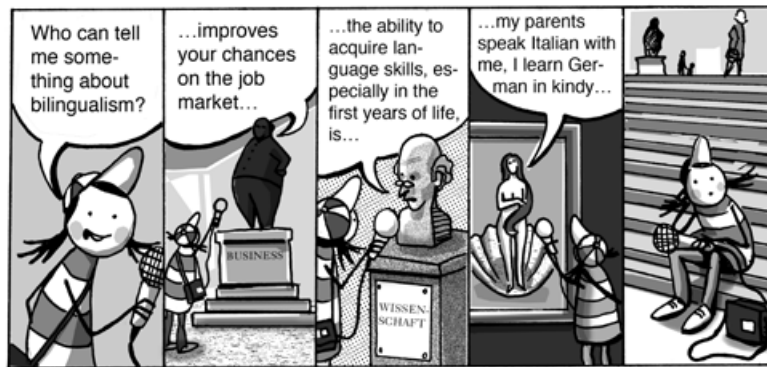


- Why is this topic interesting for you and your audience?
- What do you not know / What are you uncertain about?
- Which contradictions are there?
- Which positions are there?
- Narrowing down the topic: Which aspect do you think is most important and timely?

Discuss with others. When looking at controversial issues, it is helpful to get to know the 'opponent's' arguments. Are there any more sources of information that you could use?

Deciding on your interview guest: Who can you interview?

- Who would be competent to say something about your topic? (maybe research!)
- Who has which perspective on the topic?
- What are you looking for: an overview, professional competence, every-day experience, an evaluation, personal experiences?
- If the topic is controversial: Which side is he /she taking?
- What do you find most interesting about your interviewing guest?



By choosing your guest you determine the perspective on the topic. Criteria: Who is interviewed by other media? Would you like to let other people have their say who are usually not questioned? Which aspect of the topic or which side in a controversy would you like to highlight? Are you looking to provide overview knowledge or personal experience? Please note: When interviewing public authorities or agencies there are usually regulations that only authorise certain people to give a statement>>> press office.

If you want to prepare an interview because you know an interesting person: note that you will need an interview topic nonetheless. Which topic could the person talk most interestingly about? And why would you want to make this topic public?

Approach and preliminary talk: inviting the interview guest and clarifying the facts



The main goal during the approach is to win the chosen guest over to the planned interview. At the same time you make sure if your topic really suits the chosen guest. If your interviewing guest should start speaking at length, tell him/her politely that you want to question him/her later on in the interview. Do not reveal your questions just yet as your interview might then lack liveliness.

In addition the following facts are important:

- Collect information on your interview guest: full name, title/function, how would he/she like to be addressed?
- Tell your guest about yourself and your plan: Your name, broadcast station and programme, topic / focal points and scheduled length of interview
- Make an appointment for the interview (time, place)

Make a first evaluation of your guest: Is he/she talkative, shy, used to media, cagey, vain...?
What does he/she like to talk about?

These observations will help you later on in the interview to be able to ask the right questions.

Planning questions: What would you like to ask?



The last step of preparation is to write a questionnaire. This helps you to put your thoughts into order. During the interview the questionnaire serves as a keyword map in case you get nervous. But not more! It is not a plan that you have to stick to in any case.

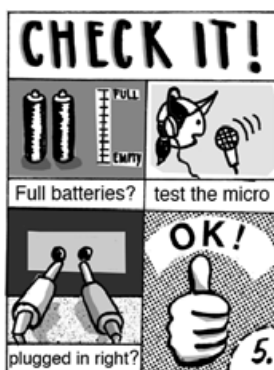
- Collect the questions that pop up in your mind (brainstorming) and put them into a new order
- Start from what makes your guest special or what he is good at: What can he talk about best? What does he know best?
- What is your key question, the title of your interview? How could you separate the key question into smaller (sub)questions so that you have a good structure in your interview?

Be careful with too many aspects – less is often more

- What is your opening question?
- Is the interview structured in an order so that the audience can understand the topic?
- Put down key words instead of full sentences!
- Have you written down numbers or statements that you want to confront your guest with?
- Do you have all the necessary information? Or do you still have to research something?

Go through your interview – mentally by yourself or with a colleague. Have the heart to develop a critical point of view – saying it politely helps.

Check list: technical equipment: do the mobile recording unit and the microphone work?



You should be confident of the handling the unit and the microphone correctly. Before every interview to a technical routine belongs:

- headphones, sound storage medium Check if everything is there: microphone, cable, batteries/power,
- Do microphone and headphones work?
- Practise: plugging in microphone and headphones, the handling of the microphone, changing batteries
- Practise recording and play it: What is the optimal microphone distance and the best recording level? (the indications of each unit in combination with any microphone is different)

The ideal recording level lies between -3 and 0 Decibel. Do not go above zero! Recordings which are too low will have a hissing sound later when you turn it up to normal volume. Too loud recordings sound distorted and are therefore not usable. When you record the interview with the unit, it is best to start already during the 'warm up –talking'. This makes finding the right recording level easier.

II. The actual Interview

The most important thing now is to put aside all the preparation and, with the interview topic in mind, to engage fully with your guest.



- Create a good talking atmosphere: show your interest
- Assume responsibility to lead the interview – for your audience!
- Pose short and clear questions (exception: questions which provide information)
- Only ask one question at a time
- Ask open questions
- Avoid asking too open questions
- Avoid closed questions
- Address your guest personally and show respect
- Do not start your sentences with: "hmmm" or "yees" (this sounds commentating and creates distance, even if you are saying it because of uncertainty or confusion)
- Ask questions concerning concrete events and experiences
- Never give your microphone away!

Listen closely and react to what has been said. Do not stay glued onto your prepared questionnaire. Ask further questions if you do not understand something or if your guest is not answering your question (especially with people who are used to the press, e.g. with politicians confrontation can be important). Do not be shy to ask questions of which you already know the answers: You are asking for the listeners and maybe want that your guest clarifies something in his own words.

Live or produced in advance?

Think about how you want to record the interview. Do you want it to take place 'live' in the studio? The advantages of a live interview are: It makes a programme very vivid and you also save time. Or would you like to record the interview and maybe even edit it before it is broadcast? The advantages are: It can give a sense of security to a source that is shy because of the publicity if you can erase slips of the tongue. Questions and answers which do not belong to the topic can be cut. However, any editing process requires you to master the necessary technique. In any case it helps to plan an edited interview just like a live one. Otherwise the editing takes up a lot of time.

Editing a pre-recorded interview: overview of production steps

- Import the interview into the computer
- When listening write a record protocol (with track numbers /time details – which questions and answers are where?)
- Select the sections that you would like to use as originals: how long are they? Will they be left in the original order or are there good reasons to change it?
- Make an editing plan: Which passages are broadcast in which order? Where should it be shortened? Where should individual slips of the tongue be cut?
- Conduct your corrections and changes according to your editing plan in an audio editing programme.