
UNIT 2 PREPARING QUESTIONS

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2.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The objective of this Unit is to give you ideas on

- how to formulate questions for an interview;
- basic questions to be asked;
- the technique to be adopted in asking questions;
- the handling of certain types of interviewees; and
- the writing of an intelligent report.

After reading this Unit, you should be able to

- prepare a suitable list of questions to ask at a particular interview;
- avoid personal bias in formulating questions;
- focus your interview on the central theme;
- be flexible in asking questions;
- apply certain basic rules in pursuing a fruitful line of questioning;
- identify different types of interviewees;
- keep the interview running smoothly;
- know the interviewee's intentions;
- overcome the interviewee's resistance, if any; and finally
- write an intelligent but self-effacing report.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In your previous Unit, you learnt how to work out your preliminaries. You should now be able to get yourself ready to formulate your questions. Preparing questions beforehand with care is crucial to getting good results from an interview. The ability to improvise during the interview is important, and may often bring you startling results. However, it will not do to rely solely on that ability because you should not assume that you will be able to keep one step ahead of your interviewee.

2.2 WRITE DOWN YOUR QUESTIONS

It is always helpful to write down your questions.

2.2.1 In advance

Write down your questions in advance, giving them as much thought as you can, and phrase each question with care. Formulate your questions so that they will elicit the kind of responses you want whether it is information, opinion, attitude, or personality glimpses that you are after. Routine questions bring routine answers, while searching questions can draw out thoughtful responses and unusual questions can lead to surprising or meaningful insights.

2.2.2 In a logical order

Always jot down your questions in the order in which you wish to ask them. Give yourself plenty of room between questions. Not only will this help you add supplementary questions, but it will also help you to relocate the next question if you change your sequence in mid-interview.

2.3 POINTS TO REMEMBER WHEN FRAMING QUESTIONS

Here are a few points to keep in mind when framing questions. Use them as a checklist.

2.3.1 Avoid questions which may draw yes/no answers

Never phrase the question in such a manner that the interviewee can dismiss it with a simple 'yes' or 'no', unless you are definitely trying, for example, to get an evasive public official to admit or deny something.

2.3.2 Do not let your questions show bias

As far as possible avoid words that reflect your own bias, unless you are deliberately using that as a strategy to provoke and open up a tough interviewee who is being difficult and evasive.

2.3.3 Have a focus for your questions

First, choose a focus or a particular objective for your interview. You may interview someone (a) to obtain information, (b) to know his views on a particular subject, and (c) to get to know him as a person, so that you can write a personality profile. Quite often, while you focus on one aspect, you will discover information that can be used in other ways to enrich your subject. But if you do not have a specific focus in mind, your questions will tend to range so widely that the responses will turn out to be a shapeless jumble, difficult to arrange into a meaningful shape. You can seldom anticipate all that you might discover, but your focus, once determined, will guide the shaping and ordering of your interview.

2.3.4 How a focus is determined

The person you have chosen to interview, as well as your reasons for choosing him, will tell you how you should proceed. If he is the survivor of a communal riot or a damaged plane, you will focus on his recollections and emotions related to the event itself. If he is an authority on some specific subject, the expertise or ideas will provide the focus. And if you are interviewing an actor, a sports star, a mountain climber, or a voluntary social worker, you look for aspects that can highlight the personality or the spirit of adventure or dedication of the interviewee. This primary focus will help you set a direction to the interview, but it should not prevent the exploration of secondary, related factors that can lend depth to your primary focus.

2.4 BASIC QUESTIONS OF AN INTERVIEWER

There is much virtue in the simplest questions that reporters learn to ask whenever they pursue even the most basic news story. Rudyard Kipling lists these questions in a brief and memorable stanza:

I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who

Reporters call them the five Ws and H and seldom fail to keep track of them in whatever they write. The simplicity of this approach is sometimes ridiculed, but even its critics will not deny the sound common sense on which it is rooted.

These questions, then, will always suggest the basic leads that you can pursue. Pursue them relentlessly, taking care to apply them appropriately to your subject.

Betsy P. Graham, an eminent journalist, provides an excellent summary of how these might be applied:

Three questions should be posed frequently no matter what the occasion: 'Why?' 'How?' and 'For example?' When interviewing for a personality profile, try to find out why the person acts as he does, bearing in mind that the subject's past explains his present. Ask about the important influences in his life, how he spends a typical day, how he would like to be remembered, what he values most in life. If he says he's dissatisfied with his accomplishments, ask for an example of something he has failed to achieve. Ask him to describe the kind of people he is drawn to, to count the number of intimate friends he has. Ask him about the crises in his life, his disillusionments, his problems, his worst fault. Find out how he is trying to solve his problems or correct his weaknesses. Is there anything about himself that puzzles him?

Look for contradictions, irony: If he is a blabbermouth, does he criticise his wife for talking too much? Ask factual questions: Who, what, where, when, why, and how? Ask how many, how often, how much? Don't ask a professor if she enjoys teaching or finds it rewarding. Ask her (perhaps by a series of questions) how many students she has taught in her career, how many of them have become famous or very successful, how many write to her occasionally, and how many have become friends. Seek to convert the general answer into a concrete revelation. Frequently ask your subject to elaborate, to illustrate, to say it in simpler words.

When interviewing authorities, experts, and celebrities, turn your mind inside out to think of original questions. Ruthlessly shun those that readily occur to you, for you may be sure they've been asked hundreds of times before. Surprise a famous actress with a question about a little-known phase of her life, and you will be much more likely to get a fresh story with colourful quotes.

While preparing for the interview, think of ways to get good anecdotes—short illustrative stories that can pick up the tempo of a sluggish article. Those you already know from reading about the subject might be too familiar to use again, but ask his wife or his children to tell you fresh anecdotes about him. And look for experiences or situations in his life that will elicit anecdotes if

you ask the right questions. Sometimes you may especially want an anecdote told in the subject's own words rather than second-hand from a family member or a business associate. In that case you can simply ask him, for example, to tell you about the time he was almost killed in a hunting accident.

2.5 TECHNIQUE OF ASKING QUESTIONS

While your interviewee should get the impression that you are asking questions in a relaxed manner, even this is a contrived effect.

2.5.1 Be flexible in asking questions

A certain amount of flexibility both in framing and asking questions is necessary. Even with a cooperative interviewee, if you have phrased your questions so that you can elicit the information you expect, but have kept them flexible enough to allow him a relatively free play on his ideas, you can still use the list to stay on course. Where the person is shy or reticent, further questioning on a friendly, informal note, or trading an experience similar to the one you expect him to communicate to you, might help. Your advance list can help you choose something that he responds to. And if he is deliberately digressing, you can politely bring him back to the subject, without getting lost in his diversions.

2.5.2 Ask supplementary questions

Perhaps you won't need to follow your list of questions beyond a point. Perhaps better questions will occur to you as the interviewee warms up and leads you off in a new direction. It would be unwise not to listen carefully and follow his leads. But, on the contrary, you can run into a person who is shy and not all that cooperative. Or you may run into a crafty person who deliberately ignores your questions and rambles on.

2.5.3 Be ready to ask follow-up questions

When you observe such reactions, follow up with apt questions—'Do you feel comfortable about that assumption?' or 'Do you really think so? Why?' or 'Can you tell me a little more about how you feel about this?' or 'Are you saying, then, that...?' or 'Let's take the opposite view for a moment...'. How you size up the interviewee's emotions will govern where you lead him.

2.5.4 Try not to forget the obvious

In all your preparation and conversation with the interviewee, you may ignore the most obvious question. After a long press conference, the astronauts who walked on the moon were exposed to a school child who asked them: 'Were you scared?', a question that all the trained reporters had overlooked.

Activity 1

What is the technique that can be usefully adopted in asking questions? (100 words)

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(Check your answers with the hints given at the end of the Unit)

2.6 POINTS TO REMEMBER WHEN THE INTERVIEW IS IN PROGRESS

Even when you have made all the preparations, done all your homework and finally made it to the interview, you should not become lax.

2.6.1 Make the interview run smoothly

Once you have opened up the flow of conversation, keep it going. You need to listen carefully, throughout, with your mind alert. If the person rambles or strays too far from the subject, interrupt him discreetly and purposefully to indicate the direction in which you want the talk to proceed. Never forget that your role is that of a discerning listener. You are not the expert, but you have a responsibility to the reader. For instance, if you are interviewing an expert on a current problem and he strays too far into background, you might come back with 'That sounds interesting. But are you saying it relates to the present?' And if he says, 'yes', interject quickly, 'in what way?' That should help. If it doesn't, keep trying other ploys, until something works. If the question is controversial and the interviewee is evasive, try summarizing the opposite point of view in a brief statement and tell him you want his side so that you can balance the picture in your mind. Something, somewhere along those lines, will work.

2.6.2 Listen carefully

The art of listening requires more than close attention to what is being said. You may need to look beyond the words the interviewee speaks. You must catch his hidden feelings, his unexpressed reactions. Watching him and reading his thoughts are thus as important as hearing his words and being able to read your notes.

2.6.3 Watch the reactions of the interviewee

The nod of his head, his smile or frown, the twitching of his brow, the perspiration on his face, or his assured, confident air will tell you how to evaluate his mood, as well as what he is saying.

2.6.4 Keep your interviewee in good humour

Whatever you do or ask, you should know how to keep the person you are interviewing in good humour. Keep him relaxed, and draw the person out so that what you get out of him makes a good article.

2.7 HANDLING OF SOME SPECIAL INTERVIEW SITUATIONS

Sometimes you may find yourself in a situation where problems of a special nature arise, unexpectedly.

2.7.1 How to overcome resistance

You may encounter resistance of varying degree or kind, before or during an interview. It may help to know a few instances, and to consider how such resistance can be overcome.

Hugh Sherwood once arrived to interview a top public official, a list of 32 questions in hand. The VIP's public relations men asked to see the questions and ruled out twenty-seven as beyond the official's field. Sherwood was disheartened, but he decided to take the chance. After a few minutes of conversation with the official, seeing that he was a courteous person, Sherwood told him: 'Your public information officer says you can answer hardly any of my questions. He doesn't seem to think you know much.' The PRO was annoyed, but not the official, who went on to give Sherwood a big scoop for which he had not come prepared, but which was very welcome indeed. He had to change his line of questioning considerably, but it rewarded him amply. The implicit challenge to the official's status made him talk frankly.

2.7.2 How to handle an evasive interviewee

If, during an interview, a public official tries to stop you with responses such as 'No comment', or 'I'd rather not answer that', and if you know that he knows more and it is in the public interest to bring that out, you need to keep trying. This can take several forms. You can plead helplessness and say your article won't see print unless the question is answered. Or you can point out that his refusal to answer may lead to rumour and speculation, with damaging effects. Or you may threaten to obtain the information from other sources. How far you succeed will depend partly on your stature, partly on a range of circumstances.

2.7.3 Interviewing a celebrity

If it is a prominent person you are interviewing, what you have read about him, or learned from conversations with people who know him, will give you cues both on where to start and how to proceed. If something he has written or said is the central issue, you should study it carefully in advance and break it down into its component parts. You can choose an aspect to begin with; this can then be related to the other issues in a logical fashion.

2.7.4 Interviewing more than one person

Sometimes it would be necessary for you to interview more than one person. When the occasion demands it, let the interviewee know about it, so he knows what to expect. Two factors can help you in the decision. First, is the person so important or interesting that his opinions or his personality will give you enough material to support a substantial story? Second, is the subject so large or so controversial that you need to reflect different approaches? If so, one person cannot be expected to provide all that you need.

2.8 SUMMING UP

Asking questions, then, is more than a matter of ready wit. It takes much advance care and preparation, courtesy and sympathy for other human beings, the ability to catch nuances, to hold one's own against an aggressive official, and to relate to another person in an open, free manner. You need to work hard, to let the other person feel that you are decent, sincere, and knowledgeable. But when it comes to the reader, play down your own role, except to apply your intelligence towards lending coherence and shape to the material you have gathered. If you can also avoid the temptation to put your feelings above those of persons you have interviewed and their opinions and feelings, you will be doing more effectively what the reader expects you to do, providing a communication link between the subject and your reader. You will thus be doing the reader a service, while enjoying yourself. It takes a lot of effort and skill, but you derive much satisfaction at the end of the process.

Activity 2

Choose some person and theme for your interview and draw up a list of five questions, following the guidelines offered in this Unit. (80 words)

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(Check your answer with that given at the end of the Unit)

2.9 ACTIVITIES: AIDS TO ANSWERS

Activity 1

- a) be flexible both in framing and asking questions;
- b) be ready to ask supplementary questions, and questions improvised to suit a situation;
- c) ask follow-up questions to arrive at definite positions; and
- d) don't forget to ask the obvious questions.

Activity 2

Hints:

The choice is wide: politician, scientist, artist, cricketer and so on. If you choose a cricketer your questions can be about (a) cricket in India, (b) international cricket. You could ask questions on: (a) relative strengths of the teams now playing, (b) top batsmen and bowlers, (c) importance of fielding, (d) influence of one day matches and playing techniques, (e) selection boards, (f) training, (g) discovering fresh talent etc., etc.

2.10 GLOSSARY

You will find in the glossary a short list of the terms used in this Unit.

Anecdote: a short interesting or amusing story about a person or incident

Nuance: subtle shade of colour, meaning; originally used in painting and carpet weaving when colours meet to produce a new shade