

Journalism 101: Interviewing



Why people matter for
storytelling, and how to
interview them



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News Decoder



TEHRA
The Environment and Human Rights Academy

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The Empowering Youth through Environmental Storytelling is a collaboration between The Environment and Human Rights Academy (TEHRA), News Decoder and the Young Educators European Association (YEEA).

The purpose of these educational materials is to help young people understand the climate crisis on a systems level through engaging with the topics and foster agency through the skills and techniques of journalism.

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We cannot be held liable for how these materials are used in practice.

These educational resources have been developed to the best of our knowledge, using reliable and widely-recognized sources. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy and clarity, we cannot guarantee that the materials are free from errors or omissions. Climate change is a field of knowledge that continues to evolve, and teachers and learners are encouraged to consult up-to-date scientific sources (e.g. IPCC, IPBES or national agencies) to complement and enrich these activities.

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1. The importance of people

The most interesting stories are specific. They focus on a person, a place, or a community.

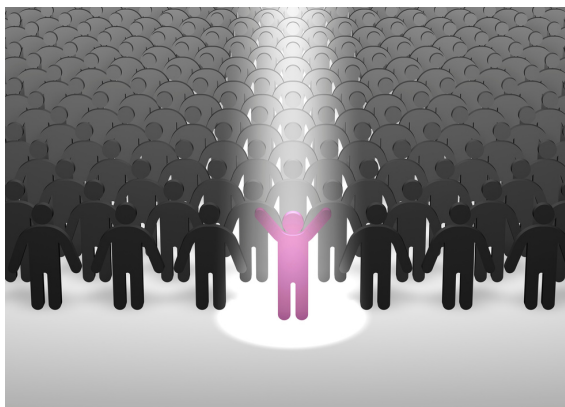
News values centre around impact and proximity to a certain group or place.

However, you also want to make your story interesting to people living on the other side of the world. And this is easily done when it comes to climate stories.

It is done by providing the context to show that this isn't just an issue that's being experienced by the country or people you're talking to, because climate change is an issue that in some way or another affects everyone.

The art of showing, not telling

By presenting the stories of the people experiencing climate change in various ways, you show audiences everywhere that this topic is relevant.



2. The difference between an expert and expertise

If someone really is an expert, then they have expertise.

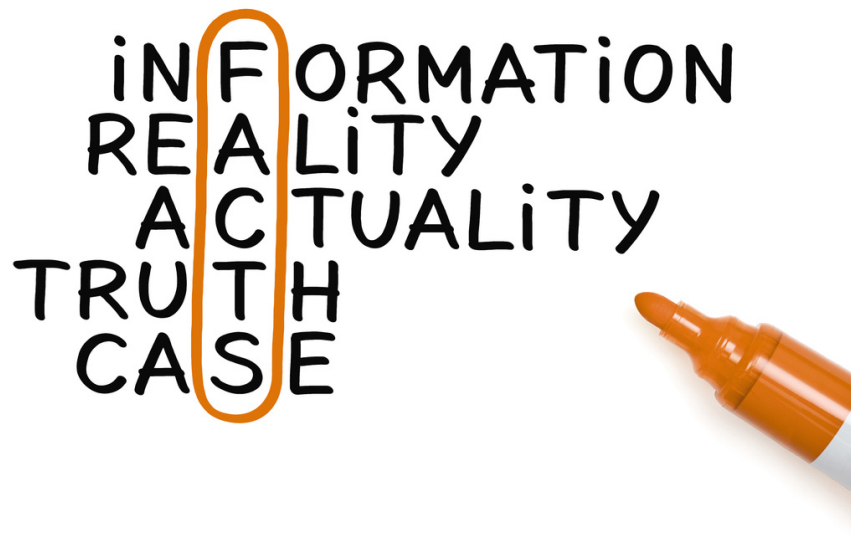
But you can buy yourself a degree online, give yourself a title and make business cards. Suddenly you are a doctor of climatology!

In other words, while it's always great to have quotes from a scientist, lawyer, or political analyst, sometimes the most important expertise lies elsewhere.

Think about these people below.

An Indigenous Person who has lived by a river all their lives and has learned the lore and experiences of generations of people who fish and farm by it might have deep knowledge of the ecosystems there without any university degree.

A community leader with no high school diploma might have valuable expertise on the effects of pollution, having lived near a hazardous waste site all their life.



If you are doing a story on designing new transportation systems, a long haul truck driver might have valuable expertise.

To find experts for your story – and properly use them in a story – ask yourself the following questions:

- What kind of information do I need?
- Who would have real knowledge about that?

Perhaps it would be someone who has written research papers in accredited journals, or someone who works in a particular industry – or maybe it's someone personally affected by the problem.

And when you interview people and they tell you something, ask these types of questions:

- How do you know that?
- When did you learn that?
- Where did you see that happen?

We call people affected by a problem “stakeholders” because they have a real stake in finding a solution or maintaining the status quo.



3. Types of sources

The data you find will ground your story in meaning and significance. Interviews however, the words of real people, will help to make your story more compelling.

Through interviews, you can evoke emotion, put words on the greater impact of the issue you're exploring, and dive deeper into the significance of the data.

The data and reports are the basis of curiosity, while the interviews allow for interrogation. The [following video](#) explores interviewing for a climate story.

Human Sources

People, not numbers, are the heart of your stories. Finding those people is often the most difficult part of journalism. But once you find the people to interview, everything else tends to fall into place.

So what types of people do you need?

There are four types of people you can seek out for any good story. And while you might not include all the four types of sources in each story, try to think about what's important for your particular topic and question.

1. People affected by the problem.

These might be local communities, students, patients, workers, consumers or parents. These people are called stakeholders or victims and are a critical source to have in your article.

These people can provide anecdotes – little stories about something they experienced or something their community experienced.



Anecdotes can bring a story to life and make a story compelling by bringing the reader to a place where something is happening and introducing them to people it is happening to.

Sometimes it's not so obvious in your story who is being impacted, for example if you're writing about an industry in a Global North country that has a high carbon footprint.

Then, ask yourself, who is paying the price for this industry to continue emitting at such high levels? If you can't find someone on the ground who is being affected, use your words, images, or data to focus on who or what is being impacted and how.



2. People who regulate or monitor the problem.

They might work for government or police agencies, or industry or watchdog organisations. These people are often referred to as officials, and are an important source if you want to find out what is being done about an issue or what should be done.



3. People responsible for the problem.

These might be people who represent a corporation or non-profit or governmental organisation. They might be landowners or manufacturers or retailers. Some reporters call them targets. It is important to attempt to include quotes from this type of source when you've painted them in a negative light.



4. Independent experts.

These are people who are knowledgeable about the problem, such as psychologists or sociologists, scientists or financial or legal experts, but who are not connected to the problem.



They might be academics or ex-workers or business competitors. This can be a useful source when you're trying to find out what needs to happen or why something is happening. When your story relates to solutions to development or climate change in a specific country or region, find experts from that country or region, as they have a better understanding of the situation on the ground.



4. Perspective

Journalists in general have a difficult – whilst of course rewarding – job. Their companies profit incentive means that they are increasingly short on time with tight deadlines, and so can easily fall into the trap of grabbing sources who will get back to them quickly, or turning to sources who are often quoted by journalists, knowing they will want to speak to them.

This means that there are many voices out there – groundbreaking scientists, people experiencing the damaging effects of climate change every day, individuals and groups working on systemic and just solutions – who are never (or very rarely) sourced by journalists.

The perspectives that we find in the media are therefore limited. The problem here is that the sources can then shape the story and that many perspectives go unheard.

Remember that when you go looking for your sources.

And remember, while an expert can help you identify a problem and explain its causes and effects, a stakeholder gives you the first person accounts and the emotions – anger, fear, pain, frustration that make a story compelling and urgent.

The first person accounts are what will connect with readers or listeners.

If you only have stakeholders, you won't give your readers a sense of scale or the context needed to understand the problem and figure out how to solve it.

But if you only have experts, the story will feel cold and readers won't connect to it. When you're telling a story about the climate crisis, you need experts to tell your audience what is happening and what we can do, and you need humans on the ground to tell your audience why it matters.





5. Finding stakeholders

It can be tricky to find stakeholders. People who are victims of some problem might not advertise themselves as such. Here are some ways to find them:

- Start with people you already know.

They might have relatives and friends and colleagues who you can ask. Those people have relatives and friends and colleagues.

Through your own personal network you have access to many, many different people. Let everyone know the story you are working on and the types of people you are looking for.

You will find people in surprising places: cafes, markets, doctor offices and schools. But they won't come to you if they don't know you are looking to speak to them.

And don't forget the power of social media. Just one person you know who has 2,000 social media friends can reach a lot of people you might not know.

- Contact organisations.

Don't just think about environmental organisations. The leaders in your local church, mosque or community centre know a lot of people. School organisations are great networking places. So are trade groups and labor unions.

Visit places where people live and gather. There is nothing as good as face-to-face interactions.

- Search out the comment sections of news articles.

People often post about their own experiences at the end of articles. Sometimes you might be able to contact them through those comment chats.



6. Organise and prepare for an interview

Now comes the hard part: getting them to agree to speak with you. Don't worry, it's not as scary as it may seem. The key thing is to be confident, respectful and courteous when reaching out to your prospective interviewees. In your initial email or call, you should state:

- your name;
- where you go to school or work;
- reasons for wanting to interview that person;
- the media outlet that will be publishing your story (if applicable); and
- the subject matter to which your interview will relate.



Example

Suppose you are writing a story on how the emissions from your local area's electricity sector have increased over the years and are still generated by fossil fuels, despite the government's pledge to decrease overall CO₂ emissions.

Your research has led you to an organisation that has an idea for transforming the electricity sector – in such a way that would reduce CO₂ emissions by a significant amount. You find the email address or contact number of the organisation on their website, and the media contact is called Bill Dolphin.

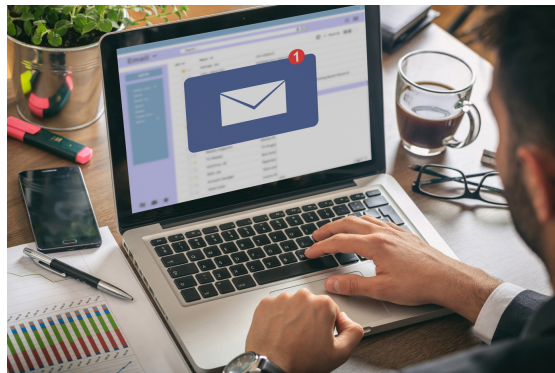
Your email to Bill Dolphin could read as follows:

Dear Bill,

My name is Jane Doe. I am a high school student at Big City School. I am writing an article for a school project on climate change, on the subject of the ongoing increase in emissions by the electricity sector. I understand you are fighting to overturn the electricity sector (be as specific here as you can) and hope you have time to answer a few questions on the nature of this solution and what is standing in the way. I know your contribution will enhance my story greatly!

If you are available for an interview, please suggest some times this week that you are available for a call and the number at which I can reach you.

*Thank you,
Jane Doe*



If you don't hear back within a day or two, you should follow up once or twice.

In the meantime, you should reach out to several other potential interviewees, as it is not uncommon to not hear back from everyone you contact. If all of the people you contact do respond, all the better! The more sources you speak to, the more authoritative and potentially engaging your story will be.



7. Research the interviewee's background

Once a person has agreed to be interviewed, you should conduct further research on their background.

For subject matter experts in particular, you should be thoroughly familiar with their areas of expertise. You should see if they have any previously published work. If they have published on a topic particularly linked to your area of focus, you may want to read or skim their article(s) or book.

It is also a good idea to do some online searches to see if there are records of past interviews that they have given. If there are, be sure to watch them. You want to avoid asking questions that could be easily answered through research.

Once you are well-acquainted with the interviewee's profile, you can start to plan your interview structure and questions.



8. Planning the interview

It is crucial to prepare an interview structure in advance of your interview. A good interview structure will:

- Give you an air of confidence, preparedness and professionalism during the interview
- Ensure you don't forget to confirm essential information
- Prepare you to ask smart questions
- Give you a sense of how long the interview will last and how you want it to end

In short, an interview structure will ensure you are in the driver's seat.

Your interview structure should cover all of the following:

- Your opening comments (you should restate your name and where you go to school; what you're working on; and where the story will be published)
- Your prepared questions
- Your closing remarks (you may want to promise to send the interviewee a link to your finished piece, and ask if they know another person you can interview)





9. Recording information

It is crucial to have equipment that will enable you to capture — and retain — a record of your interview. Before you head into your interview, be sure you have a notebook and pen, laptop, smartphone or audio recorder.

Note-taking

In general, it is always a good practice to take notes on a notebook or laptop, even if you do use a recording device or smartphone to record the conversation.

You will not be able to write down everything you hear, but taking notes will ensure you remain actively engaged and aware of key information. Keep your notes well-organised. Be sure to record the name, time and date of the interview.

Smartphones and audio recordings

To ensure accuracy and efficiency, you may want to use a smartphone or other electronic device to record your interview. If you take this approach, test out the recording device before your interview and ensure it's well-charged.

And before you record your interview, make sure you ask your source for permission! Simply, "is it okay if I record our conversation?"



Phone calls

For phone interviews, you may want to install a "call recorder" app on your phone. Even then, it is a good idea to type notes as you talk, as this will help you pay attention to the most important information.

Record retention

It's a good idea to keep your notes and recordings for at least two years after the publication of your story, and even longer if the story is in any way contentious. You want to be able to refer back to your materials in the event that anyone ever questions the statements you attributed to someone.



10. Interview format

As soon as an interviewee agrees to be interviewed, you should settle on an interview format.

Some common options include interviews by phone, in person, by video conference or by email.

We discuss some of the pros and cons of each interview format below, and, in the sections that follow, offer tips on how to interview effectively by phone and in person.

If you plan to make a video story, or include photos of your interviewee in your story, make sure to ask for their permission to be featured in your story by email, before you meet.

If their answer is positive, keep the email as proof of confirmation! If their answer is negative, you may have to adapt your story or find another interviewee.

Phone

In most cases, it will make the most sense to speak by phone, as this requires no travel and is minimally disruptive to each person's day.

However, interviewing by phone will prevent you from capturing any personal aspects of the interviewee, and may make it more difficult to pick up on certain cues.



Meeting

Face-to-face meetings tend to deepen the quality of the interview, as they allow for more natural conversation and enable you to capture details from your meeting. In many cases, though, it will be impractical or impossible to meet in person.

However, if you want to make a video story, it's important you find a story where you can interview your sources in person. Similarly if you want to include photos for your story – particularly of the stakeholder/victim in your story.

Video call

If you cannot meet in person, it may be useful to use technology like Google Meet, Zoom or Skype to conduct a video interview. This will have the advantage of expediency, while still enabling you to see the person's expressions. This can also be a good solution if you're making a video.

Email

Email interviews — interviews where you send the person questions and they send back answers — will mean you miss the opportunity to follow up on interesting threads from their comments; be unable to challenge or probe their responses in real-time; and be unable to gather important information, such as their tone or manner in answering questions. An email interview should be treated as a last resort.



11. Sourcing your interviewees

In your story, you must disclose the names of the individuals you interviewed. This means that, in every interview, you must come to an agreement with the interviewee regarding how he or she or they will be sourced.

In particular, you should confirm the person's name and its spelling, the organisation they work for and their job title, and how they would like to be addressed in the story (for example, as a representative of Great Products Company, a government spokesperson for the Department of Important Policy or an assistant professor at the University of Atlantis).

When you are clarifying how to source the interviewee, it's also a good time to make clear to your interviewee that their comments will be on the record — meaning you may directly quote or paraphrase the person's statements in your multimedia story.

Anonymous sources

In media stories, you may occasionally see references to “anonymous sources.” An anonymous source is an interviewee who refuses to be identified by name, position, industry or specific knowledge, often for reasons such as fear of retribution or harm.

Reputable media organisations only use anonymous sources in limited circumstances, and their editorial policies typically require that they take numerous steps to verify the accuracy of the anonymous source's information before publishing it.

Revealing the identity of one's sources is important because it helps your readers assess for themselves the veracity and authority of the information that the interviewee has provided.

For example, if your story included a quote by Dr. John Smith, a professor at Harvard University, readers would be likely to regard this person's statement as credible because of the reputation of the institution and the interviewee's association with it.

Conversely, if your story included a quote by a middle school student on Argentina's debt crisis, readers might be sceptical about the student's authority to speak on such matters!

As the above example illustrates, it's very important to reveal the identity of your sources. This is a practice that the world's most reputable news publishers follow too.



12. Asking the questions

As you prepare for your interview, think long and hard about the questions you want to ask.

List them in a notebook or laptop as they come to mind. Then, organise them in a logical order in your interview plan.

In this lesson, we walk you through common types of interview questions:

- WWWWW+H questions
- Emotional questions
- Closed questions
- Sweeper questions

WWWWW+H

As you likely learned when you were young, most stories address the following questions: What happened? Where did it happen? When did it happen? Who was involved? Why did it happen? And how? In short, WWWWW+H (who, what, when, where, why, and how).

If you are preparing a story that covers a recent development or event, it will likely be appropriate for your story to address these questions very early in the story.

As a result, in your interview — particularly if you are interviewing someone who is affected by an event — it may be appropriate to ask the questions who, what, where, when, why and how.

Emotional questions

Most interviewers find it easy to ask the WWWWW+H questions. It takes more skill to ask emotional questions, which elicit information about the interviewee's thoughts, recollections, opinions or feelings about the subject matter.

Emotional questions tend to be critical for obtaining interesting and engaging quotes. You should ask emotional questions fairly early in the interview, to ensure you collect golden quotes and key information.

Closed vs. open questions

Closed questions drive at a "yes" or "no" response. They are appropriate where you believe there is a definitive answer to a question and are intent on extracting it from the interviewee. In general, interviewers should avoid using closed questions, since they will fail to draw out interesting quotes.





By comparison, think about the interesting types of responses you are likely to receive in response to the following open-ended questions:

- What is the most difficult aspect of conducting an interview with a famous person?
- What is your favourite memory from your high school graduation?
- What do you like and dislike about hiking holidays?
- How does using TikTok make you feel?

Sweeper questions

Sweeper questions are broad questions that aim to “sweep in” any information you may have failed to obtain through your targeted questions. It's typically a good idea to ask sweeper questions towards the end of your interview.

The sweeper question is designed to hand the interview back to the interviewee — to provide the person with an opportunity to add information that hasn't come up in your discussion.

Example

- Is there anything you would like to add that we have not covered?
- I've finished asking you my questions. Is there anything else you would like to discuss?
- Have I missed any important points with my questions?

Sweeper questions can unveil unexpected information and take the interview in interesting directions. It's very important to ask them before ending the interview!

13. Key takeaways

The above information will become second nature after conducting a few interviews. The most important thing to keep in mind is that you want this person to give you the information that will make your audience understand why this issue is so significant.

When putting your piece together, you should use the quotes that get to the heart of the story. But remember to be respectful and considerate in your interviews – you're just talking to another human, after all!

So remember – find the right person, ask for permission, be curious, record your conversation, and tell their story!

