

CRLN 300: Interviewing

Introduction

An essential aspect of journalism is interviews, which can add credibility to your story, make your search for quality information and resources quicker, and can give you a different view of the story than just covering it using previous articles and research. They may seem intimidating, but it's important to remember that you'll be interviewing people about something they're passionate about, that they're an expert on, or that they need others to know about – most will be willing to talk if you can show them you're invested. Below you'll find information like a template for sending interview requests, the difference between an interview on or off the record, and recommendations for cleaning transcripts and working quotes into your article when writing.

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Interview Policy

Some newspapers will ask you to identify how communication with you that you reference was done. For example, “In an email response, Dr. Thomas Chase said that *the Carillon* is an office full of malcontent journalists unworthy of support.” Please note for our lawyer’s sake that this is not an actual quote, though Tom didn’t tend to like us much.

We don’t do that unless it’s relevant. How someone communicates with you is a function of accessibility, not morality. Always ask the person you are interviewing the best format to communicate (e.g. in person, phone, Zoom call, email), and use products like Google Meet that have live captioning if you are interviewing someone who is d/Deaf. Do your best to give your interviewees ample time to respond to requests; when sent at the last minute, they may not be replied to (let alone seen) until days after your article is due. Do not try to do all of your interviews the day articles are due. We are not a daily newspaper; take time, take space, and get the job done to the best of your ability. We’re structured for it.

You are asking questions to fill out the following: who the fuck, why the fuck, when the fuck, what the fuck, where the fuck, and how the fuck. We are a student newspaper. As such, you are not to ask leading questions, but to get a sense of the environment of the story. That said, pointed questions are okay if you are holding people to account like campus figures, members of government, or other organizations and institutions who are sometimes assumed to be faultlessly credible. They can get their softball questions from *Global* or *CBC*. We know better about what’s going on, at least on campus, and it is our job to show it. For example, let’s say (maybe not so hypothetically) that Chartwell’s has a rodent infestation again. Some questions you could ask are:

Who: “What kinds of pests are entering the building?”

Why: “How would you say this infestation compares to previous infestations for Chartwell’s?”

When: “When was Chartwell’s made aware of the infestation?”

What: “To your knowledge, does this pest problem extend outside of Chartwell’s? If so, how is everyone planning to adjust previous approaches to minimize this infestation for everybody involved?”

Where: “Where have the pests been re-entering?”

How: “How did the pests re-enter the building?”

An appropriately pointed question might look like asking Chartwell’s what the cost is per student per meal, and asking how this compares to their prison clients. What you

shouldn't ask your interviewees (despite how tempting these types of questions may be) are:

"Why were your staff so incompetent?"

"Does this mean I have rat shit in my overpriced burgers now?"

"How are you going to make sure this never ever happens again, so help you God?"

"Do you think that your company is as useless as the current administration?"

Sending the Interview Request

Interview requests can only be officially sent out once you've run your topic past a section editor or the editor-in-chief and have received approval to pursue the story you pitched. If nobody at *the Carillon* knows you're writing the article, you are not yet writing an article for *the Carillon* and cannot claim to be doing so. You are free to contact interviewees in advance and inform them that you'd like to write an article for *the Carillon* and would be looking to interview them should the pitch be confirmed, but we recommend you check pitches with us first so you don't risk wasting your time and effort (and the time and effort of others).

Interview requests should go out early (Monday is the goal), as there's never a guarantee the person/people you want to interview will have free time at the last minute. In the initial email always be sure to mention your name and pronouns, followed by the information that you're working on an article for your university's student newspaper. It's also important to include the topic of the article you're working on, and the area or field you'd like to ask them questions about.

Don't assume you'll get all the information you need from one interview. You're expected to verify (fact-check) the information you're given by interviewees. Humans are notorious for making mistakes, so if you've interviewed a human, there is always the chance they've made one. It's beneficial to have done research on the topic before constructing your interview questions or even sending the initial request as you're more likely to get a response if you can show you're invested in putting in the work to do the story justice. To speed the process, include a few potential interview times that you know work with your schedule, and ask that the potential interviewee indicate which time(s) and location would best work for them if they're willing to meet with you. Our final tip when sending the request is to politely but firmly set a deadline for when you'll need their response; your interviewees are likely unaware of the timeframe you're working within, and some structure can help ensure clear, prompt communication.

Interview Requests

Request format

The best interview request format will honestly depend on the person you're requesting the interview from, which initially makes things a bit more complicated but will overall make organization of requests and interview styles simpler. Generally academic professionals and/or instructors will prefer to coordinate over email, local and/or smaller businesses may prefer email or social media as their primary avenue, and other larger organizations or groups that tend to have their email inbox filled with spam can tend to prefer phone interactions so they can ensure a real person is on the other side of the interaction. We would recommend contacting people with interview requests on Sunday or Monday if your article deadline is Saturday by end of the day so they have time to respond and you have time to coordinate, and if you must send a follow-up message that should be sent by Wednesday at latest to ensure you have the time to plan, conduct, transcribe, and integrate the interview into your article before end of the day on Saturday.

Email requests/follow-ups

For those of you still feeling a little uncertain where to begin or who'd benefit from a template while sending out your first few requests, here's a draft you can work with whether you're requesting the interview over email or during a phone call:

Hello (insert name of email recipient)

My name is (insert first and last name, pronouns) and I'm working on an article about (brief topic description) for *the Carillon*, the student newspaper at the University of Regina. While doing research on the topic I found your (insert a report, article, piece of artwork, statement, event announcement, or something else that connects them to the topic; do not send them your interview questions in advance, but you may send them your topic and scope) and would appreciate the opportunity to interview you about it for the article. I'd be willing to do the interview at (list potential settings). It will likely take (insert an estimate of the interview length [15-30 minutes is standard]), and I'd be available during the following times:

-(day of the week, month and date, time span)

-(day of the week, month and date, time span)

-(day of the week, month and date, time span)

In order to include information from this interview in my article I'll need to have conducted it by (insert last date you're willing to interview [we recommend at least two days before your article is due]), so please let me know by (insert date you'd like to have the interview scheduled by) whether or not you're interested, and when you'd be available if you are.

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider,

(email signature)

Here's an example of what that draft might look like once you fill it in with the information relevant to your article:

Hello Been Ripdoff

My name is Holly Funk (she/they) and I'm working on an article about how university students are impacted by high and steadily increasing textbook prices for the Carillon, the student newspaper at the University of Regina. While doing research on the topic I found your paper on how much the people writing textbooks are paid compared to the profits kept by the companies who publish them, and would appreciate the opportunity to interview you about it for the article. I'd be willing to do the interview at your office, over Zoom, or somewhere on the university campus. It will likely take half an hour, and I'd be available during the following times:

-Tuesday, August 9 between 2-7 pm

-Wednesday, August 10 before 5 pm

-Thursday, August 11 before 2 pm and between 5-8 pm

In order to include information from this interview in my article I'll need to have conducted it by August 11 at the latest, so please let me know by August 9 whether or not you're interested, and when you'd be available if you are.

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider,

Holly Funk

Constructing the Interview

Structured Interviews

Putting together a structured interview is a little bit like writing short answer questions on a test. You'll come up with a list of questions before the interview, normally ordering them from a general topic to those on specifics, and those will be the only questions asked. When conducting the interview you'll simply read the questions off the page, listen attentively to your interviewee's response, and move on to the next question. This isn't to say you're either reading questions off the page or sitting silently; you may (and should) respond to their answers to show you're listening to them. They should still feel like this is a conversation and you should still be engaging with them, but you're confirming and acknowledging their experiences rather than pulling additional follow-up information depending on the answers you're given. This method can be a bit restrictive if you're one to think of other questions you'd like to ask during the interview (if you tend to ask additional questions through conversations, you'll likely have follow-ups to ask during interviews), but can be a good starting point if you're still getting the hang of interviewing. Structured interviews work well with Q&A-style articles, and may also be used for incorporated quotes, review, commentary, and creative options.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews start out much like structured ones: you do your research, come up with your list of general-to-specific questions, and when you conduct the interview you'll be reading off your prepared questions. The difference is that if your interviewee brings up something you didn't have a question prepared for, you're able to come up with questions on the spot and sprint down rabbit holes to get to topics or areas you may not have thought to ask about. With this method it's important to pay attention; make note of the things your interview source gets excited – or hesitant – to talk about. It's meant to be more of a conversation where you'll offer questions and prompts based on research you've done, and they'll respond with their expertise and lived experience that lends them knowledge on the topic. If they suddenly start using their hands more in conversation, taking much more time to choose their words, or get an excited gleam in their eye, chances are there's knowledge and passion trying to find its way out. Relevant questions asked by a genuinely interested person can really help that process. Semi-structured interviews can also be used for Q&A-style articles, incorporated quotes, review, commentary, and creative options.

Important Interview Questions

While constructing your interview, there are a few questions it's important to include at the beginning. If you're recording the audio from the interview (and you should be) the first question you'll ask is for their verbal consent to have the audio from the interview recorded so that you can transcribe the interview afterwards. While in most contexts you don't legally need the consent of the other party to be recording your conversation, it's an important part of informed consent which makes it an inherent aspect of ensuring your interview subjects are aware of your scope, comfortable having their information used for your article, and that they've had ample opportunity to give you information related to the article you're covering - essentially, that you haven't asked leading or hemming-in questions.

Leading questions include questions that manipulate people into responding a certain way, so something like "Why do you think sweatshops should continue abusing their employees to increase their surplus?" could be asked like "Why do you continue to support Shein when it's well-established that their clothing-making staff members are mistreated, and their designs are often stolen from other designers?" No person being interviewed can just say "no" to this. Many could say "I don't know" or "No comment," but it'll also be useful for you to be able to outline the questions you asked and where people in positions of power refused to answer you. While it could make sense for someone like a standard undergrad to have no opinion on something like the pay rate for URSU staff or the opportunities to give feedback as a student to faculty members, it's useful to ask these questions because it reinforces to individuals that they are correct in wanting to have answers to these questions.

Once you are recording, the first information you get from them should be their name and pronouns, followed by any position, title, or information that explains why they're the person you're interviewing for the specific topic you're covering (e.g. job title, area of study, involvement in the event). If somebody doesn't yet know concretely what their pronouns are, you can explain this by giving an overview of your own pronouns. Here's how I would explain mine: "I know that I look very much like a woman most of the time and sometimes I act quite like a woman, so sometimes I use the pronouns 'she/her.' However, from time to time I also feel like neither a man nor a woman, so I use 'they/them' pronouns then. Not often - but sometimes - I feel like a man and use 'he/him' pronouns, and I acknowledge that I can appear to be any of those three to the people I encounter, so I'm happy to respond to whichever they see me to be in that moment." Whether your interview source prefers she, they, him, ze, or hirself, make sure you're asking for their identity and identifying terms. In a few ways, it's much more important than their positions or even their name; it's something truly chosen and defined by them, and we affirm that.

Once you're aware of their pronouns, you may then launch into the questions you've prepared (and those that may come up during), and when you're winding down the interview make sure you thank your interview source for their time and let them know when and where your article will be published.

Transcribing the Interview

In simplest terms, transcribing is typing out exactly what was said during an interview by you, the interviewer, and the person(s) you interviewed. It's best practice to transcribe verbatim, including every "um" and "like," long pause and laugh. These things can be removed later when cleaning up the transcript, but may prove necessary to include which will cause frustration later if you've left them out and have to re-transcribe parts of the interview. When it comes to gathering information for an article, it's usually better to have it and not need it.

Time spent transcribing depends on a host of things, but on average a standard half-hour interview can take 2-3 hours to properly transcribe. This may seem like a lot of time to spend just typing what you hear, but there are serious benefits from the process that extend beyond simply having a transcript to work with. It can build your skills as an interviewer as you'll be more able to notice things like terms or phrases you may be overusing, questions you could have worded better, or even questions you should've asked but didn't think of during the interview. Essentially you're listening to a conversation rather than taking part in it, so you'll be able to engage with the information differently and if you're someone who works better when they read information than hear it, you may notice things you couldn't while just listening.

That being said, the process is not preferred by or accessible to everyone, and that's part of why transcription can now be done using software, apps, and the like. It is still important to check over the transcript that a service provides you; the approach to transcription isn't that different from talk-to-text services, and those frequently have errors. It's even more important here than in your texts to make sure you listen through the interview post-transcription while following along with the text written so you have the chance to correct any error made before you pull the quotes to use in your article.

Following are some websites you can look at that provide transcription services (we are always looking to update this list, so please contact us if you have recommendations we don't have listed).

-[Otter](#)

-[oTranscribe](#)

-[Colibri](#)

Attribution

On the Record

When an interviewee is speaking on the record, everything they say is being recorded, may be used in the article you're writing, and can be attributed to them by position and name (e.g. mechanical engineer Iyam Geared) if quotes are used. You can only use direct quotes from interview sources in an article if they were said on the record, which is what most of your interviews will be.

Off the Record

To speak off the record, both the interviewee and you as the journalist have to agree to the boundaries of the interaction. These interactions can be used to point you towards other potential interviewees or information, but the boundaries are that it cannot be recorded, and points from the conversation may not be quoted or attributed to the person who gave them by name or position. For your journalistic purposes, this is essentially eavesdropping on another's conversation without the ability to cite the people having it; it's just direction. Though there are fair reasons for someone to request to speak off the record, it's important for you to think about why they might not want to be attached to what they could tell you. Are they genuinely concerned for their safety, or do they just not want to accept the consequences to their actions? Be wary of those who jump on and off record frequently as they appear to manipulate the information available to the public, filtering it through what they believe people ought to know. Our purpose is to provide information to the public, so this attitude conflicts with our interests and should be challenged when you interview (AKA try to obtain information for the public's best interest).

On Background

Having a source on background means many different things to many different journalists, but *the Carillon* uses it to convey that information given by the person being interviewed can be summarized and attributed to their position (e.g. mechanical engineer), but cannot be attributed to them by name or directly quoted. It is similar to 'off the record' interviews in that you are not able to directly quote, but you may summarize this information in relation to someone's position to convey why they are credible to speak on the topic. An example of this would be "A member of the university's administration told *the Carillon* that the 'deal' on housing units really isn't intended to save students money, just to fill vacant housing units in the buildings."

Cleaning the Transcript

It is acceptable to remove “ums” and “ahs” and, in most cases, “like,” if it is unnecessary and/or distracting. You should leave “like” in if it contributes to the quotation, as shown below.

Original quotation: “Yeah, like, we had a really good year on the field. And umm, we, like, tried like really hard to you know, umm, get into the finals.”

Cleaned up: “Yeah, we had a really good year on the field, and we tried like really hard to get into the finals.”

Quotations are written verbatim, if possible, since changing anything that your source says could change the meaning; we can’t be putting words in someone’s mouth. If you come across an error you can add [SIC] behind it to show that it is the wording your source used. However, if it is a simple error that might be unnecessarily embarrassing for a source, you can make small changes (or you can intentionally leave the error if the embarrassment is earned in full). If you have a quote or written submission from a source that has a lot of errors (e.g. a tweet), instead of going through to correct all the errors, you can add “*As printed.*” immediately after.

Retaining error: “I bought 1,000 hamgberders [SIC],” said Trump.

Correcting error: “I bought 1,000 hamburgers,” said Trump.

We use square brackets when injecting (not replacing) a word or phrase that wasn’t said by the speaker into their quote for clarification.

Original	“The professor said she would have to approve the marks before they are posted.”
Correct	“The professor said she [the Dean of Arts] would have to approve the marks before they are posted.”
Nope	“The professor said [the Dean of Arts] would have to approve the marks before they are posted.”

Quotation Placement and Punctuation

Quotes are an integral part of reporting. They give your story depth and credibility whether you are quoting someone directly or summarizing information. When setting up a quotation of either type, the speaker should always be introduced.

Summarizing quote: University of Regina President Vianne Timmons said that government funding is decreasing annually, affecting both students and faculty.

Quote included: "Every year, government funding is dropping," said University of Regina President Vianne Timmons. "This means that tuition has to go up, and faculty numbers have to go down."

All punctuation is placed inside quotation marks - there are no exceptions. Floating punctuation looks awkward, so make sure everything's inside.

Correct	Some of the students said "quiet study space," "food and beverage options," and "affordable housing" at this university "are crucial for a good education."
Nope	Some of the students said "quiet study space", "food and beverage options", and "affordable housing" and this university "are crucial for a good education".

When setting up quotations, the comma placement is different depending on how the quotation is laid out:

Commencing: They said, "The new funding program will help students meet their financial needs. Income for the average post-secondary student really hasn't kept up with tuition rates, especially over the past decade, but we're trying to help where we can."

Continuing: "The new funding program will help students meet their financial needs," they said. "Income for the average post-secondary student really hasn't kept up with tuition rates, especially over the past decade, but we're trying to help where we can."

Concluding: "The new funding program will help students meet their financial needs. Income for the average post-secondary student really hasn't kept up with tuition rates, especially over the past decade, but we're trying to help where we can." they said.