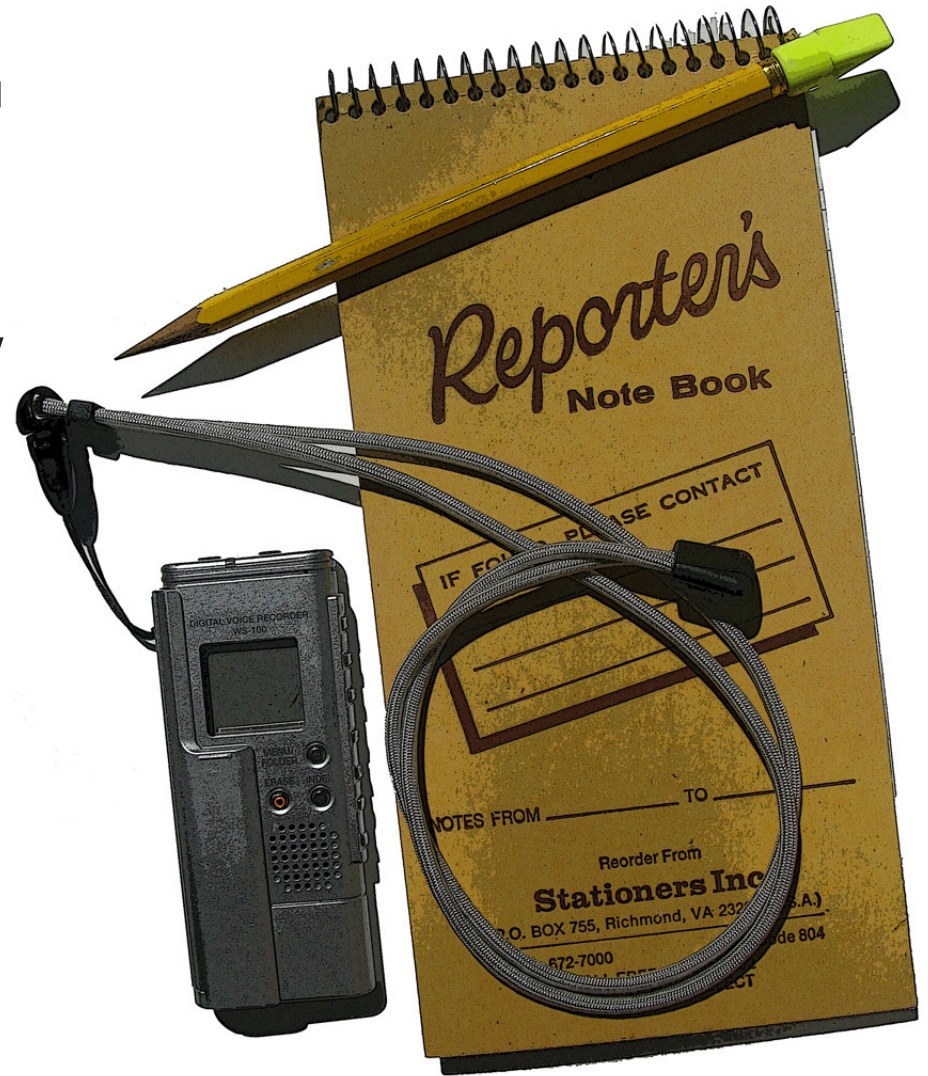


# Reporting *for* Duty

You can't crank out interesting copy by sitting in front of a computer in the journalism room. You must get up, go out, find and talk to specific people. If you want to write about unicorns and daffodils, fine. Join the literary magazine staff. Yearbook is journalism. Journalism is reporting.

by BOBBY HAWTHORNE  
Austin, TX | 2017

**N**o one reads yearbook copy, right? I hear it all the time. Students don't like yearbook copy, and they won't read it. Why spend all that time and effort and space with words when all students really want are photos of themselves gawking at a camera lens. Well, it's not as simple as that. Few students have read powerful yearbook copy, so they don't know if they'd like it or not. They certainly won't read pitter-patter articles meant to fill a hole to satisfy a press association rating evaluation. Good writing is meant to be read. Let's begin with that.



# cheat sheet

① Date of interview:

② Place of interview:

③ Recorded:  Yes  No

④ Transcribed:  Yes  No

⑤ Source's email address:

⑥ Source's cell phone #:

DETAILS | **Face / Body / Body Language:**

DETAILS | **Clothing/Accessories:**

DETAILS | **Environment:**

OTHER VISUAL DETAILS:

**What is this story about?**

**Background information:**

**Opening quote:**

**Closing quote:**

# QUESTION & ANSWER

❶ What do you mean by “don’t ask close-ended questions?”

☞ **Well, this is a “close-ended” question: What is your favorite song?**

**This is an “open-ended” question: Why do you believe today’s popular music is so bad?**

It’s good to remind you also not to ask cliché’ questions:

- Were you glad you won?
- Were you sad you lost?
- Are you looking forward to a winning season?
- Are you excited about the coming season?
- Were you surprised when your name was announced?
- What was your most embarrassing moment?
- What was the purpose of the such-and-such club, activity, etc?

❷ Can you provide an example of an “obvious” question? Sure. “Were you glad you had a winning season?” is totally DUH. “What moment during the season will you never forget?” is WOW.

☞ **So, a high school senior is interviewed for a story about “Locks of Love,” the public non-profit organization that provides hairpieces to financially disadvantaged children in the U.S. and Canada suffering from long-term medical hair loss.**

She responds to what and when and how questions but is never asked “why?” Why did she participate in “Locks of Love?”

The reason? She survived cancer as a child and knows what it is like to sit in the waiting room of an oncology clinic. And she understands how traumatic it is for a young girl to lose her hair.

❸ How do you make a club/activity story interesting? Well, you might ask the club president, “Did you leave the club different from how you found it?”

☞ **If the person says “Yes,” the obvious follow-up questions are “How?” and “So what?” Then, the reporter should ask for specific examples to illustrate the changes.**

Also, if you’re writing a personality profile on a public figure — the principal, head basketball coach or student body president — ask, “What’s something no one knows about you?”

One more interesting question: “What were you thinking when...” What was going through your mind right as you caught the winning touchdown pass or when the school board voted against an important curriculum idea that you strongly supported?

❹ Is there a particular order in which to ask questions?

☞ **It’s not written in stone, but generally at the beginning of the interview, ask what, when, where, and who questions. Ask for names, times, dates, numbers and other “simple to remember” questions. This allows the subject to feel a sense of control.**

Next, narrow the focus. Ask for examples. If a football coach says “The seniors are showing great leadership,” ask for a specific example of leadership. Which one player has exhibited great leadership, and how?

Ask analytical or interpretive questions: Why? How? So what? What if? Where? What if this happens again?”

❺ Any tips on crafting questions that will elicit interesting answers?

☞ **Deal with universal themes: love & hate; life & death; success & failure; loss & gain; good & evil; chaos & order; sacrifice & reward.**

Think also in terms of struggle: against society, against nature, against powerful political interests, against oneself.

So, look for a student who has overcome a great adversity. For example, a student survives a horrible car accident and later goes on to be a state champion sprinter. Focus on the accident. Get all the details. Focus on the time in recovery. Focus on preparing to succeed. Focus on succeeding. Focus on what it all means, how struggle has changed the person. Explain what readers can learn from hearing this person’s struggle and ultimate victory.

# Reporting *vs.* Writing

Anyone who ever said writing is easy probably isn't a writer. It's not easy, but in terms of producing readable stories for your student publication, it's probably the easiest part of the process. Most of your time will be spent gathering information from a variety of authoritative, local sources. Authoritative means people who know what they're talking about. Local means they live in your community and you have access to them, one-on-one.

**K**now this: If you do your job right, the great majority of your time will be spent reporting. If you spend three hours on a story, at least two and a half hours of that will be spent gathering information. Most of that time will be spent finding and interviewing the right person because your story should be driven by powerful direct quotes and supported by relevant facts. Take your time. Arrive early. Be prepared. Relax. Take deep breath. Review your notes, then begin the interview. Don't rush it. Let it develop just as a casual conversation might. Again, relax.

① You may have to talk to a dozen or more people before you find the right source. If you're writing a story on bullying, you will probably find six or seven people who have been bullied, but that doesn't mean they're the right person to interview. Keep looking until you find the person who has the right story.

② Interviewing is an intimate experience. You must get the source in a quiet place where he or she can think. Never attempt to interview a student while he or she is engaged in another activity. For example, never attempt to interview a male athlete while he is hanging out with his buddies.

③ Think narrow and deep rather than wide and shallow. Concentrate on a single, powerful incident or moment, then ask enough questions so you can recreate that moment for the reader. You may have to ask five or six small "detail" questions before you can write a interesting, descriptive paragraph. Be patient and thorough.

# Before Your Interview

You are assigned to write the copy for the Habitat for Humanity Club. You have a lot of choices. You could steal information and quotes from the Habitat for Humanity website. That would make for a good research paper, but no one would read it. Or, you could write an essay about your general feelings about Habitat for Humanity. No one would read that either. Try this: Talk to students at your school and ask them about their specific experiences as members of the club.

**L**earn as much about the story as possible. How much space do you have? How many words does your editor want? What kind of story should it be: straight news, a personality profile, a list, a how-to feature, a stand-alone quote. It's difficult to put together a list of questions for potential sources if you have no idea what the story is about, so meet with your editors and make sure everyone agrees on the purpose and scope of the story. Know also that the purpose and scope might change once the fact-gathering process begins.

- ① What's the purpose of this story?
- ② Where will it run? How long should it be?
- ③ What's obvious? What are the 'DUH' facts?
- ④ What do readers already know about this topic?
- ⑤ What don't readers know about this topic?

Some sources are incapable of providing a powerful, compelling quote. It's not in their DNA. Does that mean you never talk to them? No. It means you get as much out of them as possible, then rely on your own writing abilities to fill in the blanks. Now and then, you have to be able to write around the quotes. The quotes alone aren't always going to be able to tell the story. This is where watching and listening comes in. These descriptive details will provide the fodder for your creative writing talents.



① Allow your subject a chance to add a thought about anything he or she likes. It leaves them feeling that they've had their say. So, end your interviewing with, "Is there anything else you'd like to add or anything I should have asked?"

② The most important quality a journalist can have is aggressiveness with charm. You have to be forceful, but not at the point it's pushy. Don't let the subject intimidate you, but at the same time, don't try to bully the subject. Remember: It's a conversation.

③ If the subject turns hostile, keep your cool. Stay calm and courteous.

④ Remember: It's not the questions that make for a successful interview but rather the attention you pay to the answers you're given.

④ Go over your notes while the interview is still fresh in your mind and make sure to follow-up on anything that needs clarification.

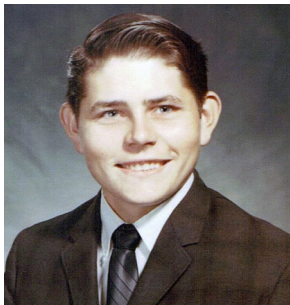
PROBLEM	POSSIBLE CAUSE	SOLUTION
<p><b>TOO VAGUE</b> Source provides vague, goofy, abstract answers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Have you chosen the right person to interview? Does this person have sufficient information or experience to provide new insight or knowledge?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Find a source who has a personal connection with the story. Remember: Experience counts. Simply having an opinion does not.</li> </ul>
<p><b>CLICHÉ</b> Subject's answers are worn-out responses you've heard a million times.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Did you ask a dumb questions such as, "What is the purpose of FBLA?" or "What does curriculum mean to you?" Ask a question that forces the source to provide a thoughtful response.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Go beyond the basic facts. Ask for examples. What were you thinking when? Why? How so? So what? What if? What now?</li> </ul>
<p><b>MISLEADING</b> Answers are misleading at best, false at worst.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ A student in a wheelchair says, "I don't mind being here. It's just the way I am." You know it isn't true. Most likely, there's a lack of trust between the reporter and source.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Spend more time developing a relationship with the source. You will never get a revealing answer unless your source trusts you. That takes time and empathy.</li> </ul>
<p><b>TOO WORDY</b> Answers are wordy, redundant, hard to follow.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Perhaps you failed to ask a specific, focused question. The question was so general that it demanded a fuzzy response.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Control the flow of the conversation. Concentrate on a single incident or moment. Don't cover a lifetime or career. If the source rambles off-topic, guide him or her back to the main subject.</li> </ul>

**① Finding a lead is rarely easy, even for veteran reporters. But one fail-safe trick is to identify your best direct quote, then paraphrase it and use it as your lead. For example: Karla Sue says, "I can't remember a time when I wasn't riding on the back of a horse." Your lead: Karla Sue can't remember a time when she wasn't riding on the back of a horse.**

# Finding Mr. Right

Find the person who has a story, not just an opinion.

Find the person for whom the issue or event is profoundly important. Consider the quotes below:



**“Acting out a scene on the stage may look like simple work but it’s not. It takes a lot of time and effort to get it right.”**



**“I worked hard to concentrate on my lines. It takes a lot of time to memorize the plethora of lines that make up a quality show.”**



**“I was so nervous before the senior play that I threw up just a little in my mouth, right before I went on stage.”**

**L**et’s do a bit of comparison. You’re writing a story on what it’s like to be the wife of a head football coach at your school. You interview five wives, none of whom tell you anything you didn’t already know. “Being a coach’s wife is fun. It’s exciting, but there’s a lot of pressure. Blah blah blah.” Then, you find the right coach’s wife. She tells you that last year, she had a baby on a Thursday in October and was released from the hospital the next morning. That afternoon, she and a friend and the new baby drove 100 miles to her husband’s game. “If I hadn’t attended, people might have talked about it in church on Sunday,” she said.



# Do your homework.

**F**or whatever reason, former Hollywood heart-throb Brad Pitt has come to town and has granted you an interview. He's recently finished a bitter custody battle with his latest celebrity wife. He's just filed for bankruptcy. His latest film, "Return to Tree of Life: The Root of All Evil" was a critical and financial disaster. He's packed on 100 pounds and is losing his hair. So, your first question should not be, "Well, Mr. Pitt, what are you up to these days?" Do your homework so you can ask questions that elaborate on facts you already know — questions like why, how, so what, what if, what now and what next?

You are assigned to write a feature about Mrs. Evelyn Smith, a popular English teacher. Before your interview with Mrs. Smith, learn the following:

- ① **Biographical information.** Where she began and how she got here.
- ② **Educational background.** Where she went to college. What degrees has she earned.
- ③ **Years in the classroom.** What subjects has she taught? Awards? Honors?
- ④ **Anecdotes.** What do colleagues and students say about her? Find people who know her well and who have stories to tell about her.
- ⑤ **Quirks.** What personality traits explain or define her?



**I**f you don't understand an answer, don't brush it off and move on. Stop and ask the question again. It may be necessary to simplify your question or ask it in another form. The best questions are simple sentences. The best questions are fairly short and direct — somewhere between 15 and 20 words. If you have a complicated question, break it into a series of simple questions. Don't try to answer six questions at once. Also, be willing to admit that you don't understand something. Better to look ignorant during the interview than to publish something false or misleading.

# during

## THE INTERVIEW

- ❶ Unless you have a photogenic memory, record your interview. A professional reporter might be able to recall full and complete direct quotes, but you can't.
- ❷ Double-record. Use a digital recorder as well as the recording device on your smart phone.
- ❸ Take along a note pad and keep notes. For example, you might jot down that a particularly poignant moment of the interview took place at the 12:33 mark.
- ❹ Use body language to indicate interest, agreement and understanding. Don't emote, though.
- ❺ Relax. Chances are, your source is as nervous as you are. If you'll relax, he or she likely will too.



**S**howing up in cut-off jean shorts, a Metallica tank top and mismatched flip flops is no way to impress the new superintendent. Be a professional. Prepare yourself in every way. Dress appropriately. Know what kind of story it'll be, when it's scheduled to run, and how long it's expected to be. Be polite and respectful. In a best-case scenario, simply conduct a comfortable conversation. For a story to have a conversational tone, you need to conduct a conversation with your sources.

# deal KILLERS

**T**here are ways to bring an interview to a screeching halt, to have yourself escorted to the door, to have you and your publication black-balled, ridiculed and scorned. Here are a few:

- ❶ Show up late, unprepared and dressed inappropriately, then stay too long.
- ❷ Ask dumb questions.
- ❸ Yawn. Roll your eyes. Fail to pay attention or provide positive feedback. Be a jerk.
- ❹ Misrepresent yourself. Lie or spread lies. Gossip.
- ❺ Argue with the subject.

# Where *to* Interview?



**Do not attempt to interview a source while he or she is dashing between classes or is in the middle of some other activity. Don't interview students in packs. You'll never get an intelligent quote from a person gooning at the camera with his or her friends.**



**Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed or interrupted. It should be quiet enough so that your digital recorder can pick up the entire conversation. It should also be isolated enough that the source is able to think and respond thoughtfully.**

**E**ven if the person you're interviewing loves the local breakfast joint and suggests you meet there for the interview, think again. Chances are, the restaurant is crowded and noisy. Waitresses clattering around plates, silverware and cups. Bee Gees and Donna Summers being pumped from the overhead speakers. Babies crying in the booths on either side of you. Find a neutral environment — one that is safe and secure but offers the source an opportunity to silently contemplate your questions and respond without distractions.

# Get your facts right

**Y**ou're assigned to write the story about freshman Evelyn Hsu, who recently earned a black belt in karate. You don't know her, but you don't want to go into the interview cold. So, gather as much information as possible. Learn a little about karate. What does it take to earn a black belt? Visit her gym. Talk to her karate instructors. If they tell you her favorite move is the back hook kick, find out what that is. Talk to her teachers and friends. What do they say about her? What's she like? Get them to tell you a story that might serve as an anecdote. If they say she's a quiet, shy girl, then that might be your angle: Quiet, shy girl who packs a wallop. Go into an interview in command of the facts. Then, ask questions that reveal motivation — the why and how and what if — about those facts.

You are assigned to write a feature about freshman Evelyn Hsu, who recently earned a black belt in karate. You might ask these questions:

- ❶ How did you get started in karate?
- ❷ Why did you choose karate?
- ❸ What's the hardest part of karate?
- ❹ What is your best memory from karate? What's your worst?
- ❺ Where do you go from here with the sport?

# Thoughts *to* ponder

- ❶ Life is like war: 59 minutes & 30 seconds of boredom. Thirty seconds of terror.
- ❷ Ask questions that will generate stories. You will need to ask a good number of who, what, when and where questions, but make sure you follow-up with “how, why, what if and what now?”
- ❸ You want your source to tell you stories, so ask questions that will trigger them. Ask your source to recall specific incidents, favorite memories and defining moments.
- ❹ Keep the interview focused on a single angle. Don't write a biography.

## THE 3-question INTERVIEW

**Y**ou are interviewing the retiring head librarian, Mrs. Ima Shusser. The last thing you want to do is ask a load of questions about where she grew up, where she attended college, where she began her career and how long she's been on the faculty here. You should know this going into the interview. Instead, ask the following:

- ❶ What's been the best thing about being the librarian? Follow up: Can you give me an example?
- ❷ What's been the worst single thing about being the librarian? Follow up: Can you give me an example?
- ❸ Where do you go from here? What now?

# Rarely if ever...

- ❶ Text message questions for an interview.
- ❷ Conduct email interviews. This should be a last resort. Arrange a face-to-face interview if possible.
- ❸ Conduct an interview on the rush between classes.
- ❹ Conduct an interview with a person while he or she is hanging out with the crowd.
- ❺ Rely exclusively on hand-written notes jotted down during an interview. Use a digital recorder.

# Never. Ever...

- ❶ Say to someone, "I need a quote for a story."
- ❷ Write a quote for someone. Don't let someone say, "Oh, just make up something for me."
- ❸ Make up a quote. Never think, "I know what he would have said, so I said it for him."
- ❹ Misquote someone. The quote must be accurate in all its facets and details.
- ❺ Take a quote out of context. The quote must be true on its face and in context.

# You can't squeeze good writing out of lazy reporting

**W**ho needs to be told “Homecoming was fun. Everyone was excited, especially the homecoming queen candidates.” Quotes like these come from lazy reporting. A better question: What were you thinking when you were standing out there in front of your friends and family and everyone else in town? If you play your cards right, you might end up with a quote like this: “It was really cold, and we were standing out there in our little dresses, and I kept saying to myself, ‘Just smile. Look happy. Everybody is watching.’ We didn’t know who had won until they actually announced it, so there was a lot of anticipation. I can’t say I was disappointed that I didn’t win because the girl who did win is one of my best friends. I was happy for her.”

How would you cover the following events in a way that doesn't tell readers what they already know? What angle might you take to produce an interesting, original story?

① Homecoming & prom

② Student Council projects

③ Class & club elections

④ Testing & student assessment

⑤ Academic extracurricular contests