

Tips on interviewing people from other groups

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★ Be sensitive and thoughtful. Understand that people who are different from you may be scared about talking to a journalist, even if it is not the first time they have done so. To put them at ease, you might start off the conversation with “small talk”—about their families, their work life, hobbies, and so on. This will help them feel comfortable. It will let them know that you view them as more than just a representative of a minority, that you recognise that they have other aspects of their lives.

★ Make sure you understand any conditions they may have placed on the interview. Clarify whether or not they mind having their name used. Or perhaps they do not mind using a first name, but would prefer that you not mention their last name, their town, or other details that might identify them. Accept their requests and do not try to persuade them otherwise.

★ If you have a choice of where to interview them, decide on a place where they feel comfortable. It is often best to interview people in their own environment—their apartment or office, for example—because that is where they feel most relaxed. It also helps you to understand their perspective because you can experience them in their normal surroundings, and they may reveal things they would not in a more formal or unfamiliar setting.

★ Let them tell you their story in their own way. If they want to start with what happened five or 10 years ago, let them, even if it seems to you that it is not exactly relevant to what you want to know. Try to schedule enough time with them so you do not have to pressure them to get quickly to the point. People often feel more relaxed about discussing something close to their hearts when they have the freedom to speak at length.

★ Write up a list of questions beforehand, but use it as a general guide rather than something you have to stick to strictly. As you ask your questions, you should listen carefully to what they say, so that you are open to other approaches. Be flexible. If you

are too attached to your own ideas of what the interview should be about, you may not recognise those moments when your sources mention important but subtle aspects of the problem that you have not been aware of previously.

★ No matter how different they are from you, do not preach to them about how they should live their lives. If you approach them with a judgmental attitude, they are likely to sense that immediately and will probably not feel comfortable talking to you or trust you to use the information sensitively. They understand their situation much better than you do – which is why you are interested in interviewing them.

★ Try to acknowledge to yourself any biases or prejudices you have about the minority they belong to—and then try to put those ideas aside when interviewing people and preparing your story. If you have a stereotyped perspective of the people you are writing about but do not recognise it, you are likely to demonstrate that bias in both your questions and your writing.

★ Remember that your sources are experts. An expert is not just a doctor or scientist. Your sources are experts on their own lives. Do not assume that you know what they will tell you, because then you won't be open for any surprises. You want them to describe their lives and experience to you – and your job is to convey that to your audience.

★ At the end of the conversation, ask if they know any other people who might be willing to be interviewed. This can be an important method of finding other sources for this or future articles. Of course, the more sensitive you are while interviewing them, the more likely they are to feel comfortable referring you to someone else.

★ Above all, be careful how you use the information. When someone agrees to talk to you, they are doing you a great favour. When you write about them, do so with care and compassion. It is easy to frighten members of your audience when you report about people from a different background by using stereotypes, inflammatory or derogatory language, unverified information, and other biased material. Your role, however, is to help your audience understand other people and empathise with rather than fear them.