

**Writing a mass media story based on an interview**  
(Top 10 tips by Ross F. Collins, professor of communication, NDSU)

**The assignment:** Write a story (about three to four pages) based on an interview of someone you DON'T know, or don't know very well. (That is, NOT your grandparents, parents, siblings, relatives, spouse, roommates, friends, coworkers or teammates.) The story normally needs to have some connection to the university or student life. The topic may be a biography, a feature story or a news story. You must include at least one interview, and may include more than one. **Extra credit** (five points) will be offered for stories including more than one interview. Generally in professional mass media few stories of any substance are based on a single interview. The majority are based on multiple interviews, sometimes dozens.

**General principles for mass media interviews**

**1. Story should NOT** be about your own experience but about experience and information you gain from the person you interview. Do not use "I" or "my." The story is not about you.

**2. Story may be based** on a meeting or other news event but also needs an interview in addition to event reporting. Commonly beat reporters covering news will also include interviews.

**3. Story should be** written as if it could be published in a student or local newspaper. Don't write anything you don't want to be read by a mass media audience.

**4. Interviews are best conducted** in person. While reporters do sometimes rely on communication technology, for this assignment a phone interview, text interview or interview by email will not count; I may check your source to make sure you interviewed her or him in person.

**5. Do not write a generic lead.** Try to use active voice. Try to find strong verbs. Leads to avoid:

- a. Those beginning with questions. They ask your reader to write your lead.
- b. Those beginning with quotations. They ask your source to write your lead.
- c. Those beginning with general statements, such as "The university is filled with interesting people," or "Students today are looking for rewarding internship opportunities." Be specific, such as "Deborah Jones begins her morning with hot coffee, but she doesn't drink it herself. As the Minard Hall coffee cart manager, she...." Or "Some internships may not pay, but Jacob Smith's did, and very well indeed. He took home \$20,000 for one summer's work at...."

**6. Do not refer to someone** by first name. After introducing full name and identification, use last name only on subsequent references. This is standard AP style.

**7. Using quotations.** Stories should have at least three quotes from the source. Guidelines for quotations:

- a. Periods and commas are always inside quote marks in U.S. style. Example: “I plan to run for Student Senate next year,” said Nern.
- b. In longer quotes, particularly those with more than one sentence, place attribution in the middle. Example: “I plan to run for Student Senate next year,” said Nern, “and I’ll ask Hillary Clinton to be my running mate.”
- c. Do not use as attributions the words stated, commented or mentioned. They are clumsy. Just use said, or says, and, occasionally, added, pointed out, noted, or concluded.
- d. Begin a new paragraph after a longer quote. Mass media style emphasizes frequent paragraphs, as the story looks more inviting than a wall of text.
- e. Do not put quotes in italics.
- f. If you are not sure of the source’s exact words, take the quote marks off the material and make a paraphrase. Guessing or making up quotes will sooner or later get you into big trouble. You may wish to use a partial quote, if you know some of the words. It is considered acceptable, but not required, to clean up grammar errors.
- g. Consider ending your article with a strong quote that seems to sum up the story. It’s a common technique in mass media style writing.

## **8. The interview.**

a. Locate a subject to interview. Either text, call, email or approach that person. Explain the topic of your story and the publication you are working for. (If it’s for a class, tell the person that, but also suggest that it could be published later.) Note: do not tell the source the angle you may plan to take; tell him or her only the subject. For example, tell the faculty senate president you are doing a story on university budget cuts. Don’t tell her you are planning to emphasize the difficulties of adjunct professors who may lose their jobs due to these cuts, and how that will affect student learning.

b. Prepare for an interview by finding background on the source and subject. You gain credibility when you appear to know something about the person’s area of expertise, and you don’t waste time asking pointless questions.

b. Write at least five questions so that you’re prepared. Avoid yes/no questions. Avoid letting a source take over the interview by proposing questions designed to promote a particular spin. Your job is not to promote someone’s agenda but to collect facts.

c. Take notes in addition to recording the interview; if you choose to take notes on a laptop keep in mind that the computer between you and your source may inhibit communication. Try your best to keep up with the person’s comments. Ask him or her to repeat, if necessary, realizing that the repeated comment may not be as fresh or interesting as the original one.

d. Always ask a subject before you leave if he or she would like to add any comments. Sometimes those make the best quotes of the entire interview.

e. If your subject says something is “off the record,” that means you can’t use that material in any way in your story. Usually “off the record” comments are useless to reporters, unless they

give a hint to where a reporter might search for information, Deep Throat style. If your source says “off the record,” you may wish to request that he or she make comments on the record, so that you can use them. Oftentimes they will. Keep in mind that an interview is a negotiation, and often your source wants to give you information as much as you want to get it. People usually like to talk about themselves and their work.

f. Always ask for a phone number in case you want to recheck facts, and offer yours in case your source wants to add something later.

9. Do not agree to read your story or send it to the source for editing. Your source is not your editor. It is your story, not your source’s. You can sometimes send parts of a complex or technical story, however, if you are not certain that you are conveying the material correctly. (If your source insists on seeing your work before publication, tell him or her that your editor does not allow it, and if they still insist, tell them to call your editor. In the case of a writing class the editor is your professor.)

10. Include contact information (phone number or email address) for every person interviewed. This is standard procedure among professional news operations, as an editor or fact checker may wish to verify the quotes or other material for accuracy.