

Journalistic Interview across Language and Culture
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Texts:

•*Interviewing: The Oregon Method*, Peter Laufer (editor) Note: all profits from the sale of this book go toward SOJC student services.

•Recommended reading:

The Norton Book of Interviews, Christopher Silvester (editor)

Equipment: audio recorder, pencil (or pen) and paper.

A warm welcome

I look forward to working with you in Mexico and getting to know you as we interview each other. I hope you already love the interview as much as I do and that if you don't, you will by the end of the term. The interview provides us access to an endless array of subjects and – no matter our personal backgrounds – the result is that we are afforded the privilege of encountering and learning from multiple voices, diverse points of view and a wide variety of cultural experiences. If you have questions not answered in this syllabus or in class, do not hesitate to contact me. We will work hard, learn from each other, and have fun.

Overview

I love the interview because it is intimate, immediate, and often an entrée toward the soul. Conducting interviews can be both great fun and an art form.

The interview is a crucial tool for journalists, and every human interaction constitutes a form of interview. This class is designed to improve and professionalize students' interviewing skills, from crafting questions to the critical task of listening actively and creatively to answers.

Course objectives:

Students participate in this hands-on class. They choose and secure their interview subjects. Their interviewing processes and the resulting stories they create are presented, analyzed, and critiqued in class. In addition to the primary texts, excerpts of model interviews are studied as are the techniques used to secure them.

Among the issues considered by the course are:

- 1) Interview ethics — including questions of coercion, intimidation, and the buying and selling of access
- 2) Filtering questions and source vetting
- 3) The architecture of the interview setting

- 4) Unannounced interviewing – stalking, staking out, ambushing and clandestine – along with the value of a formal news conference
- 5) The power of silence, and non-verbal questions & answers
- 6) Preparation vs. the Larry King technique
- 7) Interviewing across geographical, cultural, and linguistic borders
- 8) Is anything ever really “off the record”?
- 9) When is it okay to change the wording of a direct quote?

By the end of the term, students should be adept at

- observation,
- identifying high-value interviewees,
- defying gatekeepers to arrange interviews,
- successfully interrogating interviewees (even those recalcitrant and/or media-trained),
- accurate note taking with and without recording devices,
- integrating interviews into narrative prose,
- defending their work to critiques from unhappy interviewees,
- verification.

Guests with specific types of interview experiences join the class during the term to be interviewed by students. Guest lecturers who use the interview in their work speak to the class.

Three interview exercises are assigned, as is a fourth news story final project of approximately 1,000 words which is based on at least one major interview and several supporting interviews. Periodic additional work is assigned as needed both in class and homework. There is no final exam.

The first assigned interview is with someone who uses the interview as a component of work and is not a journalist. Lawyers, police officers, doctors, priests, and employers are examples. The goal of the interview is to gain an understanding of how the subject uses interview on the job.

The second assigned interview is with someone who is an expert. The goal of the interview is to explain the expertise to a lay audience.

The third assigned story exercise is with someone living as an ex-pat in Mexico. The goal of the interview is to develop a story of a cross-cultural experience.

Stories of approximately 500 words in a narrative form are submitted for each of the first three interviews.

The fourth written assignment is a journalistic story based on a major interview. It can be a profile of an interviewee or an examination of a story through the experiences of the interviewee. It must be buttressed by approximately four germane ancillary interviews providing context, texture, and other factors to be discussed in class. Use of material generated for the three exercises as elements of the final paper is encouraged. Students who submit this final project for publication and elicit prompt documented responses from editors (acceptance or rejection) receive extra credit.

Students keep a narrative log of the events that occur as they secure interviews. These logs are submitted with assignments.

There is class discussion of how the assigned interviews are secured and conducted, as well as of their content. Assigned interviews must be recorded with an

audio recording device and presented in a written narrative form (unless special arrangements are made for alternative platforms). Inform interviewees that you are recording the conversation and record their agreement to the recording. Further details regarding the assignments are presented during classes, as are details regarding ad hoc assignments developed during the term. The interviews must be documented with the interviewee's name, contact point, title, or role, along with the time, date, location and duration of the interview.

Housekeeping

Class participation: Students are expected to attend every class on time, meet all deadlines on time, complete all reading and other assignments, and engage in group discussions. That basic average standard earns an average C grade in class participation. Failure to meet it risks a lower grade. Those who seek an A or B must surpass the basic standard.

Written assignments: Clear American English is expected, along with accuracy and fairness. That standard, as is the case with class participation, earns at least an average C grade for written assignments. Failure to meet it risks a lower grade. Again, those who seek an A or B must surpass the basic standard, with well-proofread assignments that show flair and style, exhibit thorough research along with compelling writing and elegant language use.

Grade guideline details:

A = Exceptional work of professional quality and suitable for publication.

B = Above average work that shows clarity, accuracy and fairness but can benefit from improvement.

C = Average and with no substantive reporting errors.

D = Weak work plagued with English language and/or reporting errors.

F = Failure based on substantive language and/or reporting errors.

Interviews conducted in class, analysis of the interviews of others, sharing favorite interviews worthy of study and other in-class work add up to 25% of the grade.

The first three assigned graded interviews, along with the logs of what occurred while executing the assignment, carry 10% of the grade each, for a total of 30%.

The final graded project feature story is the remaining 45% of the grade. Students will be given the opportunity to rewrite the final project after an initial draft is assessed.

Format: Each assignment must include your name and the date. Assignments must be submitted via black ink on white paper. Use the typeface Times New Roman, 12pt. Double space (single-spaced papers will not be accepted). Print on one side of the paper only. Indent paragraphs. Do not add extra space between paragraphs. Number the pages. Do not deviate from this format.

Assignment protection: Keep a duplicate copy of all assignments.

Academic honesty: The University of Oregon policy on academic dishonesty is summarized at this website: <https://policies.uoregon.edu/vol-3-administration-student-affairs/ch-1-conduct/student-conduct-code>

Disabilities: Students with a documented disability who anticipate needing accommodations to complete this course please arrange to meet with me during the first

week and request that the UO Counselor for Students with Disabilities send a letter verifying the disability.

Classes begin and end on time. Attendance is required, barring illness or emergencies. Absence mandates written explanations. In case of absence, students are responsible for determining what was missed. Contact fellow students for details. As is the case with news stories, two reliable sources are recommended. If there are any unexpected changes to the class schedule due to weather or emergencies, attempts to inform students will be made via Canvas.

This class follows the lead of my colleague Mike Thoele and recognizes that what he calls a “magnificent failure” can be as valuable to the learning process as a successful interview. If the interviewer demonstrates, in what Thoele calls “vivid detail,” a disaster, and explains in instructive detail what was learned from the experience and how it will be applied to future interviews, the failed interview can earn a good grade.

Another tip of the green eyeshade to the late SOJC Professor Tom Wheeler and this line from a syllabus for a class he taught that included interview techniques: “I will be just as willing to hear excuses regarding late assignments as an editor would be regarding missed deadlines – not at all.”

Reading schedule:

Interviewing: The Oregon Method,

Chapters 1 through 5 to be read by end of week 1 (58 pages)

Chapters 9 through 13 to be read by end of week 2 (53 pages)

Chapters 15, 22 and 27 to be read by end of week 3 (25 pages)

Assignment schedule:

The first interview narrative and log are due at noon in class the first Friday of the course.

The second interview narrative and log are due at noon in class the second Friday of the course.

The third interview narrative and log are due at noon in class the third Friday of the course.

The first draft of the major project narrative and log are due at noon in class the last Monday of the course. The major project is due the last Friday of the course. Projects are presented orally on a schedule to be announced.

Again, welcome.

Our earliest human records – paintings on cave walls, for example – are pictorial interviews.

“What did you do today?”

That’s the question the cave wall artist asks his comrade or himself. The answer shows up marked on the wall.

“I took my spear and killed dinner for us.”

The interview is a grand tradition, a critical function for journalists and an art form. I look forward to sharing yours.