

Interviewing experts – asking for information

Experts are people who know a great deal about a subject because they address it in their work, because they are extremely interested in it or because they often have dealt with it.

Because you are faced with an abundance of material, information and ideas, an expert can help you sort everything a bit. Quickly and simply, he also can give advice on your subject so that you don't have to wade through too many textbooks. He can point out interesting details to you and give you specific help in finding your subject's focus.

When interviewing an expert, you should bear the following in mind:

Preparation

- Look specifically for experts who can provide facts that would close existing gaps in your information. You can find experts in, for example, organisations, associations and universities but also in politics and administration (agency guideposts, Yellow Pages, Internet ...).
- After establishing contact or in the preliminary conversation, clarify if the possible interlocutor is really an expert on your theme.
- Agree upon the date, place and time of your meeting. Consider which aspects of your subject should be addressed in the conversation. Share this information (preferably in writing) with the expert, so that he can prepare himself. Decide which person from your group will lead the conversation.
- Ask if you can record the conversation on tape or video.
- Acquaint yourselves with the subject and collect background information, so that you will be more confident during the conversation.
- Write down your questions for the expert in a sensible order. Try to place the central questions in the first half of the conversation so they don't get "lost." Avoid questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no"; the "how," "why" and "whence" questions are more suitable.

**Before the
interview**



Conducting the interview

- When interviewing experts, you are having a conversation; in other words, your conversation partner will stray from the question posed, chat and relate details that surprise or fascinate you but do not address your theme. In many cases, the expert will also not designate things as clearly and comprehensibly as you expected or hoped. Try then to free yourselves from the list of questions and respond to his answers. But also try to bring the expert back to the theme; ask a question again, enquire what his answer meant.
- Designate one member of the group to write down a brief outline of the answers, even if the conversation is also recorded. Then you are safeguarded if the equipment fails and also have a first written overview of the conversation, without having to listen to the entire cassette.

**During the
interview**

Evaluation

- Analyse the conversation when the impressions are still fresh. In this way, you can be sure that the expert will still be able to remember you if you call him to enquire about some detail or other.
- Using your list of questions, check which answers you received and which questions still remain open.
- Divide the important from the marginal. Which new insights have you received? Note down the most important passages of the interview. In the case of lengthy interviews, it makes sense to organise the statements according to theme or issue.
- Discuss: Does the information that you received in the interview agree with the information you already had? Where do several experts advance the same or different views? How can possible contradictions be explained? Can they be elucidated or eliminated?
- Even when you can find no satisfactory answer or explanation, you should in any case refer to such open questions and contradictions when writing your report.

**After the
interview**