

# INTERVIEWING TIP SHEET

International Human Rights Clinic  
Human Rights Program, Harvard Law School

June 2010

---

## I. Before an Interview

- A. *Different types of interviewees—who do you want to talk to?*
1. Start by figuring out who you want to talk to and what you hope to learn from each interview. Some individuals may be just sources for other sources, creating a domino effect.
  2. Eye-witnesses and/or victims
    - a. They should provide “the story,” document the abuse, and humanize it.
  3. Local NGOs
    - a. They may be good for context from on the ground and for networking.
    - b. They are often advocacy organizations so may come with a bias.
  4. Academics
    - a. They may provide a potentially more detached view.
    - b. They may have good information on context and historical issues.
  5. Experts
    - a. They may help you answer technical questions (e.g., legal, scientific, medical, etc.) you may have.
  6. Government Representatives
    - a. They may be willing to give official statements, which are important to include in an investigation.
  7. Perpetrators
    - a. They may provide balance for a report, provide evidence of intent and motive, and explain why something was done
    - b. It is often advisable to leave their interviews until later in a mission.
- B. *Preparation*
1. Prepare lines of questions in advance, particularly when you are new to the field.
  2. Listen carefully and be prepared to modify your questions both within an interview and between interviews.
    - a. Do not force an interview in certain directions.
    - b. For example, if you go in to ask someone about a massacre and it turns out the interviewee was not there, you will have to figure out some other useful questions to ask.
  3. Tailor questions to the expertise and knowledge of the witness.
    - a. Some may be able to provide eyewitness testimony while others provide expertise in a certain area.
    - b. Remember that not everyone is an expert in everything—judge the information s/he provides accordingly.

- C. *Coordination*
  1. Coordinate with your fellow interviewers on question and logistics before you go into an interview.
  2. It is often good to have one person lead an interview so that it has a flow and to better build rapport. Otherwise one interviewer may be guiding an interviewee along a certain path only to have that path interrupted by the second interviewer.
  3. You can pause or take a break at key points to ask other interviewers if they have questions. Alternatively, you can divide an interview up into segments so that one person asks one set of questions and another asks another.
  
- D. *Setting*
  1. It is best to get the interviewee alone in a private space so that s/he can feel comfortable speaking freely. This is not always possible, particularly with children and in family situations.
  2. When it is relevant, consider the security of the interviewees.

## II. **During an interview**

- A. *Introductions*
  1. Explain who you are in terms the interviewee can understand. Remember s/he may not know what Harvard or your organization is.
  2. Explain what your project is.
  3. Explain how their information will be used (make sure you get consent).
  4. Be prepared for: a) People asking for money/assistance, and b) People complaining that interviewers never do anything for them.
  5. Your goal is to win trust from the beginning.
  6. Ask permission to take notes.
  7. Discuss confidentiality here and/or at the end, depending on who the witness is. In some cases, you may decide for them (i.e. not use names for security reasons, regardless of what they say). When keeping a witness confidential, be sure to exclude *any* identifying factors that could give his/her identity away (e.g., do not identify Dr. Smith as a "doctor" in a certain village if there is only one doctor in the village).
  
- B. *Organizing an Interview*
  1. Start broad. Let an interviewee tell his/her story. For example, "I heard you saw the massacre on December 4 of last year. Can you tell me what you saw?" This allows interviewee to present a narrative—good for report and helps interviewee open up.
  2. Go back and ask specific questions. You can make a list of those in margins (e.g. when, what day/time, etc.).
  
- C. *Reliability versus Credibility*
  1. Reliability deals with the accuracy of the witness. To determine reliability, ask repeatedly "how do you know?" Some individuals may tell a good story and be earnest but may not have actual knowledge and firsthand experience with an event.
  2. Credibility deals with truthfulness of the witness. Does the witness have incentive to lie or bend the truth? Look for bias, fear, greed, apathy.

- D. *Types of Questions*
1. Avoid leading questions, which can taint evidence. Do not confuse leading questions with questions that create a foundation.
  2. Avoid compound questions. These can confuse an interviewee. Compound questions can also lead to confusing answers (e.g., if an answer is "yes" to a two-part question, it will be unclear which part it is responsive to).
  3. Be creative, e.g., some people will not know dates and times. Ask if it was morning, afternoon, night. Ask if it was before, during, after harvest.
  4. Be aware some countries have different date systems than we do.
  5. Ask people to draw diagrams or maps, but be aware that some people may be illiterate.
  6. Ask people if they have any documents can provide.
- E. *Difficult Interviewees*
1. Be prepared to guide an interview. This is as much an art as a skill. Use types of questions and order of questions to keep things on track.
  2. Ramblers may talk forever about potentially irrelevant matter. Be prepared to rein them in without being offensive, e.g., start asking more specific questions so that there is less room to ramble.
  3. Quiet ones may give you one-word or very short answers to open-ended questions. Try asking broader questions to see if you can get them to open up. If this does not work, go back to specific questions to draw out relevant info more systematically.
  4. Traumatized individuals require extra care and sensitivity.
- F. *Hostile Witnesses*
1. It is important to get opposing views, so all sides are represented, e.g., government officials or perpetrators. Sometimes such individuals will be open but at other times they can be hostile.
  2. It is often good to save hostile interviews to end of mission to extent you can. This allows you to come prepared on issues you need responses to. It also helps ensure you do not get interference with your mission (e.g., get kicked out of the country).
  3. You may want to initially act as you know little, which may encourage them to say what they think more freely than if they think you have preconceived views. You need to always balance this with a need to show some level of credibility.
  4. Later, you can ask more pointed questions and call them on what they said earlier, e.g., "You said xx earlier, but from what I have heard, yy is true."
  5. Save the tough questions for the end (while still budgeting time) so you do not get thrown out of someone's office too early. This also allows you to determine how hostile an individual is.
- G. *Working with a Translator*
1. If possible, vet a translator for skills, biases, etc., before hiring him or her.
  2. Explain clearly and repeatedly that you need to get verbatim translation.
  3. Obstacles
    - a. Bad English—figure out creative ways to ask questions (obviously avoid getting translator with bad English unless absolutely necessary).

- b. Abbreviated answers—reiterate verbatim translation. Interviewee may talk for five minutes, and translator only gives you a couple sentences
  - c. Interjection of translator's opinions may also occur. Be aware of his or her potential biases, so you can pick up on this. Again explain you need to know what the interviewee is saying.
  - d. Translator may try to conduct the interview. Remind him or her that you need to know what is being asked and need to formulate the questions.
4. Benefits of translator
- a. Use translators (and fixers) to learn about language and culture. They can be valuable part of team. They may have awareness of how to phrase questions that you do not have. Do not debate such things during interview though.

H. *Ending an Interview*

- 1. Ask: Is there anything else you want to add?
- 2. Ask: Is there anyone else you can recommend I talk to?
- 3. Get name with spelling, age, profession, other relevant info.
- 4. Get contact info, if possible, for follow up questions.
- 5. Discuss if you can use his or her name or identifying information if you have not already.

**III. *After an interview***

A. *Protect notes*

- 1. Keep your notes in a safe place (usually on you) to avoid loss and theft.
- 2. Do not put them in checked luggage.
- 3. Hide identities of witnesses in notes when relevant.
- 4. You can email them to yourselves if you are in location where security may be an issue.

B. *Type up notes*

C. *Organize notes*