



Turning Interviews into First-Person Essays

Interviews are a wonderful tool for documenting history and social or cultural issues, and also a great way to learn about people's lives. These tips will help you turn a spoken interview into a clear piece of writing that will hold the interest of an outside reader.

As your first step, you will *transcribe* the interview, writing out everything the person said, exactly as they said it.

Once you have that *transcript*, you are ready to begin editing it into a first-person essay in the voice of the speaker. You become a kind of "co-author" with the person you interviewed. The words are theirs, but you choose what parts to use and in what order to arrange them. You present their story to a reader. This is an honor and a challenge.

BEFORE YOU START

Before you begin editing the interview, *know the length of the final essay* you will produce from it. A good length is 500 words, or about two double-spaced pages.

If you are doing this work on the computer, be sure to *save two files*: the "unedited transcript" and the transcript that you are editing into an essay. You will need to go back often to check the original words.

Editing your interview transcript into a completed essay takes time, and it should go in several stages.

DECIDING ON YOUR FOCUS

Because it is a conversation, every interview has many more words than you will use in the final essay. When looking at a long transcript, many people find it hard to choose the important parts.

For this reason, it helps to know your goal. Do you want your essay to focus on a certain theme, like "work" or "childrearing" or "war"? Or do you want to create a portrait of the person as a whole? Once you make this decision, you can begin to determine what to save and what to cut. Ask yourself:

- *What is unique about this person?*
- *How does this person see the world?*
- *What does this person know that others do not?*
- *What details reveal this person's time period, place, or community?*
- *What specific personal details does this person share?*

Think about what you really want the reader to know about your narrator. By getting this clear, you can present a strong picture of who the narrator is.

WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO KEEP

Start with the printed transcript of the complete interview. Read it several times. As you read, use a highlighter to mark statements that you might want to include.

- Mark the passages where you can best feel the speaker's *energy*—joy, sadness, worry, fear, anything that brings the person to life on the page.
- Look for moments of *description* and *observation*. When you can hear, see, smell, touch, or taste what the narrator is talking about, that's a good sign that it should go in the essay.
- Look for statements of *meaning*—passages where the narrator tells *why something matters* to him or her. These will also help your reader care, so they can make your essay stronger.

WHAT YOU SHOULD CUT

Much of what people say in an interview is not "essay material." For example,

- Take out "filler words" like "um," "ah," and "you know."
- Take out unimportant comments. (Ask yourself, "Does this give readers something they need to know in order to 'get' this person?")

Sometimes, a speaker will talk about the same subject—food, for example—in different parts of an interview. First, group these passages together. If they say the same thing in different words, keep only the part you like better.

When in doubt, cut it out!

ORGANIZING THE NARRATIVE

Interviews let people remember and make sense of their experience out loud. For this reason, your narrator may talk in roundabout ways, and touch on many different topics.

As you edit the interview transcript, look for a balance between creating organization and keeping a natural flow in the narrator's speech.

You may move the pieces of the interview around to find an order that makes sense to the person reading. But you also want your reader to experience the narrator's thought patterns. The order in which someone shares feelings can show something interesting about how the person sees the world.

Look for a *strong beginning*—something that makes you want to keep reading, to find out more. A student interviewing a car-wash owner started the narrative like this:

Not again! It's raining for the third time this week; I'll have to take the day off. The water steals my job; my tips vanish in the air. Everyone who owns a car goes out on rainy days so the water can do its work for free. They do not see that I need to wash their car to survive.

Look for an *ending* that leaves the reader with something to think about. For example, in the car-wash essay:

How I miss the sunny days in the Dominican Republic. That is the place I would rather be, instead of here at the car wash, where I keep on praying, "Please, God, don't cry today, let me work the whole day."

STAYING TRUE TO THE SPEAKER'S VOICE

Everyone talks in a style that belongs to that person. Your readers will want to "hear" the natural voice of the narrator.

Do not change the speaker's words in order to make them "better" or "more descriptive" or "good grammar." If your narrator speaks in slang or a dialect, don't change their words to standard English.

However, you may leave out unnecessary words, to make a passage shorter or more clear. You can indicate where you cut words by typing three dots (. . .), which is called an *ellipsis*. For example, in this interview with a survivor of Hurricane Katrina:

This is a place that is unlike any place in the world. There's dancing everyday in the street . . . Right now, if I just take this cane and derby I got, and I start singing a beat, people will follow me and just go down the street. You can't do that nowhere else. I will never leave New Orleans. I will die here.

You may also need to insert words, to make clear the speaker's meaning. Put brackets around any words you have added. For example, in the previous example, you could do this:

This [the New Orleans French Quarter] is a place that is unlike any place in the world.

WHEN THE SPEAKER USES SEVERAL LANGUAGES

You may interview someone who speaks several languages—and that is an important part of who they are. Statements made in a native language might have the most impact if you present them in that language.

In that case, write the foreign language in italics. Then, translate for the reader. Put the translated words in brackets.

In the example below, Paul Phillips, Jr., describes his father, a self-trained veterinarian and descendant of slaves. His father could communicate in both German and English. Paul describes an interaction in both languages:

A husband of the household, unknowingly to his wife, called my father for a tooth extraction of their pet dog. The dog screamed, causing the lady to come to the door. Upon finding out what was going on, she said, "*Ich murdu auch den Schwartzen dasz thun wasg weisg.*" ["I don't think this black man knows what he's doing."] Not looking up from his work and to the surprise of both, my father calmly replied, "*Ich weisg.*" ["I do."] That lady was really surprised!

EXPLAINING THE CONTEXT

You may need to add a note before or after the essay, so that the reader understands things that the speaker has not directly addressed.

For example, a brief introduction or end note could explain the relationship between the speaker and the person who conducted the interview. Or it could tell why and where the interview took place. For example, sentences like this could go in italics before or after the essay:

Sari Alborni interviewed her mother Carmela Alborni about emigrating to America in 2006. They spoke in their home in San Francisco.

READING THE ESSAY ALOUD

When you have made your interview text into a shorter narrative essay, print it out and read it aloud (either to yourself or to another person). As you do, you will notice places that do not sound natural, or places where you can cut unnecessary words. Your ear will tell you things that your eye will not catch.

After you make the changes, read the piece aloud again. Keep repeating the process until you have an essay that captures both these key elements:

- The focus you wanted
- The essence of the person who is speaking.

CHECKING YOUR PIECE WITH THE PERSON INTERVIEWED

Once you have the essay finished, show it to the person who was interviewed. Make sure that your work has not somehow changed the meaning or tone of what that person intended to say. Together, you can make the final changes, so the essay stays true to the speaker, and at the same time is short and clear enough to engage the reader.

Don't forget to make a clean printed copy of the final piece to give to the interview subject. Together, you will have created something of great value—both for the speaker and for all the readers your essay will reach.

RESOURCES

In Our Village: Kambi ya Simba Through the Eyes of Its Youth

By the students of Awet Secondary School in Tanzania, East Africa and What Kids Can Do (Next Generation Press, 2006)

Forty-Cent Tip: Stories of New York Immigrant Workers

By the students of three New York City high schools (Next Generation Press, 2006)

"A Kids' Guide to Recording Stories"

<http://www.transom.org/tools/basics/200501.shoutout.kdavis.html>