

Communication 4312 – The Writing Process

The writing of the story should begin when you are given the assignment. Be sure to understand clearly what the assignment is and what the person making the assignment thinks the story is about.

Start immediately doing research. Spend as much time as you have on this. Find out everything you can. If time is short, that can be a factor. Or, if this isn't that big a story, then you won't need to do as much. But, if it's a significant story, do everything you can. Preparation can even include talking people who know the subject beforehand.

Make a list of questions you might ask. Don't necessarily stick to the questions. But have them to fall back on. Be aware when answers may lead you in a different direction.

Have a sense of the escalation necessary in an interview. Group the questions so that they will lead you more deeply into the subject matter. Write the questions clearly so that you can refer to them easily.

Before the interview, write a one-sentence or a one-paragraph statement as to what you think the story is about. You might even try writing a lead as a starting point. This, by the way, is a common way that stories get on budgets for newspapers, the wire services, magazines, etc.

If you are meeting someone for the interview, be sure to know where you are going. Arrive about five minutes before the scheduled time. Dress neatly and appropriately to the situation. Have a good notebook and a tape recorder you know have to use. Have more than one pen!

Other than exchanging pleasantries, don't spend time chit-chatting. Get to the point quickly. Listen to what the interviewee says. Take good notes. You may interrupt as you go to get spellings or details straight. Or, put an asterisk by those items that may need clarifying.

Observe the time limit. Normally an interview can't be expected to last more than half an hour. Sometimes the interview may be shorter – depending upon the person you are interviewing and her or his position. For the most part a longer interview isn't going to accomplish much.

The story may or may not be about the background. You need to figure out how important the background is to the story and how much of it you will want to use. No need wasting time asking about details that, while interesting, don't figure into the story.

Again, depending upon the story, you may want to ask if the subject of the story can suggest other people you may talk with. This is particularly helpful when doing longer profiles. That way, you can tell the other people that she/he suggested you talk with them.

Clarify all questions before leaving. Stop the interview before the interviewee does. Don't let long periods pass without asking questions. Ask if the interviewee has something else to add that you may not have asked. See if it will be okay for you to get back to the person either by telephone or by e-mail. Check the number and the address.

If you know when the story is going to appear, tell the person. If you don't, tell her/him you'll let them know. Say thank you and leave. At the appropriate time afterward, send a note thanking the person.

Don't allow the interviewee to read the story. You may read back quotes and you may also go over details that you may not be sure of. But: be sure that you know the policy of the people you are working for on this.

Immediately after the interview write a trial lead. As soon as possible, write as much of the story as you can while it is fresh in your mind. Do not delay on this. Delaying can be very harmful to your ability to write a good story. Get as much of it down as you can. Then put it aside. At a time when you have time to work on the story, go back to it.

When you do turn the story in, you are going to have to deal with an editor or editors. This can be the most difficult aspect of the process. So, we'll save that for another time.... However, dealing with me gives you a mild idea of what you might be in for.

■ David McHam