



# Tips For Interviewing Experts

When we think of the word “expert,” many of us picture a doctor, lawyer or professor. But an expert can be anyone who has a lot of knowledge or experience that you can tap into for a particular story. We often interview experts when we need a complicated process explained, or if we need someone to speak about broader trends for a story.

When looking for the right expert to talk to, think about someone who is:

- (a) Good at explaining things and/or a dynamic storyteller
- (b) Acknowledged in the field, meaning he or she has written about the topic or has been recommended by others a knowledgeable source
- (c) Representative of the diversity of the population. For example, women and people of color are often [underrepresented](#) in the media as sources of analysis and expertise. You have an opportunity to change that.

Once you find your expert, you’re going to want to spend some time researching them and writing questions ahead of time. Here are some tips to get the best responses possible from your expert:

## **Get to know them**

When we interview researchers, we often focus on what they know versus who they are. But small, relevant details about your expert can give their responses additional context and make their answers come to life. As long as you have enough time, remember to ask the expert about themselves, why they do the work they do, and what they’re passionate about.

*EXAMPLE: “In past interviews, you’ve said that social media may be making teens today more narcissistic than past generations. What were you like as a teenager, and how did narcissism play into your life?”*

*EXAMPLE: “Your work rehabilitating whooping cranes takes up a lot of time, but it’s mostly unpaid volunteer work. How did you end up working with this particular animal, and what makes it worth it?”*

## **Quote their work**

Researching your subject is especially important before you interview an expert. Are you asking an expert about a topic they’ve written or been interviewed about before? What are the “typical” questions people ask this person, and how can you go beyond that? Show you’ve done their homework by referencing their work in your question.

*EXAMPLE: “In the article you wrote for the New York Times last month, you said that turtles are the most underrated reptile. Can you explain what you mean by that?”*

### **Ask for the short version**

If an expert gives you a very long or complex explanation, don't be afraid to ask them to explain it more simply. You can use the long version for reference later, but you want a response that's easy to understand for someone outside of the field.

*EXAMPLE: "How would you explain that same concept if you were talking to a 5<sup>th</sup> grader? Can you give me the 30-second version of that explanation?"*

### **Seek clarification**

Did your expert use word that you don't know? Or do you think you might understand it but you're not 100% sure? Rather than take a guess, interrupt politely and ask them to define it in a different way.

*EXAMPLE: "Sorry to interrupt – can you explain what you mean when you say milk is usually 'pasteurized?'"*

*EXAMPLE: "So let me make sure I have this right – Arugula is a type of lettuce?"*

### **Play devil's advocate**

Not all experts agree, and you'll want the person you're interviewing to respond to the other side of the argument. Be careful not to phrase it in a way that comes off as a personal attack.

*EXAMPLE: "So you say that kids shouldn't have to pay court fees when they get arrested. How do you respond to people who say, 'if they didn't want to have to pay, they shouldn't have messed up in the first place?'"*

### **Probe for specific examples**

Stories are more powerful than general sweeping statements, so it's always a good idea to ask for examples. Have experts comment on specific scenarios that you've heard of, or let them fill in the blanks based on their own experience.

*EXAMPLE: "You say inner-city kids have fewer opportunities for civic engagement. What are some examples of things that they are missing out on?"*

*EXAMPLE: "You say that it's up to parents to talk to their kids about abusive relationships. Can you give me an example of how a mom might go about having a conversation with her son about that?"*

### **Try not to be intimidated**

Remind yourself that your time is valuable, and that you are doing a service by bringing knowledge to a new audience. Be clear about how much time you'll need for the interview and minimizing interruptions.

*EXAMPLE: "Hi, Dr. Jones, I appreciate your making time to talk with me today. I expect the interview will go about 20 minutes."*