Introduction
Fast and flexible -- information interviewing is a useful research tool. Good investigative reporters use information interviewing to ferret out a story, and talk-show hosts use interviewing to inform and entertain. You may want to interview someone to find out more about a potential career, or you may conduct multiple interviews as part of a broader research project.

To conduct effective information interviews follow these basic steps:
1. Plan for the interview. Use the 5 W’s (why, what, who, when, and where) to develop good questions. Then prepare an interview guide.
2. Prepare for the interview. Identify potential interview candidates, obtain their consent, and schedule the interview(s).
3. Conduct the interview. Use questioning and listening skills to zero in on important interview topics. Take notes. Send a thank you note.
4. Analyze the interview content.
5. Report your findings or incorporate them into other documents.
6. Follow-up. If appropriate, share results with the person you have interviewed.

1. Plan for the Interview
Appropriate planning can make the difference between a useful information interview and one that is a waste of time. Use the journalist’s 5 W’s to help you plan.

Why
Clearly define your interview purpose and objectives:
• What knowledge gaps are you trying to address?
• What will you do with the interview information when you’ve finished?
• Do you need to:
  o Obtain information unavailable from other sources?
  o Verify other findings?
  o Add credibility to conclusions you’ve drawn?
  o Obtain names of additional contacts?
  o Find additional resources – books, periodicals, associations, web sites?

Tip: Limit the number of your interview objectives to about 3-5.

What
Develop an interview guide.
• Identify questions to support each of your major objectives. Your questions should address topics specifically related to your objective. Let’s say you wanted to identify additional information resources. You would ask for recommended books, periodicals, Internet sites, and associations.
• The structure of your questions is important.

Use open-ended questions to get the person talking and to obtain more information. Basic open-ended questions start with the words: who, what, when, where, why and how. The questions “what, why, and how” are especially powerful for eliciting information.

Examples:
– Why did you choose this particular occupation?
– What are the primary requirements to be successful in your job?
– How could I find out more about this industry?
Use **close-ended questions** to obtain specific answers or to close off discussion.

**Examples:**
- Do you have an advanced degree?
- Is an internship a good way to become familiar with the work?
- Do you know of other types of similar jobs?

Some people use the technique of asking a close-ended question followed by an open-ended one.

**Example:**
- Is an advanced degree important to your top executives? (Answer: yes). Why?

Sequence your questions. First get the person talking and then focus on the major topics of interest.

a. What is the person's background?
   b. Probe specific topics:
      Topic 1 – General question followed by specific follow-up questions
      Topic 2 – General questions followed by specific follow-up questions
   c. Closing question/summary

You can usually explore about five or six major topic areas in one hour. Allow approximately 5-10 minutes per topic. Allow more time if a topic will be complex or you wish to explore it in depth.

**Who**

Selecting the right person to interview is, of course, a make-or-break decision.

- Identify your selection criteria for interview candidates.
- What knowledge and experience should they have?
- What type of job, title, or position are you looking for?
- Are you interested in people from a particular industry or company?
- What credentials might be important?
- Is affiliation with a particular professional group or association important?
- Is a candidate likely to be interested and willing to give you an interview?
- Is a candidate likely to be available when you need to conduct the interview?

Develop a list of potential candidates to contact.

- Contact professional associations to compile a list of candidates.
- Conduct a library search to determine experts on the subject you wish to explore.
- Tap into your own professional network for recommendations.
- Consult friends, family, and co-workers to identify potential candidates. (This is especially helpful if you are networking or doing interviews related to a job or career search.)

**When**

- Determine the best time to complete your interviews and establish target dates.
- Establish the length of the interview. Most interviews last 1 to 1.5 hours. If you plan to conduct a longer interview, ask the person you are interviewing if he or she would be willing to allocate more time. Break up very long interviews into several sessions. If the person is very busy, a half-hour interview may still be useful to you and acceptable to them. If so, focus down to your most important questions.

**Where**

Make sure you choose an interview setting that allows you to talk freely. It is best to have a quiet and private place with no interruptions. If an interview is to be confidential, than a private setting is essential.
• The person you are interviewing may ask you to come to his or her office. Obtain any necessary information to assure you will arrive on time for the interview.
• If you will be meeting at a restaurant, choose one where there isn’t too much background noise or loud music.

2. Prepare for the Interview
Make any necessary arrangements. Contact potential interview candidates, obtain their consent and schedule the interview(s).

• Give yourself adequate lead-time. Assume that it may take at least one to three weeks to schedule the interview.
• Contact your interview candidates and explain:
  o The interview topic and purpose,
  o Why you chose them,
  o How much time you will need,
  o How interview information will be used.

Although most people are quite willing to share information, some may decline for various reasons. Thank the person for their time and ask if there may be others who they might recommend. If not, do not push, but thank them and proceed to contact another interview candidate from your list.

• Make any necessary arrangements -- restaurant reservations, transportation, etc.
• Make a copy of your interview guide for you and for the person you’ll be interviewing.
• Assemble materials for taking notes.

Note: Although tape recording exempts you from taking notes, many people don’t like being recorded. It is very important to obtain permission. It takes considerably more time to transcribe a tape recording after an interview but a full transcription captures more detail. If you will be taperecording the interview, make sure that the equipment is working, the volume setting is correct, and you have blank tapes.

3. Conduct the Interview
It is very important to put the person you are interviewing at ease. Be certain to greet them warmly and thank them for helping you. Begin briefly with some general conversation, perhaps based on something you know about them or see from their office that may indicate a common interest. Then, follow this basic sequence.

• Explain the interview’s purpose and objectives. Ask if the person has any questions or concerns about the interview. Address any issues.
• Obtain the person’s background information. This usually includes: name, title, company/organization, role/responsibilities, education, previous positions, and involvement in professional organizations.
• Ask an easy or interesting question to get the person talking.
• Introduce questions in sequential order and follow your interview guide. Sometimes people answer a question planned for later at an earlier time in the interview. Be prepared to record an answer whenever it occurs and to skip a question if it already has been answered.
• Listen! Make eye contact and nod. Occasionally paraphrase what the person is saying. Keep the tone conversational so the person doesn’t feel like they are being grilled. Keep your own comments short – be careful not to talk too much, consuming your valuable time to hear from the other person.
• Record notes on your interview guide.
• Use a funnelling technique to explore particular ideas in more detail. First, ask a general, open-ended question, and then, follow up with questions to elicit more specifics.

Example:

Overhead Question: What do you think is important to know about employee retention?
Follow-up Question: You mentioned work-life balance as one important dimension, could you tell me more about that?
  • When you finish a major topic area, summarize and transition to the next topic.
  • At the end of the interview, ask if there is anything more the person would like to add?
  • Thank the person again and outline your next steps.
  • Send a thank you note within one or two days of the interview.

4. Analyze the Interview Content

Once you’ve completed an interview, analyze the comments to determine what you’ve learned and to establish any findings and conclusions.
  • Transcribe the information from your interview guide. Match the interview comments to the key topics you explored.
  • Look for any patterns or themes in the responses.
    o What facts and ideas did the person emphasize? (Look for repetition and ideas the person felt strongly about.)
    o What additional information did they provide?
    o How did responses confirm or refute other research?
    o How biased were the person’s remarks? (Bias is one disadvantage of interviews.)
    o Were there any surprises?
    o What did the individual’s body language and demeanor communicate?

5. Report Your Findings

In some cases, you’ll need to communicate or document the results of your interview to others. You’ll need to tailor your report to the appropriate audience. You should include the following in any document or report.
  − State your interview purpose and objectives.
  − Explain the method you used to obtain the information.
  − Summarize the interview findings.
  − State any conclusions you’ve drawn as a result of your analysis.
  − If required, integrate your interview findings with other research.

6. Follow-Up

Make certain you fulfill any other responsibilities or expectations connected with your interview(s).
  • If appropriate, share your final document with the person you’ve interviewed.
  • Fulfill any promises or actions you agreed upon as part of the interviewing process.

Interviews allow you to quickly obtain information that might take a great deal of time to find other ways. They usually are an interesting and relatively easy method for gathering information. If you plan well, ask good questions, and listen carefully, your interview will be a success!