DOING AN INTERVIEW

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Interviewing is something we do (or need to do) on a fairly regular basis. However, we often confront situations for which there are not enough materials available to prepare us. More commonly, perhaps, we assume that we have the requisite skills to do an interview and, therefore, do not need manuals, textbooks or similar "guides." After all, we think, most any fool knows how to get information: it's simply a problem of asking the right questions of the right person. Yet, many of us have had the experience of spending an hour or two (or three) with the right person trying to figure out, for example, why we're there, why he/she is there, what to do during those painful and embarassing silences when he/she doesn't know what to say and you've forgotten what comes next, or why he/she doesn't understand what you're trying to learn.

The problem, of course, is that interviews are not common events. They're not conversations and they have a purpose. They tend to be formally arranged and limited in duration. They offer the researcher a limited opportunity to get information (or opinions or both). They have a beginning and an end and what goes on in between has to be prepared for. They should make sense to the person asking the questions and the person answering them. And, the content of the interview has to be saved somehow. All these aspects of the interview and the interview process are complex and, as one might imagine, highly variable. Therefore, we cannot assume that, simply because we are good conversationalists (or library researchers), we can do interviews well.

This document represents an effort to begin outlining some aspects of interviewing. It is not intended to be a "how-to" guide nor does it pretend to cover the myriad facets or dimensions of the interview process. Rather, it speaks to some general issues about doing interviews in a way that is probably most useful for social scientists. I direct some attention to the practice of "team" interviewing (i.e., two people interviewing one or more respondents) because that is the context in which I prepared the outline. However, most readers will find some useful clues for how to prepare for and conduct other kinds of interviews. The issue of tape-recording vs. note-taking is largely skirted; I prefer extensive notes to taping mostly because few of us have the financial resources to transcribe taped interviews and because those of us who tape (but don't transcribe) rarely make adequate use of those recordings. I put considerable emphasis on the before and after phases of interviewing--in large part because these are elements of the interviewing process which tend to get the least attention but which also significantly affect the quality of interviews and interview data.

The outline by itself is some help but it does not substitute for an adequate explanation for each item. That is something I hope to do in the near future. However, even an outline can yield some assistance for those who may be contemplating this kind of research in the future.

For many readers, this outline may appear to put great emphasis on the obvious. It does. But, unfortunately, we tend to ignore the obvious.

I. BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

A. Contact

1. Purpose of the interview:

   a. do you have an idea of what questions need to be asked?

   b. can that set of questions be communicated in a few short sentences?

2. Choice of respondents:

   a. do you know who is a (the) logical person to contact for that information?

   b. who can steer you to the appropriate person?

3. Preparing the respondent:

   a. how do I explain that this is (you are) the person whom I should interview? (i.e., back to 1.a.)

   b. how should I establish my/our credentials?

      * different credentials have different meanings (this will be discussed more later)

   c. is there anything I can send in advance of the interview which can:

      * establish my authenticity or credentials?
      * describe the overall project or study?
      * help prepare the (occasionally suspicious or unprepared) respondent? (e.g., a list of general questions to be covered; a list of specific requests for data; and/or list of people/sites I would like to interview/visit)

4. Confirming the interview:

   a. should I send a note confirming the time, date, place and topic?

   b. should I call before leaving?

B. Preparing for the Interview

1. Preparing the interview guide:

   a. develop a checklist of questions or topic areas

b. consider variations in wording of the questions in case the written form is not comprehensible

c. consider more specific, probing questions to follow the general ones

d. develop a directional outline to insure that:

* if you get lost during the course of the interview you will be able to come back to your agenda

  --this is especially helpful when you confront wordy or wandering respondents

* there is some discernible logic or coherence to your questions

  --<u>this is important for you</u> (particularly when time is short and you find yourself having to skip areas)

  --<u>this is important for the respondent, too</u> (since he/she will be trying to discern from your questions just what you are up to)

e. develop a sense of the relative priority of different questions or areas of investigation

* time constraints, again, may limit the interview and force you to decide which are the most important topics to cover

* a sense of priorities may lead you to be more directive in the interview itself, e.g., limiting (politely) the verbal meanderings of some respondents

  --here there are no set rules for how to direct the respondent

  --how much you feel prepared to direct will depend upon:

  i. what kind of information you <u>have to have</u>

  ii. how willing you are to be drawn into issues/areas <u>the respondent may be telling you are important</u> (more about this later)

  iii. how likely it is you will be able to re-contact the respondent

2. <u>Preparing an interview team for interviewing:</u>

a. reach agreement about the purpose of the interview, the contents of the interview guide, and the different questions/ areas of investigation

b. reach agreement about the size of the interview team

* two-person teams tend to work best, for the following reasons

  --most respondents would rather deal with one interviewer (in part because it's easier to try and figure out one person at a time)

  --two people can develop rapport much more easily than three (and you can't build coalitions with two people)

  --unless there are a large number of interviews to be done, it is easier for two people to alternate roles in the interview situation (or get experience in each role) than for three people

  --two people are less intimidating than three

  --two people fit better in a small office than three (especially if the respondent brings in colleagues)

c. reach agreement about the roles to be played in the interview

* there should be one and only one lead interviewer in the interview situation

* the lead interviewer should be prepared in advance to introduce him/herself, colleagues and the topic

* the lead interviewer should have full command of the interview guide

* both the lead interviewer and the co-interviewer should take notes during the interview (more on notes later)

* the co-interviewer should take the responsibility for detailed notetaking

* where possible, lead interviewer and co-interviewer should alternate roles from one interview to the next

3. <u>There should be some discussion advance in the research team about contingency plans, in case:</u>

   a. the respondent proves unwilling to deal with certain topic areas

   b. the respondent brings along colleagues for separate topic areas

   c. the respondent feels better rapport with one member of the interview team than another

d. there are lessons to be learned from prior interviews to which one or another member of the interview team is not privy

II. DURING THE INTERVIEW

A. Protocol for the Interview

1. If at all possible, get there on time.

2. Establishing credentials:

   a. make clear your affiliation

      * this is clearly affected by your sense of what the point of the interview is

      * if you feel it necessary to profess special qualifications, do so; but beware that this can be construed as "one-upmanship"

      * being from the University is quite often enough since your questions will indicate your level of ignorance/expertise

      * be aware that unnecessary reference to other affiliations may influence the respondent's behavior

        --also be aware of the fact that you are there to learn (otherwise why do the interview?); you do not want to indirectly steer the respondent away from crucial description by implying (consciously or otherwise) that you already know what he/she is likely to say

3. Introduce the project of study briefly

4. Prepare the respondent by briefly describing the purpose of the interview and the general topic areas

5. Make clear what conditions may be imposed on the interview or the information provided

   a. the confidentiality of the firm, organization, respondent or information can be assured if the respondent feels it is necessary at any point in the interview

   b. if feasible, a summary of the interview will be provided to the respondent after the interview so that factual accuracy can be checked

B. Conduct of the Interview

1. Begin with general questions and give respondent a chance to explain with broad details

    a. lead interviewer should establish eye contact and take topical notes

    b. lead interviewer should be listening and thinking about next appropriate probing question

    c. co-interviewer should take as detailed a set of notes as possible but also follow the drift of the respondent's remarks

2. Probing questions should be interjected as the respondent slows down or pauses

    a. you are there to learn, so do not interrupt impolitely

    b. probing questions should be presented with as little qualification as possible

    c. you do not want to tell the respondent what the answer is (or what you think the answer should be)

    d. you do not want to confuse the respondent or make him/her feel redundant or unnecessary

3. If the respondent begins to wander, you should politely get get him/her back on track, e.g.,

    a. "Hmm, that's interesting. But, I'm still not sure I understand what you said about X. Could we go back to that for a moment?"

    b. "A moment ago you were describing X. Could we go back to that for a moment?"

4. Should the lead interviewer get off the track, the co-interviewer should politely re-direct the interview by interjecting a question

    a. this should be done as smoothly as possible

    b. there should be agreement between the lead interviewer and the co-interviewer that this is legitimate

5. If the respondent tries to "take over" the interview:

    a. the lead interviewer should attempt to redirect

    b. the co-interviewer should take over the role of lead interviewer temporarily (e.g., good cop/bad cop)

6. If the respondent gives information that seems incorrect or untrue, he/she can be challenged, but politely, e.g.,

a. "That's interesting. At other companies they do X; why do you think it's different here?"

b. "I'm not sure I understand. If X does it differently, why do you think they do?"

c. "I read somewhere that 1+1=2. Could it be that I misunderstood?"

7. At the close of the interview, you should attempt:

   a. to ask general and/or summary questions .

   b. to ask if there's something(s) you may have missed

   c. to ask if you can re-contact the respondent for additional or clarifying information

III. AFTER THE INTERVIEW

A. Recording the Information (see Appendix)

1. Detailed notes should be written up as soon as possible after the interview

2. Lead interviewer should write topical notes

3. Co-interviewer should write topical notes

4. Expect to spend 50% - 100% of the time it took to do the interview writing up the notes

B. Post-Interview Analysis

1. Critically analyze the conduct of the interview

   a. what did we/I do right or wrong?

   b. how should we/I do it differently next time?

   c. how will did the lead interviewer/co-interviewer perform?

2. Critically analyze the format of the interview

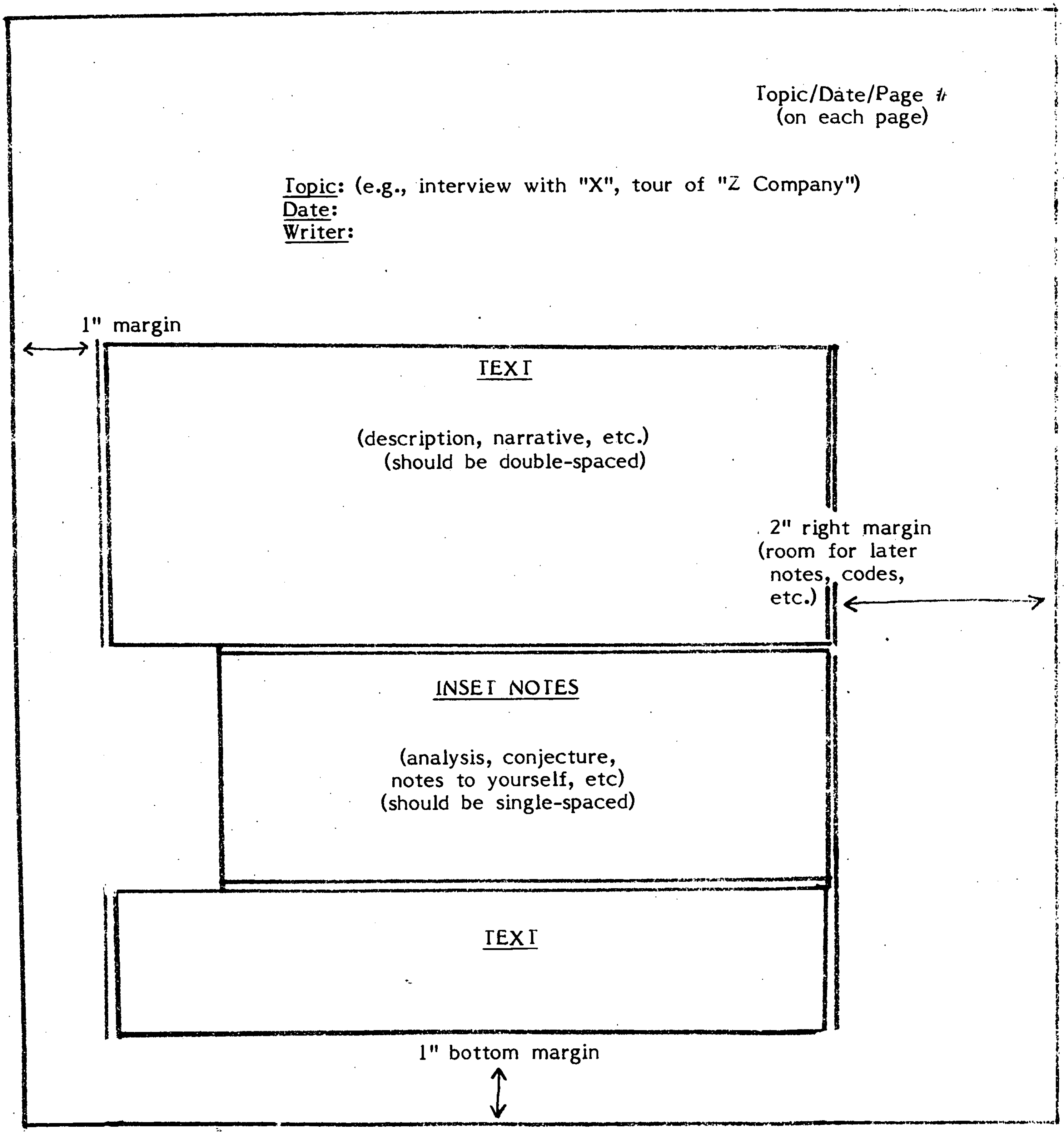
   a. what questions worked and what questions did not?

   b. how should we/I do it differently next time?

3. Critically analyze the notes and compare them for factual accuracy

4. Send the respondent the topical notes (or a reduced version of them) to the respondent

Suggested Format for Field Notes



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