**Interview Project: Coming up With Good Questions**

Below are some **invention strategies** that should yield some interesting questions for your interview.

* What questions are related to your purpose with this writing?
* What first drew you to this topic/person? What do you want to know about it/them?
* What would your audience want/need to know?
* What are some holes in what’s already been written about your person/topic?
* You can also use a journalist’s standard strategy: the “5 W’s,” Who, What, When, Where, Why, How. One way is to ask all the “who” questions you can think of, then all the “what” questions, then the “when” questions, and so on.
* Consider also where you can go to observe something related to this topic/person. This isn’t required, but it can give you good material to write about and lead to more questions if you see things that you don’t expect and maybe don’t understand. For example, if you’re interviewing a jazz musician, ask if you can watch a jam session or a performance. If you’re interviewing a pediatric nurse, ask if you can spend an hour or so shadowing him/her at work.

**Principles of good questions and good questioning**:

* Come prepared! Research the more objective, easier background questions on your own, BEFORE the interview. This shows you are resourceful and that you respect your interviewee’s time.
* Open-ended questions are usually better than those that can be answered with yes or no.
* If you have questions that might be considered personal or even potentially offensive (but you feel they are essential to your story), save them for the end, as you are more likely to have gained their trust. Be ready to accept a refusal to answer these questions.
* Try to turn overly personal questions into impersonal ones. Ask “What is the salary range for a civil engineer in Silicon Valley?” Not “How much money do you make?”
* Avoid “leading the witness,” as they say in the courtroom. The question shouldn’t suggest part or all of the answer you are expecting. Example: Ask “How important would you say wealth is to people in your culture?” Not “Would you say people from your culture are more spiritual, less concerned about wealth than Americans are?”
* Let them supply what you missed. A good last question is something like this: “Is there anything you else would like Americans to understand about your culture?” or “What have I forgotten to ask you?” or “Who else could I talk to to find out more about this?”
* Arrange for follow-up. In case you think of more questions later, ask if you can follow up with another (shorter) interview, maybe by email or phone. In-person interviews are best for the first go-around.

**Interview Questions: Different Purposes, Different Questions**

**Starting with Purpose:** As your text argues, “writing with a spirit of inquiry” and “moving beyond the familiar” will lead to more learning for you and a more interesting essay for your readers because “good topics arise from important questions, issues, and problems,” as well as from your own native curiosity.

**Relating Questions to your purpose:** Plenty of formulas exist for coming up with good questions, but the best ones usually arise from your reasons for writing. Below are the four most common purposes for interviewing someone for this assignment. Each leads to a slightly different invention process for coming up with good questions.

**Ethnographic Essay without a specific focus**: You are interviewing someone from another culture just to learn more about that culture. You still need a focus for the essay you’ll write, but that focus will emerge as you go through the process. Example: Any of you who met someone at Coffee Night and chose them at random because they are “foreign” might go into this unsure of your purpose.

**Ethnographic Essay with a specific focus**: You are interviewing someone from a different culture to find out something specific about it, for example, how their education system compares to ours, or how they match people up matrimonially. Examples: The Oklahoma girl who went to study abroad in Finland, interviewed for *The Smartest Kids in the World* by Amanda Ripley.

**Achievement-based profile**: You interview a person because of something he/she has achieved or an interesting experience he/she has had. Examples: Paperclip Man; Aimi Duong founds Pillows for Peace.

**Unusual Job-based profile**: You are interested in a person because, say, they left a family business in car repair to raise alpacas, or they teach sword-fighting at Renaissance Fairs for a living.

**Boilerplate Questions Based on Purpose**

Based on which type of interview you are doing, here are some general questions to get you started. Note: if you use these in the 10 questions you submit for the assignment, don’t count them among the 10.

**Ethnographic Essay without a specific focus**:

* What are some common stereotypes about your culture?
* What customs and traditions do you think do your culture the most credit?
* Which (if any) of your culture’s customs or traditions do you think should change? Why?
* What has surprised you the most about American culture so far?
* What are your favorite/least favorite things about America so far?

**Ethnographic Essay with a specific focus**: (example: education)

* What do you think are some of the strongest features of education in your culture?
* How highly do young people value education in your culture?
* How important are sports or other extracurricular activities as a part of education in your culture?

**Unusual Job-based profile**:

* When did you decide you wanted to do this profession?
* How did you prepare for this profession?
* What do you like best/worst about this job?
* What advice do you have for young people thinking about this profession?
* What are some common misconceptions about your field?