An interview is frequently the course you chart between what you came in knowing and what you’re finding out as it’s happening.

—Terry Gross, host of Fresh Air, National Public Radio

Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, you will be able to do the following.

• Use interviews to gather material for your speeches.
• Schedule an interview at a time and place that will increase its chances for success.
• Create open-ended questions to draw out the best possible answers.
• Dress appropriately and present yourself in a professional manner.

Chapter Outline

Following are the main sections in this chapter.

1. Using Interviews to Gather Information
2. Preparing for an Interview
3. Conducting an Ethical Interview
4. Interviewing for a Job or Scholarship

Speech Vocabulary

In this chapter, you will learn the meanings of the speech terms listed below.

- interviewer
- subject
- rapport
- verbatim
- open-ended question
- follow-up question
- yes-no question
- leading question
- portfolio
- puff ball
- pause
- bridge
- sparkler
- sound bite

Academic Vocabulary

Expanding your academic vocabulary will help you become a more effective communicator. Listed below are some words appearing in this chapter that you should make part of your vocabulary.

- pollster
- proxy
- vicariously
- grovel
- chauffeur
- embalm
- unobtrusive
- canned
Interviewing plays a vital role in how we communicate with each other. In this chapter, you will learn to use interviews to gather firsthand information. This information will add credibility and authenticity to your speeches. It can also provide the “punch,” or the personal anecdote that makes your speech memorable.

As you study this chapter, you will learn that interviewing others is a challenging but rewarding exercise. Careful preparation and sound strategy will help you get the most out of every interview. Sometimes it will be your turn to be interviewed. This chapter will show you how to prepare for an interview and how to maximize your chances of success. The chapter will also give you tips for answering tough questions and for handling yourself courteously after an interview.

Introduction

Interviews are among the best ways to find out something new. Most of the informative reports and speeches you give in school are based either on library research or on firsthand interviews. Talking with an expert can often be more helpful than reading an article or a book, and it’s almost certain to be more fun. You can spice up any speech with a few well-chosen quotations and stories from a lively interview.

An interview is a conversation controlled but not dominated by one person who asks questions of another person. In other words, an interview is a conversation with a special purpose. That purpose might be to learn what someone thinks or to gather information about a new idea or discovery. It might also be to find out more about someone who has applied for a job or admission to college.

You can learn about something you’ve always been interested in by interviewing an expert in the field.
Using Interviews to Gather Information

Interview comes from the French word *entrevoir*, which means “to see one another.” Interviewing, you might say, is a contact sport—eye contact, that is. A good interview grows out of a personal relationship between people. Don’t think of it as Ping-Pong; think of it as a handshake.

Learning good interviewing skills is one of the smartest investments you can make in your future. People in many different careers conduct interviews. A book editor interviews prospective authors; an insurance agent interviews clients about their homes, cars, or other possessions; a teacher interviews students about their academic problems. A financial adviser, a lawyer, and an architect—all these professionals use interviews in their jobs.

We focus this chapter on how to be an interviewer (the person who asks the questions), because you will frequently use interviews to gather material for your speeches. We believe that if you can learn how to conduct a good interview, you will also have a better chance of being a good subject (the person who answers the questions). When your turn comes to be interviewed—for a job, for instance—you will be better prepared by being a good interviewer yourself.

Consider Your Audience

The number of interviews that take place is staggering. Opinion pollsters alone conduct an estimated 20 million interviews each year. Add to that figure the enormous number of interviews for jobs and college admissions. We read about interviews every day—when we check the sports page, for example, to see how an Olympic athlete felt about winning a gold medal—and we watch countless interviews on television. In fact, your ideas about interviewing may have been formed by watching television news shows like *60 Minutes*, *20/20*, and *48 Hours Mystery*.

A professional interviewer has one specific purpose: to act as a proxy for the audience. We can’t all sit down for a chat with Brad Pitt, for instance, or Beyoncé, but we are grateful that someone else can do it for us. Thus, we depend heavily on interviewers to act as our stand-ins.

Interviewers head into locker rooms for postgame reports, climb on board *Air Force One* to interview the president, and travel with troops heading into battle. Talk shows like those hosted by Oprah Winfrey and Larry King give audiences the chance to ask questions of celebrities and guest experts. We listen in on these shows, hoping that the interviewer asks the questions we’d like to ask, so that we can vicariously take part in the interview ourselves.

Your task as an interviewer, then, is to keep the interests of your potential audience in mind. Who will ultimately hear the information you are gathering? The teacher? Your classmates? The general public? Try to ask your subject what those people would like to know. The ability to anticipate what
an audience wants to know is part of what has made Barbara Walters one of television’s most celebrated interviewer. It’s an ability that gives Lesley Stahl and the rest of the 60 Minutes crew the courage to leap over barriers and smash down doors in pursuit of a good story.

Be Curious

The quality you need most to become a good interviewer is curiosity. Do you want to know about people’s thoughts, words, and deeds? The best interviewers bring a passionate curiosity to the job. They have a burning desire to know. They get the answers people want to hear about fascinating characters and about those caught up in interesting events. Great interviewers are brave enough to ask the natural questions, even at the risk of making themselves seem foolish.

While you may be more eager to interview a star basketball player or a world-class model than to interview your algebra teacher, you must always make an effort to generate some curiosity about whomever you choose to interview. Everyone has an interesting story to tell, and you can find it if you ask the right questions. Who would suspect, for instance, that your physical education teacher once shot baskets with Shaquille O’Neal or that your math teacher was in a movie as a child?

A lack of curiosity, on the other hand, leads to lazy thinking. If you’re not genuinely interested in what your subject has to say, you may find yourself behaving in the following ways:

- I make up a list of questions and go through them from beginning to end—no matter what the person I’m interviewing wants to talk about.
- I don’t listen much to each answer. I just worry about the next question.
If an answer confuses me or the subject mentions something I haven’t heard about, I don’t like to admit it. I just go on to the next question.

I’m so edgy about what the subject thinks of me that I can never get comfortable. All my energy in the interview goes into playing the role.

Having a great interest in the person you’re interviewing helps you overcome self-consciousness. It also drives nervousness away and gives you the courage to interview someone you respect or admire.

Keep in mind that most people like to talk about themselves, their work, and their opinions. The slightest hint that you’re interested is often all the invitation they need to start talking. Curiosity might make you seem naive at times, but a true desire to know is the only proven way to bring an interview to life. If you have the right attitude, you may hear yourself making these enthusiastic comments during an interview:

• “That’s fascinating. Tell me more.”
• “I had no idea—whatever made them do that?”
• “How did you feel when that happened?”

Recalling the Facts

1. Curiosity may have killed the cat, but it will help you be a good interviewer. What role does curiosity play in an interview?
2. Provide three short comments you could make during an interview that would encourage your subject to continue talking.

Thinking Critically

Watch a televised interview program such as Larry King Live or Nightline. What research do you think was involved in preparing the questions? How did the interviewer react to vague or unsatisfactory answers? Did the interviewer offer any personal information, or “open up,” to encourage a subject to talk?

Taking Charge

1. Conduct a “kid in the hall” poll. Think of an interesting, timely question that can be answered quickly (yes or no, agree or disagree). The question could relate to school policies or community issues. A possible question is “Should we limit all elected officials to two terms?” Ask the question of 20 people in your school. Record their responses and report your findings to the class. You might even offer your information to the school newspaper as a “roving reporter.”
2. Conduct an opinion survey. Work in a small group to develop a questionnaire on some subject of interest. Write or type a list of eight to ten questions on a single sheet of paper and reproduce enough so that you can hand out 100 copies. Ask if you can pass out the survey in some of your other classes or at lunch. Collect the surveys, tabulate the results, and report the outcome.
Presidential Announcements

Larry King says that sometimes in the past when he walked down the street, people would stop him and say, “So who are you going to make president this week?”

King, the host of a daily three-hour radio talk program and a nightly television interview program, made history in the 1990s when he nudged a reluctant candidate, Ross Perot, into announcing a bid for the presidency. Before the presidential campaign was over, King’s program had become a frequent stop for the other major candidates.

Part of King’s success lies in his skill as a listener. “I like questions that begin with ‘why’ and ‘how,’ ” he says, “and I listen to the answers, which lead to more questions.”

Although King doesn’t consider himself a journalist, he says that asking questions comes easily: “My earliest memory is of asking questions. ‘What did you do that for? Why did you do it?’ ”

King grew up in Brooklyn as the son of Russian Jewish immigrants. At age 22, he took a bus to Miami, changed his name (from Larry Zeiger), and got a job as a deejay on WIOD. Before long, he had his own sports show and was soon interviewing local celebrities.

Eventually, King found a home in Washington, D.C., with The Larry King Show radio program. Today King hosts Larry King Live, a TV talk show featuring interviews of prominent people and accepting phoned-in and e-mailed questions from viewers.

One of King’s personal rules is not to prepare too much. “I never drive to work thinking of questions,” he says, “but good things follow from what I do.”

King says that this method enables him to ask the kinds of questions people in his audience would ask. Rather than try to draw out facts from his guests, King focuses on their feelings and motives.

Today, with his trademark slicked-back hair, glasses, and suspenders, King comes as close to being a kingmaker as anyone in the media. More than 4 million people tune in each day to find out who and what he’s going to listen to next.

Question

1. What role do talk shows and interview programs play in the American political process?
2. What is your opinion of Larry King’s interviewing skills? Watch one or two of his broadcasts; then discuss in class his original questions, his ability to ask effective follow-up questions, and his overall skill in obtaining information from interviewees.
“Bend and grovel if you must,” suggests John Brady, founder of a communications consulting firm, “but get the interview. This may turn you into a wimpy-like creature, but do it. You ain’t got nothing ‘til you’ve got that person sitting down to give you a couple of hours of his or her time.”

Brady overstates the case, but his point is clear: Without a person to talk to, you have no interview. Carefully choosing a person to interview and arranging a time and place suitable for the interview are problems you must solve before you can ask the first question.

Getting an Interview

John Brady is not above taking his own advice. To get an interview with the author Jessica Mitford, he once volunteered to be a chauffeur. Mitford was visiting a college near Brady’s home, but her schedule was packed. College officials had arranged for a student to drive Mitford from campus to the airport when her visit was over, a distance of about 75 miles. Brady persuaded the student to let him drive Mitford instead. The student didn’t mind (“I really don’t know what to talk with her about,” he said), so Brady picked Mitford up, turned on his tape recorder, and got a terrific interview.

Interview situations aren’t usually that difficult, of course. You will probably find that most of the people you want to talk with are agreeable and cooperative. At times, however, it may take some persistence on your part to get them to agree to speak. And then there are those who are just too busy or stubborn. Let them alone and find someone more willing to talk.

Select a Subject Carefully No matter how skillful you are, an interview won’t work if you haven’t chosen the right person. Suppose you decide to do a speech on dreams. You discover a sleep research lab in town by thumbing through the yellow pages of the phone directory. A few calls later, you have scheduled an interview with the lab’s director to discuss the current state of research on dreams. By interviewing that expert, you are sure to learn more and gain better information than you would have by asking a few friends about their dreams.

By the way, it’s probably easier than you think to interview public officials. They know speaking about their jobs is one of their most important responsibilities. (Most politicians like the attention, too.) Public officials also have access to up-to-date information, and though you may get put on hold, you generally won’t be turned down.
Before you call Mandy Moore for a soul-searching interview, however, you should realize that a casual fan doesn’t have much pull in Hollywood. Large organizations with enormous numbers of readers, such as USA Today, can get interviews where you cannot. But don’t be discouraged; even a high school paper carries some weight. If you are having trouble setting up an interview, volunteer to write a story about your subject for the school paper. The added prestige (and exposure) may persuade your subject to grant you an interview after all.

Choose When and Where The best setting for an interview is a place where you won’t be disturbed. You want to have your subject’s undivided attention. Many people like to be interviewed where they work—in their offices, for example. That may be convenient for them, but it can create problems for you. The telephone is sure to ring, and coworkers will stop by to chat. Any interruptions during the interview will distract your subject, break the rapport—the feeling of trust and cooperation—you have developed with the subject, and stretch out the time the whole interview takes. Getting your subject off somewhere private can do your interview a world of good.

Be sure, too, that you don’t cheat yourself on the amount of time you request. Beginners often worry that they will take too much of the subject’s time. Consequently, they ask for too little and quit too early. Ask for an hour of your subject’s time. You can probably get a good interview in less time than that, but you run the risk of not getting the information you need if you ask for less.

You can always leave an interview early, but it’s rude to take more time than you requested. By asking for an hour, you also tell your subject that you have plenty of questions and that you feel he or she has worthwhile answers. If your subject is so busy that only a few moments can be spared, consider interviewing someone else.

Doing Your Homework

Having arranged an interview, you next need to learn all you can about your subject. “You should read every single thing that you can possibly get on
the person you’re about to interview,” advises long-time talk-show host Phil Donahue. “It keeps you out of trapdoors and keeps you from looking foolish.”

The preparation you do for an interview helps you create good questions. If you wanted to interview a new teacher at your school, for example, you could find out beforehand where the teacher previously taught, the teacher’s area of expertise, and where he or she went to college. Once you have the basic biographical facts, you will be free to concentrate on more imaginative questions—the kind that produce the most interesting answers.

Make a distinction between a simple question and a foolish one. You can ask the principal about open campus policies in a sensible way, but if you ask how long the lunch period is, you are asking the principal to do your legwork for you; that’s a question you can answer for yourself. Nothing will irritate a subject more—especially one who has been interviewed many times—than being asked a question whose answer you could easily have found in many other ways. Asking a subject such questions shows you haven’t done your homework. It wastes that person’s time and undermines his or her opinion of you.

**Dress for Success** Students often wonder what they should wear to an interview. Even though you may prefer to dress casually, you should wear whatever you think will bring the best response from the person you are interviewing. Good school clothes (avoid T-shirts and the latest fashion statement) should work well, but an interview with the governor or some other VIP (very important person) is going to require more-formal clothing. Your credibility is at stake.

If the governor is used to people who wear suits, you must wear an outfit that he or she will take seriously. You don’t have to overdo it, of course—especially if you’re going to conduct your interview while leaning on a tractor tire—but you want your subjects to know that you’re serious and that their comments will be treated with respect.

**Take What You Need** Be sure you take the right equipment with you to an interview. You should always have a small notebook and pen, even if you plan to use a voice recorder or camcorder. The notebook shows your subject that you mean business, and it encourages talking.

Collect as much background information about your subject as you can before your interview. Newspapers, libraries, and the Internet are useful resources.
Many interviewers use a voice recorder to help them remember an interview. For one thing, using such a device is the only way to be absolutely accurate. With a recorder, you can always be sure of getting information verbatim (word-for-word). For another, no matter how good you are at taking notes, you may miss something important. With a recording, you can go back and find what you left out of your notes. In many situations, a portable voice recorder is well worth the bother, especially if the interview is likely to be unusually long.

Given all that a voice recorder can do, you might be surprised to learn that some professional interviewers prefer not to use one. Some interviewers say they carry only a pen and notepad because a voice recorder can make a subject ill at ease. Recordings don’t protect you against mistakes, either. “You misquoted me,” a subject might say. “I know that was what I said, but it wasn’t what I meant.”

**Asking Effective Questions**

Once you’ve contacted a subject, arranged a time and place to talk, and done your background research, you’re ready for the last step before the interview itself: preparing a list of questions. Your goal is to guide the conversation where you want it to go. You want your subject to relax and to talk freely, but you also have an agenda with questions that need answering. The way you phrase these questions and the order in which you present them will determine, to a great degree, the success of your interview.

It is absolutely critical to prepare a list of questions in advance. Doing so will force you to think through the entire interview and plan the best order for your questions. Ideally, the answer to one question will lead naturally into the next question. “You start a question, and it’s like rolling a stone,” said the writer Robert Louis Stevenson. “You sit quietly on the top of a hill; and away the stone goes, starting others.” Preparing questions ahead of time is also the best way to make sure each minute of your interview counts.

**Keep Your Questions Brief** Make your questions brief and to the point. Avoid those complicated two- or three-part questions you may have seen television reporters use during press conferences: “Mr. President, can you tell us what you know about plans to export more wheat, and where those shipments will be going, and when they’ll start?”

You would be wiser to give your subject one manageable question at a time. Keep your questions simple and direct. If the subject has trouble interpreting your question, rephrase it. Suppose you ask this question: “Did the school board drop its laundry program for athletics in the interest of economy, or was it bowing to community pressure?” If this question is too much for your subject, try this: “Why do athletes have to wash their own towels this year?”

**Use a Variety of Questions** Build your most important questions on the famous five Ws and an H (who, what, why, when, where, and how). Imagine, for instance, that the parents of one of your classmates have opened a new pet cemetery in your town. You want to give a speech on how people handle the death of a pet, and you decide to interview the parents. By using the five Ws and the H, you develop this list of questions:
• WHO brings their pets to your cemetery? Can you tell me about your customers?
• WHAT kinds of burial or funeral arrangements do they request?
• WHY do people spend so much money on their pets?
• WHEN did you first decide to start a pet cemetery?
• WHERE are other pet cemeteries in our region?
• HOW do you embalm a pet?
• HOW do you restore the appearance of pets who have been killed in car accidents?

Open-Ended Questions Strive as much as possible to develop open-ended questions. These are similar to the essay questions on a written test. Instead of asking for a narrow response (such as yes or no, or true or false), the question allows the subject to decide how best to answer.

Your goal is to use short questions to produce long answers. For example, instead of asking, “Did you really fall into a vat of chocolate?” ask, “What was it like to fall into a vat of chocolate?” In the following interview, notice how a student interviewer uses open-ended questions to draw out Martha Quinn, one of Music Television’s original veejays.

Q: MTV seems to be a part of American culture now. What’s it like knowing you were a factor in that achievement?

A: I’m thrilled that I’ve been a part of it. A factor? I don’t know. I feel like a little piece of plankton in a tidal wave. I don’t really know that I had that much to do with it; I just got swept along in it. But it was a wonderful time to be around in the music business, you know, when new things are coming out.

Q: MTV’s future seems fairly certain, but what about Martha Quinn’s future? What does your future hold?

A: You know, more than anything, I wish I was one of those people who has a plan. “Oh, I

You can organize an interview and use the time allotted for it efficiently by preparing a list of questions in advance.
know exactly what I’m going to be doing.” You know, like Dolly Parton. I once read somewhere that she has her whole career planned. I hope in my best possible life that I’d have some sort of fun TV work, whether it be a sitcom or fun variety show or something like that.

Open-ended questions leave room for the subject to maneuver. While such questions may cause you to lose some control over the interview, what you gain is worth it. You may hear the subject tell you something that takes your breath away.

Follow-up Questions Inexperienced interviewers tend to look for safety in long lists of prepared questions. Of course, as noted, you must plan what to ask. But a long “must ask” list can drain the life from an interview, turning it into a tedious trip from Question A to Question Z. Along the way, you can miss a lot of good conversation in your concern to cover everything on your list.

What’s the solution? Prepare your list of questions, but stay flexible; be ready to react to the twists and turns of conversation. Listen for intriguing statements, and when you hear one, ask a follow-up question.

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Such questions help you pursue topics that pop up unexpectedly. One of the best questions is simply “Why?” Chase good ideas, even if it means letting some of your prepared questions slide.

To use follow-up questions well, you must think on your feet. Recall for a moment the interview with Martha Quinn. By listening attentively, the interviewer could recognize that Quinn’s first audition with MTV was something special, an experience that deserved to be explored at length:

Q: How did you get on MTV to begin with?

A: I was a college intern at WNBC in New York, and I had gotten myself through college doing television commercials. And when MTV came out, someone said, “Hey, Martha, that’d be perfect for you.” Just a casual comment, and next thing I knew, I was kind of moseying down to the studio to audition for this wacky, weird thing.

Q: Were you nervous?

A: It was not a big deal to me, because I was auditioning every day of my life for, you know, Twix or Clearasil or something. And I was like, “Oh, OK, this is kind of weird, but I’ll go check it out.”

Q: How did you feel after the audition?

A: When I walked out of the audition, I thought, “Wow, that is the perfect job for me.”

Q: And how did you feel later?

A: By the time I went to sleep that night, my life was to be changed for the next ten years. Can you imagine? I would like to go back and read my horoscope for that day. Seriously.

Sometimes people tell you things that are so interesting, unusual, or meaningful that they deserve your complete attention, regardless of whatever other question you were poised to ask. Follow your instincts. If someone tells you something of exceptional interest or importance, ditch your old questions and follow this new topic for all it’s worth.

Questions to Avoid Some kinds of questions work better in an interview than others. Yes-no questions, for example, should be avoided. For one thing, they allow your subject to
answer the question without telling you anything. They also give the subject an excuse to stop talking.

Suppose that while interviewing Barbara Walters, you said, “Several years ago you caused a sensation by signing a $5 million contract with ABC. Are you worth that much money?” If Walters answers yes, she will only have told you what you already know—that she accepted the contract. If she says no, you’ll think she’s just being modest. Either way, you won’t have learned anything, and you’ll have nothing new to tell anybody else.

But what if you asked the question this way: “Ms. Walters, what do you think of the public reaction to your $5 million contract with ABC?” Now Walters will be free to talk about how she earned respect in a male-dominated profession. She might tell you about how she studied camera work and editing or about the thousands of letters she sent and phone calls she made to set up interviews.

If your questions are superficial and limited, the answers will be, too. Reword your yes-no questions into open-ended ones. In most cases, your reworded questions will lead to replies that are more interesting and useful.

You should also avoid leading questions, as they influence the answers. For example, instead of asking, “Was the UFO shaped like a saucer or like a cigar?” say, “What was the UFO shaped like?”

Celebrities or public figures who have been interviewed often will be more likely to respond at length to open-ended questions.
Recalling the Facts

1. What are three things you should do to prepare for an interview?
2. What are two kinds of questions that you should avoid during an interview?
3. Describe three kinds of questions that you should try to use during an interview.
4. Why is a digital or tape recorder an important tool for an interviewer?
5. What is a follow-up question?

Thinking Critically

1. Discuss the places in your school where you could conduct an interview. Which are the best? Which are the worst? Try conducting an interview with a classmate in one of the best places, and then move to the worst and continue the interview. Report back to the class on how the different environments affected your interview.
2. Think of a famous person you would like to interview. Write a list of ten questions you would ask that person if you had the chance. (Don’t hesitate to do a little research.)

Taking Charge

Rewrite the following yes-no questions to make them open-ended. (Assume your subject is Will Smith.)

- Did you like working in television?
- Is it important that movies and TV shows have characters who can be good role models for young people?
- Will you work in television in the future?
- Did you enjoy working in the music business before you worked in television?

Take each of the rewritten questions and write a follow-up question based on what you think Will Smith’s answers will be.

Make a list of the things you would do to prepare for an interview with the President of the United States.
Conducting an Ethical Interview

The most important thing you can do while conducting an interview may be obvious, but it’s still important: Listen well. (See Chapter 3.) Good listening keeps you attentive and encourages your subject to speak. She or he is much more likely to talk openly if it’s clear that you are listening carefully. Maintain a polite but professional distance, neither arguing nor agreeing. A nod from time to time encourages the subject but does not necessarily mean that you agree; it just means you understand.

Try to remember that each time you do an interview, you influence the future. If you treat your subject fairly and honestly, that person is likely to be cooperative the next time someone asks for an interview. On the other hand, if you bungle the job, the subject may swear off interviews forever.

It’s not unusual for someone who has had a bad experience to refuse to talk again; several major league baseball players, for example, have taken this position and refuse to talk to reporters. Give your subjects respectful attention no matter what their ideas may be. The people who march to a different drummer often make the best interviews.

Getting Off on the Right Foot

When you arrive for the interview, remind your subject of who you are and why you want the interview. You can say, for example, “I’m gathering information for a speech I’m giving to my class.” In any case, the subject needs to know how you plan to use the information that he or she will provide.

Beginning an Interview

The first part of your interview should include several routine, get-acquainted questions that the subject will have no difficulty answering. These nonthreatening, factual questions get the conversational ball rolling. They also give you a chance to show some interest and enthusiasm about the person you’re interviewing. Don’t be a phony, though; find something that genuinely interests you in what the person is saying.

If possible, use each answer as a springboard for the next question. By carefully drawing on what the person has just said, you can lead him or her smoothly toward the next question. For example, “You say you enjoy rock concerts? Which one was your favorite?” Or, “I’m an oldest child, too, and I always liked being the oldest. How do you feel about it?” Questions like these allow you to “warm up” the subject before you get into the heart of the interview.

Take Quick Notes and Look Up Often

If you’re gathering information for a speech, you will certainly want to take notes during the interview. Taking notes gives you a record of what was said and helps you to be a better listener. Note taking also gives you a convenient and unobtrusive way to check off the questions you wanted to ask as you move along.

Most professional interviewers have developed their own brand of speed writing for taking notes. Some note takers omit vowels and word endings; others use abbreviations. You may already have a

A person is more likely to open up if he or she feels comfortable.
few of your own shortcuts. Develop a personal system or study a manual on speed writing. But whatever route you take, remember that what matters most in an interview is the ability to listen, think, and write all at the same time.

Although you do need to take notes, don’t let yourself get buried in your notebook. Look up from time to time. It will help your subject know that you’re still holding up your half of the conversation. Many beginners have tried to write down every answer in longhand and then panicked when they forgot a word or didn’t hear an important phrase because they were too busy writing. The more effort you spend on recording the conversation, the less energy you have to keep up with it. Thus, take quick, brief notes and maintain good eye contact.

**Handling Sensitive Questions with Care**

Some of your questions are bound to hit a nerve. If you sense that the subject is touchy about a topic but you still think you must ask about it, watch for an opening. Wait until your subject happens to mention the topic, and then gracefully follow up. For instance, you might say, “Really. Now who would accuse you of anything like that? Tell me about it.”

If the subject doesn’t mention the sensitive topic, wait until the end of the interview to ask about it. That way, you and your subject have had an opportunity to establish some trust. Ask your tough question matter-of-factly, in the same tone of voice as your other questions; don’t broadcast that the “bomb” is coming, and try not to react when you hear something big. Subjects will probably freeze up if they think they said something that shocked you.

**Be Persistent** What should you do if your subject doesn’t answer your question? This happens occasionally to every interviewer. The fact that someone talks in response to your question does not mean that the question has been answered.

The subject may have misunderstood your question. If that seems to be the case, repeat or rephrase the question. Don’t be afraid to ask a question twice. Doing so won’t make you look dumb or hard of hearing; most people will probably be impressed that you seem to know what you want.

Of course, sometimes subjects will ignore your question and try to answer a different one—one they would prefer answering. Here you need tact, but you also need determination. Ask the question again if you aren’t satisfied with the answer. If you sense that the subject is reluctant to talk about that particular question, try being silent for a moment. Many times, an uncomfortable silence tells the subject that you want to hear more.

In fact, silence is one of the best ways to get another person to talk. Be patient if you think your subject is dredging up some long-lost memory. Remembering can take time. Let your subject break the silence. If you are quiet, the subject will probably realize that you are waiting for what you hope will be the rest of the answer.

**Concluding the Interview**

When you have finished all your questions, give your subject one last chance to talk. Ask, “Is there something else you would like to tell me?” Usually there is. After that exchange, thank the subject and take your leave. Sending your subject a thank-you message a day or two later adds a classy touch to your interview.
Write up your notes as soon as possible after the interview, while the subject’s words are still fresh in your mind. Your notes will make much more sense to you than they will a few hours later. In fact, if you wait several days to read over your notes, you may find that they no longer make sense at all. Don’t hesitate to check a fact if you’re in doubt. Was the figure she gave you $1 million or $1 billion? A mistake makes both you and your subject look bad.

 Conducting Interviews over the Phone

An interview is probably best done face-to-face, but sometimes doing so just isn’t possible. An alternative you may wish to consider is interviewing someone over the telephone. A phone interview forces you to really concentrate on what your subject is saying.
Keep in mind, though, that it’s easy to let your mind wander when you don’t have your subject right in front of you. You may find yourself doodling or thinking about an assignment for another class. When you check your notes, you may notice ideas you should have pursued and notes that don’t make sense. When you do a phone interview, therefore, keep distractions to a minimum.

**Conducting an E-mail Interview**

Interviews can also be conducted through e-mail. Simply contact your subject and then e-mail a list of questions for him or her to answer. These questions should be the same types of questions you would ask in a face-to-face interview. Since you're e-mailing the questions, make sure you ask the subject to explain or provide details or examples. The subject will type his or her answers to your questions, and e-mail the responses back to you. If you need additional information, ask the subject if you can send some follow-up questions.

Listen to each answer during a phone interview. Based on the responses, ask new questions that aren’t on your prepared list of questions.

You can also conduct an interview through instant messaging. This interview format resembles a phone conversation, because it allows you to exchange ideas in real time.

**SECTION 3 REVIEW**

**Recalling the Facts**
1. What is the best way to begin an interview?
2. What question should you use to end an interview?

**Thinking Critically**
Arrange with your teacher to have a public official visit your class for a group interview. Have each member of the class prepare three questions ahead of time. Then, during the visit, notice whether any questions are repeated. Are class members listening well and creating follow-up questions, or are they simply sticking to the questions they have prepared?

**Taking Charge**
1. Pair off with a classmate and interview one another. Imagine that your classmate is new to the school and you will soon give a short speech introducing him or her to the rest of the class. Prepare a list of at least ten questions and find out something fascinating.
2. Conduct a practice interview in front of the class, and then ask the class to critique your effort. For a twist, ask your subject (perhaps a teacher or an administrator) to be as obstinate or tight-lipped as possible. How can an interviewer deal with a potentially hostile subject?
Interviewing for a Job or Scholarship

Interviews are certainly vital to your future success. Many colleges are relying less on standardized test scores (the ACT and SAT, for instance) as criteria for admission and giving greater emphasis to personal interviews. Consequently, how well you do in an interview can determine whether you are accepted by the college of your choice.

Sooner or later, too, you will interview for a job. How you conduct yourself in interview situations will be a great test of both your speaking and your listening skills. Remember, though, that the employer must satisfy you too.

Submitting Résumés

Before you can get an interview for a job, you will need to submit a résumé, or a summary of your job experiences and accomplishments. Most likely, this is the first communication you will have with an organization. Some organizations may want you to submit your résumé by e-mail. In this case, you should compose a short, formal e-mail that resembles a cover letter. The e-mail should give some information about yourself and your work history and state why you are interested in the job. You can also attach a formal cover letter along with your résumé. In this case, your e-mail will simply tell the recipient that your cover letter and résumé are attached. Spell-check your e-mail and double-check that you have attached your résumé before you send the e-mail.

Some organizations will ask you to send a hard copy of your résumé in the mail. With your résumé, include a cover letter stating who you are, the reason you are sending a résumé, your background and skills, and your interest in the job. Your cover letter and résumé are the first glimpse an interviewer has of you. Work hard to make them the best they can be so you will get an interview.

Instead of sending a résumé, you may need to fill out an online application and upload your résumé to a Web site. There may be space to compose a short cover letter.

Use Communication Skills to Your Advantage

Remember that prospective employers are not out to embarrass you; they only want to gain an accurate impression of you and your abilities. In particular, they want to know how you communicate with other people. Of course they are interested in your qualifications, but they can find that information on your résumé. Do you fit the organization? Employers say they are always looking for certain traits, no matter what the job: confidence, enthusiasm, and dependability. “Your personality and how you conduct yourself during the interview have the greatest impact on your chances of landing the job,” says Guyla Armstrong, assistant professor of business at the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

Remember that during an interview, it’s important to be an attentive and active listener.
The advice that follows is intended to give you an idea of what to expect during an interview. Some people believe that just being themselves is enough, but you may well find yourself in a highly competitive selection process. You need to know how to effectively communicate your skills and experience, as well as how to portray your personality as one that will fit the organization.

**Be Alert and Energetic** During the interview, try to show energy and enthusiasm. Sit on the edge of your chair and lean slightly forward. When you make gestures (and it’s helpful to do so if they come naturally), get your hands about chest high. Using gestures burns off tension and looks good; it makes you seem animated.

Keep eye contact with your interviewer. Don’t become so wrapped up in answering questions that you forget to connect with the interviewer on a personal level.

**Pay Attention** Pay attention to the interviewer’s name, and use the name occasionally in your answers. Doing so helps the interviewer know that you notice people and remember their names. As much as possible, turn the conversation toward things you know. However, remember to be an active listener and show respect for the interviewer.

Professional interview adviser Susan Bixler recommends that if the interviewer doesn’t extend his or her hand at the end of the interview, you should wait one moment and then extend your own hand. Doing this shows a high level of confidence and business awareness.

**Get There on Time** A day or two before the interview, call to confirm the time and place. Ask how long you should allow for the interview and if there’s anything you should bring, such as a portfolio. A portfolio is a tool for sharing information about yourself and examples of your work with others. In the past, portfolios were compiled in binders. Today, electronic portfolios are a simple and effective way of presenting your ideas. You can include text, pictures, Web pages, digital video, and slide-show presentations in an electronic portfolio. Your portfolio should clearly reflect your background, strengths, and work experience.

Electronic portfolios can be stored on an external hard drive, a CD, a flash drive, or a Web site. You can bring a laptop to the interview so you can show employers your electronic portfolio, or you can send it ahead of time so they can look at it before or after your interview.

Plan to arrive at an interview about fifteen minutes early. If you will be driving to the interview and you are unfamiliar with the route, ask for directions and do a practice drive. You don’t know what

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**Are You Missing an Earring?**

Susan Bixler, author of *The Professional Image*, recommends that job candidates conduct a 30-second check in front of a mirror prior to any interview. The check provides the reassurance needed to concentrate on people and matters at hand. To perform the check, start at the top of your body and work down. Check your hair, teeth, makeup, and earrings. Straighten your tie; check for stains or unbuttoned buttons. Then check your belt, zipper, socks or stockings, and shoes.

**Make sure to call your interviewer if you are running late for an interview.**

If you are running late for an interview, make sure to call your interviewer. It shows respect and consideration for their time. Professional interview adviser Susan Bixler recommends that if the interviewer doesn’t extend his or her hand at the end of the interview, you should wait one moment and then extend your own hand. Doing this shows a high level of confidence and business awareness.

**Get There on Time** A day or two before the interview, call to confirm the time and place. Ask how long you should allow for the interview and if there’s anything you should bring, such as a portfolio. A portfolio is a tool for sharing information about yourself and examples of your work with others. In the past, portfolios were compiled in binders. Today, electronic portfolios are a simple and effective way of presenting your ideas. You can include text, pictures, Web pages, digital video, and slide-show presentations in an electronic portfolio. Your portfolio should clearly reflect your background, strengths, and work experience.

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Plan to arrive at an interview about fifteen minutes early. If you will be driving to the interview and you are unfamiliar with the route, ask for directions and do a practice drive. You don’t know what
traffic problems you’ll encounter or if you’ll get lost. And if you drive, you’ll have to find a parking place. Lastly, go to the interview by yourself. It shows confidence. Many teens want to take along a friend for moral support, but that is not perceived as professional behavior.

Anticipate the Questions

Good interview planning means that you try your best to guess what questions you may be asked and think about how you might answer them. For example, the interviewer will almost certainly ask you to describe yourself. Other questions may be more difficult.

The interviewer may want to know, for example, why you’ve never held a job for very long. You should guess that a question like this will be coming and have a reasonable answer in mind, such as “I’ve had many responsibilities at home, looking after my younger brothers and sisters, but they’re all in school now.”

Most interviews boil down to why you are applying, what kind of person you are, and what you can do. Know the answers to those questions. Here are some other questions you might face:

General
- Why do you want to work for us?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- What would you like to be doing five years from now?

Educational
- What is your grade point average?
- What have been your favorite and least favorite courses?
- Were your extracurricular activities worth the time you put into them?

Job-Related
- Why should I hire you?
- How long do you plan to work here?

Personal
- Tell me something about yourself.
- What accomplishment in your life has made you the proudest?
- What is the last book you read?

Think about how you would answer those questions, so that you don’t stumble for words when they do come up. Some students even memorize their answers, but be careful that they don’t seem canned. You don’t want to sound like a robot. Instead, your goal is to be so well prepared you can relax and be yourself.

Make Positive Points

Answering questions may make you feel as if you’re playing defense. That’s only natural, but you also need to have an offense planned for your interview. Prepare a short list of positive points you wish to make about yourself.

How can you get your positive points across? Be alert for situations in which you can bring them into the conversation. Here are a few possibilities:

1. Puff balls. Puff balls are easy questions lobbed in your direction. A typical puff ball might be, “Tell me about yourself.” Use a question like this as a springboard to tell the interviewer something you have planned to say. But beware: if you haven’t practiced ahead of time, such questions may leave you at a loss for words.

2. Pauses. Inevitably, you will feel a lull in the conversation. Every interview has some down time. Perhaps the interviewer has looked down at her or his notes, scratched a shoulder, or taken a sip of coffee.

   In any event, a pause gives you another chance to use some initiative. While the interviewer is momentarily distracted, jump in and offer to talk about a subject you know will show your skills and experience to best advantage.

   You might say, “By the way, Mr. Youssefi, may I tell you a little about my work on the Habitat for Humanity project our school did last year?”

3. Bridges. A bridge is a transition from one answer to another. Suppose the interviewer asks, “Have you ever been late for work?” Obviously, the interviewer expects a one-word answer—yes or no—but you can give more.

   You first answer the question—“Yes,” for example—and then, by cleverly using a bridge, you
You can help make your positive point stand out by being brief. Think of your interview as if it were being televised and keep your answer to the length of a sound bite. Sound bites are those short excerpts from interviews that we hear on television and radio broadcasts.

Sound bites last, as a rule, no more than 30 seconds. Plan to answer each question in 30 seconds. If time permits, be ready with a two-minute answer or even a five-minute answer.

**Rehearse Tough Questions**

What questions do you dread being asked in an interview? Common anxiety-inducing questions include “Where do you see yourself in five years?” and “Why should I hire you?” When you think about them, they are all legitimate questions, and each presents you with an opportunity to sell yourself.

- **“Where do you see yourself in five years?”**
  The interviewer probably wants to know if you are ambitious. If you find it hard to look five years down the road, try responding like this: “Five years seems like a long time. I can see myself going to college and studying for a degree in sports management.”

- **“Why should I hire you?”**
  Here’s where the interviewer finds out how well you understand the organization’s needs. How about a response like this: “I think you should hire me because I have the skills you need in this position. My computer courses at school have taught me how to use your software, and my communication skills are strong because of my student government experience.”

- **“Why do you want to work here?”**
  This is where the interviewer finds out how much you know about the organization. You want to convey your interest in contributing to its mission. For example: “Some of my older friends have worked here, and they said they liked their jobs and were treated fairly.”

If the interviewer asks why you are lacking in a particular area (be it grades, work experience, or participation in extracurricular activities), you need to stay positive. In response to a question about a low GPA, for example, you might say something like this: “I had not yet learned how to say no. I was..."
on the soccer team and the speech team and in student council. There just weren’t enough hours in the day, and my grades began to slip. But I learned my lesson and now know how to prioritize.”

### Phone Interviews

As an alternative to a face-to-face interview, you may be asked to schedule a phone interview. Some organizations use phone interviews as a screening tool to determine which candidates they want to bring in for a face-to-face interview.

During a phone interview, you will be asked the same types of questions that you would be asked in a face-to-face interview. The preparation for both types of interviews is the same. Compile a list of questions you might be asked, and prepare answers to those questions. Have a copy of your résumé in front of you and a pen and paper ready to take notes. Listen when your interviewers introduce themselves. Write down their names so you can refer to them by name later. Find a quiet location that is free of loud noise. Wait for the interviewer to finish a statement or question before you speak. Take your time answering each question. Pause to think about what you want to say, and speak clearly. Provide short answers, just as you would in a face-to-face interview. Be yourself and smile. Your positive attitude will come across to your interviewers, and they will know that you really want the job.

### Scholarship Interviews

Some college scholarships you apply for may require an interview. To prepare for the interview, think about your background, the courses you plan to take, the colleges you have applied to, and the type of job you would like to obtain after you graduate. If you are not sure what your major will be, be prepared to tell interviewers about the areas of study that interest you. Dress for a scholarship interview as you would for a job interview, prepare in the same ways, and thank the interviewers for their time.

### After the Interview

Consider every interview a learning experience. As soon as possible after the interview, jot down some notes on how you would like to improve. Replay the highs and the lows. What went well? What could you have done better?

Always follow an interview with a thank-you letter. Begin by thanking the interviewer for taking the time to meet with you. Then restate your interest in the position.

### Interview Checklist

As a final check before you go to a job interview, ask yourself these questions:

1. Do I have copies of my résumé?
2. Do I have a list of three references with addresses and telephone numbers?
3. Have I made sure I will be on time?
4. Have I dressed neatly and appropriately?
5. Even if I feel tired, can I remember to sit up and look alert?
6. Can I remember not to criticize others, especially past employers?
7. Can I make good eye contact with the interviewer?
8. Can I remember the interviewer’s name and use it during the interview?
9. Can I remember to thank the interviewer at the close of the interview?
10. Have I turned off any electronic devices (beepers, cell phones, etc.)?
You might also keep in touch with the organization. After a week or two, call to find out if the job has been filled. If you accept another offer in the meantime, be sure to notify the interviewer that you’re no longer a candidate. You never know when you might be applying to that organization again.

Finally, if you do not get the job, you may want to ask the interviewer for some constructive criticism or recommendations for future interviews.

Sending a thank-you card or letter after an interview reminds your interviewer that you are interested in the job.

**SECTION 4 REVIEW**

**Recalling the Facts**

1. Why is it wise to arrive ten to fifteen minutes early for an interview?
2. How can you make a positive point even if you aren’t directly asked about it?

**Thinking Critically**

What are some ways that interviews can be misused? Could a company, for instance, use job interviews to find out what people think of competing companies?

**Taking Charge**

Ask a counselor to conduct some mock job interviews for you and your classmates, or invite the manager of a local business to class to conduct mock interviews.
Imagine walking down the hall, minding your own business, when suddenly a student near you turns sharply and you are knocked to the ground by a lethal backpack. Such is the fear of Hastings Senior High School officials.

Beginning with the next school year, Hastings students will not be allowed to carry backpacks around the halls of school. Officials say backpacks pose health and safety risks to students, including posture and back problems. Backpacks can easily conceal drugs, alcohol, and weapons.

Students argue they need their backpacks in order to get to class on time with the books and supplies. Many of them don’t use their lockers because they are out of the way and too hard to get to during passing time.

Hastings senior Braden Grams finds the ban very extreme. “We don’t have enough lockers for everyone to have their own, and some people don’t trust their locker partner. Also, so many people wear backpacks that the freshmen just do it to fit in,” Grams said.

“With a big cut in state aid, administrators have better things to worry about than backpacks cluttering classrooms,” Grams said. “It’s really about contraband, which we don’t have a huge problem with, except for tobacco and occasionally alcohol. It is rarely brought to school with an intent to consume while on school property.”

Southeast students have mixed reactions to the idea in general.

“If there’s a gun or violence problem [in Hastings], it isn’t a bad idea. As far as [banning them] in Lincoln [is concerned], I don’t see it, because there hasn’t been a problem,” Jake Cammack said.

Cammack admits that he has experienced back problems due to his heavy backpack. “When I take it off, I’m sore. I’m probably stunting my growth,” he said. He also admits that his backpack has been something of a safety hazard. When Cammack sees someone he knows walking down the hall, he turns so that his backpack will stop them. But, “Sometimes they don’t see me and run into it,” he said.

“You get attached to your backpack really quick,” Cammack said. “If they ever ban backpacks, I’m dropping out of school.”

According to sophomore April Eisenhauer, “LSE is a really big school, and some people have inconvenient lockers. [If you carry a backpack] you have more time to socialize between classes and it’s easier to carry around your books. It’s also a change from middle school, when you weren’t allowed to wear them.”

“I think if the ban was at LSE, I would protest, and so would others,” Eisenhauer said.
Looking Back

Listed below are the major ideas discussed in this chapter.

- Interviews play an important role in our efforts to gather information.
- The best place for an interview is a quiet location where you can have your subject’s complete attention.
- Learn as much as possible about your subject before interviewing him or her.
- Dress appropriately for an interview. Wear whatever you think will bring the best response from the person you are interviewing.
- You must be on time for an interview, and bring a pen and notebook. Some interviewers also like to use a voice recorder or camcorder.
- It may be best to begin an interview with several get-acquainted questions—ones that will put your subject at ease.
- Questions should be brief and to the point.
- Open-ended questions allow the subject great flexibility in answering. Such questions may lead to new and surprising pieces of information.
- Follow-up questions help you pursue statements that need clarifying.
- Yes-no questions and questions that require a one-word answer should usually be avoided.
- Keep eye contact with your subject. Don’t become so wrapped up in note taking that you forget to hold up your end of the conversation.
- Gestures can be useful during a job interview; they can burn off tension, add life to your voice, and help you seem energetic.
- Stress a few positive points about yourself when opportunity permits.

Speech Vocabulary

Match the speech vocabulary term on the left with the correct definition on the right.

1. interviewer
2. subject
3. verbatim
4. portfolio
5. rapport
6. open-ended question
7. follow-up question
8. yes-no question
9. leading question
10. puff ball
11. pause
12. bridge
13. sparkler
14. sound bite

a. a “soft” question
b. a transition from a question to a positive point
c. quoting someone word-for-word
d. a sample of school assignments and other work
e. an excerpt of an interview designed for broadcast
f. supporting material—an anecdote, for example
g. someone who asks questions of another person
h. lull in the conversation
i. a person who is being interviewed
j. a sense of trust between two people
k. question that requires a one-word answer
l. question that leaves room for full, informative answers
m. question that hints at an answer
n. question that follows a train of thought
Academic Vocabulary

Match each term on the left with the correct definition on the right.

1. pollster
2. proxy
3. vicariously
4. grovel
5. chauffeur
6. embalm
7. unobtrusive
8. canned

a. to treat a corpse with preservatives
b. overly rehearsed or memorized
c. to cringe or humble oneself
d. someone who drives a car for someone else
e. not easily noticed
f. one who acts in place of someone else
g. in a way that involves participating through imagination in someone else's experience
h. a person who takes opinion surveys

To Remember

1. What do an interviewer and an interview subject want from an interview?
2. If, as an interviewer, you find yourself overly concerned with your next question or whether your subject likes you, you may lack an important quality. What is it?
3. Why would the principal be a better source of information than a teacher for some interviews? For what kinds of interviews would a teacher or a student be the best source?
4. What are some reasons that a subject's office, though convenient, is not the best place to conduct an interview?
5. Name several sources of information you could use to find out about a person you wish to interview.

6. Why is it important to dress appropriately for an interview?
7. What are some of the reasons that you might want to use a voice recorder or camcorder during an interview?
8. What are the advantages of writing out your questions before conducting an interview?
9. Why should you usually avoid asking yes-no questions during an interview?
10. The best strategy for an interviewer to take is to pretend to agree with everything the subject says. True or false? Why?
11. Name three opportunities that may present themselves during an interview—opportunities for you to talk about your own positive points.

To Do

1. Attend a local press conference. They are called frequently by state and local officials. Prepare a few questions ahead of time. Ask the officials if you may ask questions; if not, compare your questions with those asked by professional reporters. Evaluate the questions asked and the responses given.

2. Check up on yourself. Send a follow-up sheet to a person you have recently interviewed. Ask that person about how he or she thought the interview went. Were you courteous, well-prepared, and alert? Were your questions thoughtful and to the point? Use the evaluation to improve future interviews.
3. Have two students interview the same person. Have one interviewer stay outside while the other interview is going on. Discuss the differences in both questions and responses.

4. Assume you have been assigned to interview the president of your student council. What research would you do to prepare for the interview? What questions would you ask?

5. As you learned in this chapter, curiosity is one of the most important qualities of a successful interviewer. What are you curious about?

6. Make a list of 20 or 30 things that you would like to know. Then, for each question on your list, think of at least two sources of information that could answer it. Find the answers to the two questions that you are most curious about.

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To Talk About

1. What problems can be caused by the need to take notes at an interview?

2. What are some ways you might deal with an interview subject who is reluctant to give out any information?

3. When might a phone interview be preferable to a face-to-face interview?

4. Discuss who the best subjects would be to interview for a variety of speeches. Have half the class think of the speeches and the other half think of the subjects. For example, who would be the best subject to interview about the history of homecoming at your school? The first basketball team? The growth of women’s athletics?

5. Interview a family member. Doing this would be a good way to begin developing your interviewing skills, because you wouldn’t find it threatening. Do not, however, take this interview lightly, just because the subject will be someone close to you. Pick a topic that interests you, and ask probing questions. Try to find out something you don’t already know.

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To Write About

1. Oral history has become a popular way to learn about the past. Draft a proposal for an oral history of your school, an institution in your community, or a major national event. Such events include the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, Hurricane Katrina, and the California wildfires of 2007. Include possible interview subjects and sample question lists.

2. Compare your note-taking techniques with those of your classmates. Do you use an outline form? If not, do you use a combination of letters, numbers, indentions, underlining, stars, or some other system for separating major points from minor ones? What can you do to improve your system for taking notes?

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Related Speech Topics

- Barbara Walters
- Larry King
- TV talk shows
- The ethics of sound-bite news reporting
- An individual’s right to privacy versus the public’s right to know
- The most interesting person you have ever met