

# Program for Writing and Rhetoric

Kathryn W. Pieplow, J.D.

## Primary Research – Interviews

The information you have been finding in peer-reviewed journals and in popular newspapers and magazines by digging through Norlin databases and retrieving full-text articles online or finding the hard copies on the shelves (some of you even ordered articles through interlibrary loan via Zip) is called secondary research. That is, you are researching what other people have already researched; they got information first-hand, put it together in a logical way and perhaps even analyzed it.

You may also use primary research for your literature reviews and deliberative essays. Primary research is information you get first-hand directly from a source. It comes in several forms:

- **Original surveys and studies** (formal or informal). You do not have the time or expertise at this point to do formal, scientific studies and surveys (which require, for instance, appropriate sample sizes and other strict methodologies). But you can do informal studies to illustrate your points. If, for example, you're doing an essay on body image in the media, you might record two hours of prime-time television, watch it carefully, and write down how many characters are thin women – and what roles they play. Or you might watch the commercials to see how many depend for their message on skinny models, etc.
- **Government documents:** statistical reports, press releases, information on bills before Congress or state legislatures, expert testimony before Congress etc. Many of these are available online; others are available in Norlin (see a librarian for assistance). For example, if you're writing about underage drinking, you might go directly to federal or state government statistics on drunk-driving accidents.
- **Corporate and non-profit documents:** statistical reports, press releases, product descriptions, financial reports, position statements by nonprofits. If you're writing about underage drinking, for example, you might also contact the University of Colorado to get the latest number of students who have gotten in trouble in one form or another for underage drinking. If you're writing about creatine, you might try to get the latest sales numbers directly from the largest manufacturer or from a major distributor.
- **Personal documents:** Memoirs, letters, diary entries. If you're writing an article about anorexia, for example, and someone has published a personal account of her struggles – in an article or online – you might quote from it.
- **Personal interviews.** In some cases, you will wish to interview someone directly affected by your issue. If you're writing about drug testing students, for example, you might interview a student who underwent such a test to find out how it made him/her feel. In other cases, you'll want to interview an expert or someone in a position of authority. For example, you might want to contact the principal of a school that conducts these tests to find out why it tests and whether it has been successful.

### Conducting the interview

The best interview is done in person; if that's not possible, you should do it by phone. An email interview is a last resort because it is not conducive to conversation. That is, it does not permit an easy back-and-forth if the person's answers raise new issues or need clarification. In addition, people as a general rule are more generous with their time and information in person than by phone, and are more generous by phone than by email.

## Before the interview:

1. It takes time to set up an interview in person or by phone. So your top priority is to be persistent. Call people back if they don't return your call within 24 hours. You may have to make several phone calls to find the right person. Ask for at least half an hour of the person's time.
2. Once you set up the interview (or while trying to do so), brainstorm a list of the most important questions (try to keep the list to 10-15). Try to get these answered during the interview.
3. Try to phrase these questions in a non-hostile way; you do not want the person on the defensive. But do not be afraid of asking difficult questions. If you feel someone might take offense, save the difficult question(s) for the end of the interview.
4. At the beginning of the interview, remind the person who you are and what your project is about (they'll probably ask, "what's this about again?"); thank the person for taking the time to do it.

## During the interview:

1. You want the conversation to go places you hadn't planned on or didn't know about, so feel free to move beyond those initial questions. As new issues come up – or if the person says something you want him/her to clarify – take the time to ask additional questions. It's okay to ask basic questions. You do not have to pretend to be an expert. It is better to feel a bit foolish during an interview than to look foolish in print.
2. As interesting as these unplanned places might be, you don't want your discussion to get too far afield. Don't be afraid to bring the conversation back to your list of questions; after all, these are the questions you want answers to. An enthusiastic, "This is so interesting, but can you answer another question for me?" will usually bring the conversation back to your topic.
3. Bring a notebook, and write furiously; don't be afraid to ask him/her to repeat a point if he/she goes too fast. Avoid blaming the person being interviewed (e.g. "you're going too fast"); instead, blame yourself (e.g. "I'm a little slow today; would you mind repeating your point?" or "That was a great point, but I didn't quite catch it. Could you say it again?") This is particularly important if you sense a good quote since you must quote a comment exactly as it was said (feel free to read back a quote if you're not sure you got it right). Bring a tape recorder if you have one; but make sure to ask for permission before recording – and take notes even if recording. Recordings have been known to fail.
4. At the beginning or the end of the interview, make sure to double-check his/her full name (spell it back to the person slowly) and full title (e.g. vice president of university affairs). When interviewing people in authority, try to get a business card as well.
5. Be polite at all times. At the end of the interview, thank him/her for taking the time to talk to you.
6. Before leaving or hanging up, ask if it would be okay to call back for clarifications (e.g. if you find yourself confused or can't read your handwriting) and, if so, how you can best get in contact with him/her (try to get a direct phone number).

## After the interview:

1. Type up your notes as soon as you can (same day, preferably) while the interview is fresh in your mind – this will help you to read your own handwriting if you wrote quickly and will help to keep the information in your head. It will also allow you come up with additional questions for later.
2. Feel free to call the person back – more than once, if necessary – if questions come up while you're writing.
3. Write a thank you note to the person you interviewed. They were generous enough to give of their time to help you out. A few lines of thanks will let him/her know you appreciated it. (You might even offer to send him/her a copy of the finished paper.)