
UNIT 7 INTERVIEWS : EDITING AND ORGANISATION

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7.0 AIMS

The aim of this unit is give you guidance on how to

- organize the material resulting from an interview, into an ordered and balanced piece of writing by making intelligent use of a process of selection and rejection;
- give your article it proper focus and lead, always keeping your eye trained on what is likely to appeal to the reader you are writing for;
- make your writing lively and authentic by making an effective and judicious use of anecdotes and quotations.

After reading this Unit, you should be able to

- a) shift through the wealth of material you have gathered;
- b) make an informed and intelligent selection of what to present in the article from all that material;
- c) apply your shaping imagination to decide on focus, lead, and structure
- d) make selective and dramatic use of anecdotes;
- e) decide when to use quotations and when to paraphrase;
- f) observe due caution in using the question-and-answer format;
- g) maintain balance in your overall presentation and establish your credibility and integrity as a writer in control of his material; and
- h) write an interesting piece that grips the reader through the selection and arrangement of your material.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In the earlier unit you learnt about some of the preparations to be made before you go to interview a famous personality or an achiever. You have seen that there can be three types of interviews and that you will accordingly have to prepare for each. You learnt about how to prepare a questionnaire, conduct the interview and take recordings notes/minutes of the procedure. Now the next task is to edit the material you have collected and organise it into a readable, fairly and interesting piece of

writing. First we shall tell you what we mean by “editing” and there what we mean by “organization” in this particular context. Next we shall tell you how to structure your writing up — give it a shape. At the end you should be able to interview your chosen personality, having made appropriate preparations, and then write up the interview after duly editing the material you have collected.

7.2 DEFINITIONS

The necessity of defining our terms is due to the fact that “editing” and “organisation” both can have a variety or a number of shades of meaning.

7.2.1 Editing

Editing for us is the process of examining and correcting. In other words, selective use of mass of material that gets collected, particular by a beginner, in his anxiety that nothing should get left out. Simultaneously, you will have to ensure that nothing essential gets left out.

7.2.2 Organisation

Organisation is the structuring of something, materials collected during the course of the time in order to give it a shape that conveys the meaning you wish it to. That is, arranging it such that the relationship between the beginning, middle and end is an organic (naturally shaped) one.

7.3 EDITING

If you recall the earlier unit on preparing for interviews, you will remember that you could have been taping the entire interview, taking notes, both on a slip-pad and in your memory, and at the same time trying to carry on a conversation with your interviewee. Contrary to your fears, you will have discovered that this information, in addition to whatever material you collected before you even went for the interview is too much to use for any one feature or write-up.

Editing is the process of deciding on the focus of your interview, the particular achievement you wish to present to your records and the related aspects of the interviewer’s personality that you feel must be simultaneously presented.

7.3.1 Examining and Rewriting

First you will have to examine all the material you have collected. Look at it objectively, not sentimentally. Is all of it useful to you or have you gone in for the mindless, greedy collection of whatever you could lay your hands on. Probably, as a beginner, you have done the latter. Examine it ruthlessly — are you calling the writeup “A crusader for women’s rights” or “One man against apartheid” or “You can fight cancer”. In the above cases, what kind of personality have you chosen? If she/he is well-known, you do not need to talk about the present-day scenario vis-a-vis women’s rights or what apartheid means today or recent progress in cancer treatment. Perhaps you need to fill in the scene as it was in the recent past. That is all. The key to the entire process is evaluation. You have to evaluate your material all the time, both in relation to what you know to be true and in relation to the expectations of your reader for a full picture of what is being presented. You may start with a tentative hypothesis, but you find the need to change it (i) as you interview, (ii) as you review your material, and (iii) as you write it up for the reader. Only constant evaluation on all counts can ensure that your selected material is of the requisite quality. And if in the process, some of what you gathered gets rejected, so be it. You are now in the refining process, shifting grain from chaff.

Next comes rewriting. You will have to rewrite, several times, your first drafts to that you say what you want, provide the correct focus, use the appropriate tone and use the most suitable format. If you were doing a profile of a person not present, for instance, you would only be able to in the essay format but once you have actually interviewed someone you can also use the question-and-answer format.

7.3.2 Correction of Text

Check your facts. Are your dates and statistics correct? Are you quoting from memory or do you have a tape recording? Particularly if you are going to be making provocative statements, do ensure that you have a tape to back you up. The same is true if you are using quotation marks.

All along the editing and writing process several re-valuations may be necessary and several drafts may be called for. No matter how carefully you have planned, there is nothing to be ashamed about if the first or second draft doesn't sound quite right. As accomplished a writer as John Galbraith, in a preface to his fourth book, talks of the look of spontaneity that enters his writing when he reaches the fourth or fifth draft stage. That shows how hard a business writing often is.

Do not be afraid to pursue several leads and to experiment. But be ruthless when it comes to deciding what works best amongst the possible approaches. And when you have selected your approach, be equally ruthless in pruning the draft down to essentials. This is hard to do, but needs to be done.

In fact, writing often means re-writing. In rewriting or pruning your efforts, it is a good idea to keep your reader constantly in mind, and choose among words and ways of expressing what is most appropriate for him. Also, read the draft aloud to yourself to look for ways to improve it. What sounds better will often be the better way to put it across. Or let a friend or friends read your draft and guide you with their comments, while you retain your judgement on what changes you wish to accept.

7.3.3 Language and Style

As we have been saying all along, if you are writing for any intellectual readership do not be flippant. If your topic is illness, disease, death, research, injustice, exploitation do not try to be funny or witty. Granted that wit improves readability, it does not therefore follow that every topic can be so presented. The language you use will have to use the vocabulary of the field your interviewee is from. Medical for medical research, commerce for the successful entrepreneur, legal for the lawyer. Do not make apologies for this. For increasing your vocabulary, look up the ALDCE (Advanced Learners Dictionary of Current English) word-lists. What is appropriate and *le mot juste* does not need explanations. If you are reviewing a book of jokes, funny anecdotes etc. by all means be funny or clever.

7.4 ORGANISATION

With all your notes, references, and quotations in hand, you will find before you a shapeless jumble. These nuggets must have been scattered throughout the interview. Your craftsmanship lies in the ability to select the pertinent fragments, organize them, and weave them into a narrative pattern. Further, you can write an interesting interview article only when you have

- **thought about** the material to the point of **thinking through it**, noting down the probable treatment;
- **identified** your readers;
- **decided on** what slant is needed to attract and sustain their interest;
- **decided on** the appropriate length, tone, and style for the article; and
- **planned** the illustration.

In other words, a well-written interview article is the result of much labour. The article will reflect your careful thinking and deft planning of each aspect mentioned above.

7.4.1 Importance of Focus, Lead, Structure

Your shaping imagination will have to be put to work in organizing your material. Three interrelated factors are important in this respect: (a) what you have chosen to focus on, (b) how you choose to lead or start, and (c) how you structure your piece.

As we have already spent considerable time talking about focus, it will suffice here to point out that having thought thoroughly about your material, your focus will help you organize your final presentation. Your focus, in turn, will be expressed in two

specific items: (a) your lead, opening, or introduction, and (b) the overall structure, which will be governed by the logic of your presentation.

Leads or openings can be of several kinds and have been discussed earlier. Your task now is to find a lead appropriate to your subject and one that seems to have the best potential appeal to readers, given the material you have on hand. Do you wish to startle or surprise or shock the reader? Do you wish to lead him in gently? Do you wish to start with a persuasive idea, or even a controversial one? Do you want to let a set of contradictory facts form the backdrop or opening against which you will launch your piece? Or do you want to introduce the interviewed person himself? If so, will it be through a significant or startling quotation or through some observation you have made about his appearance and manners?

These and several other possibilities may occur to you, and you will have to choose the one most appropriate for your material. With experience, you will learn to arrive at your solution fairly quickly — develop the instinct, so to say, of deciding what will come off best — but to start with, you may have to experiment with drafts of several different openings until you hit upon the best solution.

This exercise of thinking carefully and then experimenting with leads will also provide you with a logic to arrange the rest of your presentation. Once you have chosen your dominant element, other elements will fall into place, step by step. But it will not happen automatically. You will still have to do your thinking cap as you decide on how the different points, quotes, or arguments in your piece are to be strung together. What supports or complements the point you have made already? What departs from it and sets up a counterpoint or argument? How will this be resolved? How varied or uniform do you want your treatment to be? And what will be the overall structure of your piece? Again, there are no short cuts. With careful thinking, wide reading, and experience, you will develop and ‘instinct’ or ‘feel’ for doing this more easily.

7.4.2 How to Handle Anecdotes

Anecdotes form the backbone of people-oriented writing. We have discussed earlier how you can probe a subject after having established a rapport. But even assuming that your subject offers you promising material, anecdotes do not always write themselves. You have to write them in a way that does the job you intend of them within your context, while keeping your reader riveted to the piece.

Practise writing down all anecdotal material that occurs to you in observations around you. Then try shaping them into brief, credible, memorable anecdotes. You can use **The Readers, Digest** as a reference for comparing your efforts with published, readable material. This kind of practice will help you both to identify anecdotal material in your interviews, and to shape them into usable form.

Remember, anecdotes are such a rich mine because they illustrate that people have done or accomplished or felt at given moments, or why they failed to accomplish what they set themselves to do. Anecdotes offer meaty evidence for any generalizations and inferences you may offer. And since they read so well, your own argument or abstraction becomes that much more palatable or acceptable.

7.4.3 Use of Quotations and Paraphrasing

One major problem in interview articles is deciding when to quote and when to paraphrase the interviewee. The decision will have to be based on a number of factors. Important among them are your skills as a writer, the subject’s skills in conveying things in an exclusive or interesting way, and what would most suit your target audience or readership. A balance has to be found among these factors.

If you have closely followed the advice offered in earlier units some of your problems at this stage would already have taken care of themselves. If you have listened carefully during your interviews, taken down verbatim only what is significant, and filled up gaps in your notes soon afterwards, when the words and ideas discussed were still fresh in your mind, some of what you should quote and summarize would already be clear.

But further thinking and a selection are involved at the stage of writing the article. Your first duty is to the reader, to keep him interested and tell him what is significant

7.4.4 Two Formats

There are basically two ways of writing up an interview. Normally, a judicious blend of these is used. The essay format as the word suggests does not use direct quotes. It is simply a write-up in the third person of an interview. However, since most readers would like to have the facts “straight” from the horse’s mouth; it does not seem logical to use it alone.

Read this:

Bombay, 1928, The annual day of a local school. A nervous boy of six plays the foot harmonium and sings two songs with his sister on stage — he receives tremendous applause.

Calcutta, 1990, June 3, A 70-year-old man (now a household name synonymous with music) receives the coveted Allaudin Khan award from the chief minister of West Bengal at a regal ceremony.

Through these long years, this person has carved his name in “pure gold” in the annals of Hindi and Bengali film music, both classical and traditional, inimitable and unmatched. He is V. Balsara — the polite, sombre man whose nimble fingers produce magic out of any key-board instrument. Today, the septuagenarian is still composing music, performing on stage, recording for HMV, INRECO and Ghatani and also training students in vocal or instrumentals. He is always on the edge of a novel idea in composing music.

(SUNDAY MAIL, July 29-Aug 4, 1990)

and then again, you could have it this way:

- Q) What was your criterion for the selection of the optional subject?
- A) As I was a medical graduate, none of the medical subjects were available for competition. I had studied these two subjects up to XII standard. Besides this, these subjects, particularly Zoology, are related to medical sciences.
- Q) How did you prepare for your compulsory papers?
- A) For General English and Hindi — no regular reading of newspapers.

(Competition Success Review)

Another variant of the interview article format is the question-and-answer (Q&A) presentation. It is still in vogue, though not as common as it used to be. The reason why its popularity has diminished is that it denies the writer the freedom to weave in background and set the context for quotes. But even in using the Q & A format, you would do well to select and condense the interviewee’s words or to rephrase your questions for sharper focus, as long as the meaning is retained. Desist from using the Q & A format as a lazy way out of editorial labour.

Usually, however, you will have to use a mix: introduce your interviewee, his achievement(s) say why your readers should read about him, and then present the interview in excerpted form.

SUDHIR Ranjan Majumdar, 49, a schoolmaster before joining Tripura Congress(I), could little have imagined that he would lead the state one day. But in politics, there is always room for miracles. After considerable haggling, a second term MLA was chosen chief minister “unanimously”. Senior correspondent **RAMESH MENON** spoke to Majumdar at his Agartala residence.

(India Today, Feb. 29, 1988)

7.5 STRUCTURING THE WRITE-UP

Structure is the final shape, how to begin, what to put in the main body of your feature and how to conclude.

7.5.1 Beginning

Begin with the barest minimum of biographical details about your interviewee. Give the chief reason why you are interviewing him/her. Has he jumped the highest, lifted the most weights, made a breakthrough in medical research, second the most runs in the world etc., etc.? Answer this question first. Try and make it interesting but do try to put in this information.

7.5.2 Middle

Give the details whether questions-and-answer format or point by point, using excerpts from his speech. This is to provide the ‘meat’ of the interview. Describe her/his appearance, mannerism, habits. Remember you must make him come alive to your reader.

7.5.3 End

Conclude by recapitulating what you have been trying to present. Sum up in your own words; if you have a tape in his words too. End with best wishes, a hope or a prayer for newer achievements.

7.6 SUMMING UP

As you have learnt in the previous Unit, a good interview is the result of investigating your subject from several angles, formulating provocative questions, and a good re-writing of the matter in hand.

Having such a wealth of material at hand, the real task is to edit and organise it to give it coherence and fluency.

- To recall, know the interests of your interviewee and record fully his responses.
- Know your target audience and the publication in which your interview will appear.
- Awareness of your intended reader will help set your tone and provide shape, order and coherence to your piece.
- You must know what to focus on and think out your overall structure for the interview and its introduction.
- You should use interesting anecdotes to hold the interest of your readers.
- When quoting, you must select from a speech or dialogue, those portions peculiar to the person you are interviewing and paraphrase the uninteresting or flat portions.
- You need to give balanced treatment to your subject so that your integrity as an interviewer is not questioned.
- Revise and rewrite, each time striking out irrelevant matter. Welcome critical appraisal of your work.

Activity 2

- i) You could begin the first by “The clutter in his studies was reflected in his own dress — paint-smearred and yet not altogether uninteresting.
- ii) The mass of canvasses stacked against the wall reflected an obsession with the mother-figure, — mother and child, mother and children...