

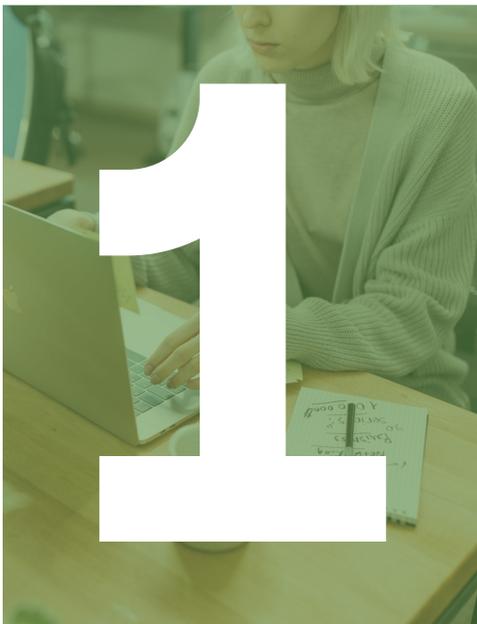


HOW TO ASK FOR AN INTERVIEW VIA EMAIL

Most of us spend 28 percent of our workday on email – deleting, sorting or responding – so it’s an essential tool for business journalists reaching out to sources and editors. But given that most senior executives can receive up to 500 emails a day, crafting a clear, concise, and persuasive email has never been more important. These five steps will help ensure people read your email request and respond promptly.



BUSINESS BEATS BASICS



CRAFT A COMPELLING SUBJECT LINE

Step one is crafting a compelling, clear, and succinct subject line. Studies show that 33 percent of us determine which email to open based on the subject line. Focus on the recipient as you craft your emails; assume that the person you are asking for an interview receives hundreds of emails each day. Consider the following:

- Use active voice instead of passive voice
- Put your ask in the subject line. For example:
Request to Interview You for Feature on Veterans in the Workplace
- Include any deadline within the subject line:
Request to Interview You for Feature on Veterans in the Workplace – Please Reply by 1/21/2024



HELP YOUR READER SKIM

Over 56 percent of email opens occur on a phone or tablet. Your emails should be extremely accessible and skimmable (and easy to read on a small screen). Otherwise your reader will probably scan the first line and move on to the next message. To ensure an easy read:

- Employ bullets in any list.
- Use sub headings.
- Keep your paragraphs short and digestible.
- Use hyperlinks wherever possible to cut down on words.
- Use bold-face type for anything pivotal (such as the deadline).



STATE YOUR ASK CLEARLY UP TOP

Place a clear ask in that very first paragraph – preferably using language similar to that in your subject line. State your deadline in the body of the email. An example:

Ms. Jones,

I'm a series editor and writer for the Guardian Labs Studio, the branded content arm of the Guardian News Media group. I'm writing a news feature for Guardian Sustainable Business on veterans in the workplace and would love to interview you (preferably, by the end of this week) as part of the piece. Specifically, I'm hoping you can comment on:

- *New initiatives within Fortune 500 companies to welcome and retain veterans*
- *Cultural barriers civilians and veterans may face*
- *The specific strengths and offerings veterans offer the corporate world*



PROVIDE LOGISTICAL DETAILS

Part of effective business communication is preempting what questions your readers might have. Here are some details they may want to know up front:

- How long the interview will take.
- Any preparation/research they need to do beforehand.
- The readership of the publication – both size and demographics.
- Whether they can see questions ahead of time.
- When and where the story will be published.

With this approach in mind, consider the following example for a second paragraph after the introductory paragraph above:

The phone (or Zoom) interview won't exceed 15 minutes, and I'm in North Carolina on ET. While I can't offer questions ahead of time, I promise the questions will fall within the outline I mentioned above.

The story, once completed, publishes (insert date) and I've attached our readership data. My goal from our interview: to gain more depth and understanding of the growing trend of veterans entering the workforce.

Then, end on a positive, upbeat note, reconfirming the deadline. For example:

Thanks so much for considering my request. I hope to hear your response either way by the end of this week.



KEEP IT BRIEF AND CLEAR

The final step is to spend at least a few minutes reviewing your email, checking spellings and dates, and editing with the following directions:

- Replace weak verbs with active ones.
- Use the active voice to help improve your tone and avoid vague or ambiguous writing.
- Swap camouflaged nouns such as cooperation, participation and solution with verbs: cooperate, participate and solve.
- Avoid confusing jargon and spell out any acronyms.



INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

Interviews with subject matter experts and “real people” give media coverage color and credibility. But if you only have 10 minutes with an expert, how can you make the most of that time and get all the information you need? This checklist offers some tips and strategies for reporters before and during an interview. Even if talking to sources is commonplace for you, it’s worth a quick refresher.



BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

DOUBLE-CHECK YOUR TECHNOLOGY

If you plan to record the interview, take a few minutes beforehand to check your recording equipment. Allow enough time for a software update or have replacement batteries and memory cards on hand. You wouldn't want a technical glitch to hinder the interview.

CHECK TIME ZONES

If you're conducting an interview virtually or over the phone, make it clear what time zone you're in and ask the source for theirs. It's not unusual for people to assume you're in the same time zone, which can lead to missed calls and frustration all around.



VERIFY THIS IS THE CORRECT PERSON TO INTERVIEW

The last thing you want is to schedule an interview with someone only to have them pass you off to a colleague or discover that they misunderstood what you need. Unless you're doing an investigative piece where you don't want to show your cards, explain the kind of expertise you're looking for and confirm the job title of the person you're interviewing so you don't wind up talking to the wrong person.

ON/OFF THE RECORD

Clarify whether the interview will be "on the record," meaning fully attributable to the interviewee, or "off the record." The latter term doesn't have a single definition: some people might interpret it to mean none of the interview can be used in the news story (it's just background for the reporter) while others might think the information is usable but only attributable to an anonymous source. Once the agreement is reached, it should be honored by both sides.

CLARIFY ATTRIBUTION

Confirm how your interviewee will be identified in the story; it is best practice to identify sources as fully as possible, ideally by full name and title on first reference. Some sources, however, might ask for anonymity to discuss sensitive subjects, in which case reporters must consult their editor. Reporters should ask why a source doesn't want to be identified fully (e.g. fear of losing a job, revealing confidential information, etc.) and include that reason in the story. Try to negotiate as precise a description as possible without endangering your source: citing a "nuclear physicist with first-hand knowledge of the project" is better than "a person familiar with the situation."

DURING THE INTERVIEW

CONFIRM PRONOUNS

Don't make assumptions based on someone's photo or the sound of their voice. Ask what pronouns your source uses so you can correctly identify them.

VERIFY NAME SPELLING AND TITLE

Even if you've quoted someone before, always reconfirm their name and title in case anything has changed. If the job title they give you doesn't match what's on the company website or their LinkedIn profile, ask for clarification, especially if you know a fact-checker will cross-reference those materials.



ASK PERMISSION BEFORE RECORDING

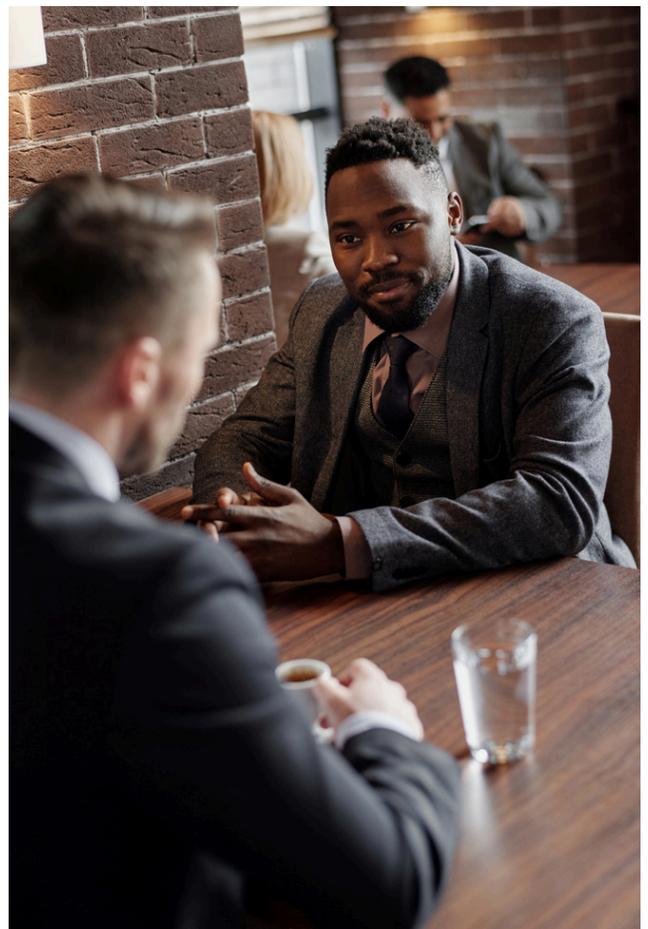
Always ask the source's permission before recording. It can help to state that you are recording the interview so you can accurately quote them.

ASK WHAT ELSE YOU SHOULD KNOW

It's handy to conclude interviews by asking the person if there's anything else you should know about the topic or if there is anyone else you should talk to.

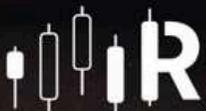
EXPLAIN THE NEXT STEPS

Some sources are more media-savvy than others, but it is always helpful to give them a heads up on next steps. Do you plan on emailing them the next day with follow-up questions? Should they expect to hear from a fact-checker? Does the art director need photos? Publication dates are often subject to change, but if you can give them a ballpark on when the piece might be published, you'll reduce the number of emails you get asking "has this published yet?"



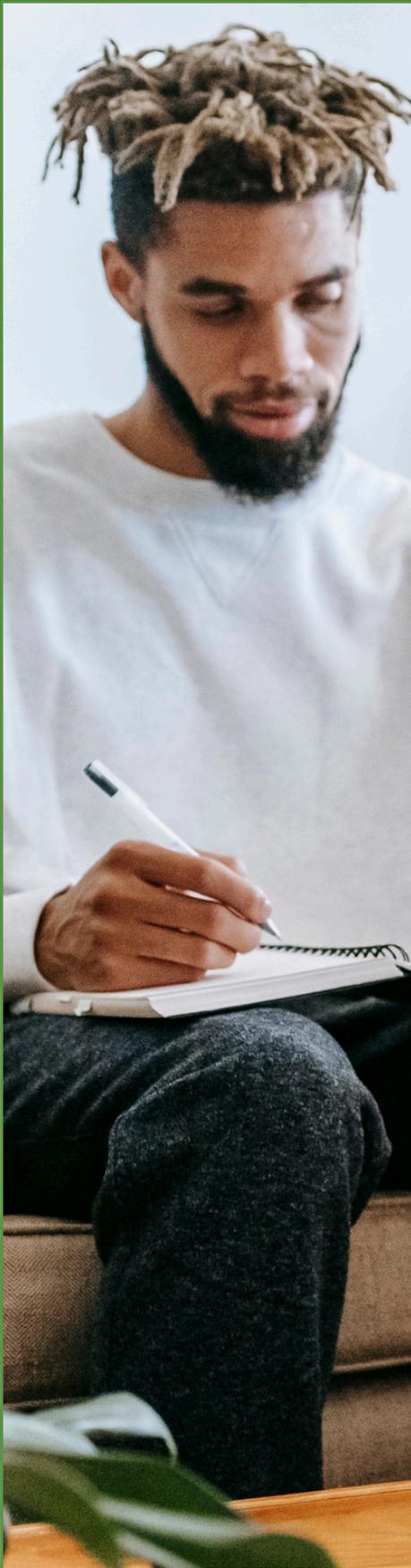


TIPS FOR BETTER BUSINESS INTERVIEWS



BUSINESS BEATS BASICS

TIPS FOR BETTER BUSINESS INTERVIEWS



START BY DOING YOUR OWN RESEARCH AND TALKING TO COMPETITORS

Before interviewing a source, do some research on their business including the people and issues involved. The more you understand someone's business, the better questions you will be able to ask and the more context you will have around the answers they give you. Talking to a competitor can give you some valuable insight into the company or industry that will be useful during an interview.

Having some prior knowledge and insights from competitors can also help you ask better follow-up questions to an interviewee's answers because you will know what they are talking about.

BE WARY OF HYPE

Avoid focusing too much on a company's latest product, service announcement, or executive hire. Look into the company's numbers, study where it fits into its industry, and ask about what is really happening.

CHALLENGE ANSWERS

Your job is more than taking dictation. Use your background research, industry knowledge and common sense to see if an answer makes sense or if they actually answered the question you asked. If not, challenge what was said. Remember that when businesspeople quote numbers – such as a percentage of growth year over year – it is largely meaningless unless you place the numbers in context. Two hundred percent revenue growth over the previous year sounds strong, but if the company only did \$100 in business previously, it's not nearly as impressive as it sounds with the added context.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO PLAY DUMB

Many people you interview will default to technical terminology, dense language, jargon, or buzzwords that will unlikely make sense to the average reader. Even if you do understand the industry language, ask interviewees to explain things in plain language. Your readers and viewers will thank you.

IN-PERSON BEATS ZOOM, ZOOM BEATS EMAIL

The pandemic upended many standard journalistic practices. A good reporter can capture a lot of detail and nuance from speaking face-to-face with an interviewee, but try to choose your location as well: homes and offices are gold mines of anecdotes and sparkling details that can enliven your story. Use all your senses and note what the location looked, smelled, and sounded like. Plus, sources are often more comfortable and relaxed on their home turf. Interviewing people over email might be convenient (and some sources prefer that method as it gives them more time to polish their answers – and even contact their PR people), but email quotes are more likely to sound like PR than natural conversation. Interview someone via email only as a last resort.

LEARN WHEN TO USE QUESTION LISTS AND WHEN TO IGNORE THEM

There are times when a question list can help, such as when you have a set amount of specific information you need. But you may be better off using a list as a way of considering what you might ask and then working in a more freeform manner. Often, having an informed conversation rather than checking questions off a list leads to more insights.

TELL THE INTERVIEW SUBJECT SOMETHING THEY DON'T KNOW

Information has value. If you can bring up something the person hasn't heard – particularly when it's about a competitor – and can slide it into your conversation, you'll likely earn some respect. That can translate into more open and interesting answers.

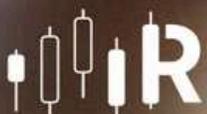
GET THEM BACK ON TOPIC

Sometimes interviewees need to go through a topic at their own pace, occasionally rambling and venturing into areas you didn't expect. That can be gold for reporting, so don't cut it off too soon. However, if you don't have a lot of time or if things go too far off the path, speak up, explain that you have to get back on topic, and have a question ready to refocus the interview.





BUSINESS NEWS STORY STRUCTURE



BUSINESS BEATS BASICS

BUSINESS NEWS STORY STRUCTURE: CCE-CCF



The inverted pyramid might be the classic model for structuring a news story, but it doesn't work very well for business and financial news, where the news often focuses on what changed from a year (or a quarter) ago and whether or that change met expectations.

For example, if you're covering the announcement of U.S. gross domestic product data – the key measurement of economic performance – the news isn't the overall size of the economy but rather how that size changed from the previous data. That's why you'll almost never see the actual GDP figure in a headline; instead, you'll see the percentage change from the previous quarter or year. As for why that change happened, the best technique (besides interviewing experts) is to see how individual components of GDP fared.

The same technique can be used to explain why a benchmark stock index, like the S&P 500, was up or down, or to measure a company's performance. What matters more than the actual amount of net profit a company reports is how that figure compares with the profit generated in the same period a year earlier. Looking into a company's profit-and-loss statement will provide clues as to the cause of that change.

Because the "change" and the "cause" of that change are almost always the key newsworthy elements in a financial news story, these two Cs are almost always in the first sentence. It is then followed by Expectations, Context, Comment, and Future.



“Expectations” are the driving force behind market prices – you’d only buy shares in Apple, for example, if you expected the company’s performance would get better in the future. Expectations are also a key part of any good business news story and should come soon after the first two Cs. As people’s expectations for the future are baked into asset prices, any event that confounds those expectations (either on the positive side or negative) will lead to a change in prices.

While it’s impossible to get a detailed view of everyone’s individual expectations, it’s possible to estimate an average by surveying experts. Many financial news organizations, such as Bloomberg and Reuters, conduct their own polling of expectations ahead of major corporate or economic events.



Every news story needs a paragraph on the significance or context of the news, and business news is no different. Each business story should explain why the news matters to the reader. This “context” element should come at the top, right after “expectations.”

Next, business news stories rely on “comment” from experts to help readers understand the news and its significance. These quotes, if chosen well, can often reinforce the “context” section of the news story or highlight key elements of the news.

Finally, if there’s a scheduled “future” event that might alter “expectations,” such as the release of a related economic indicator or a rival company’s profit announcement, it’s good practice to also note that after all the other story elements are in place. If you need a mnemonic to remember the key components of a business news story, think CCE - CCF:

Change
Cause
Expectations

Context
Comment
Future