

## A guide to filming interviews

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# A guide to filming interviews

This document is intended to provide useful advice of how to film interviews for and get the best results first time.

Areas to be covered:

- Interviewing tips
- Interview setup
- Recording the interview

## Interviewing Tips

When interviewing a subject make sure you brief them beforehand.

Tell them:

- Look at you not the camera. Pretend the camera isn't there and they're just having a chat with you.
- To make themselves comfortable, but try not to shift in their seat
- Talk naturally and clearly, try not to speak too fast.
- Wait until the end of an answer to drink water or move or take a break
- Not play with their shirt or scratch near the lapel mike as this will affect the audio.

Things to beware of:

- If they are jumping in quickly to answer your question, ask them to wait a beat as it makes the editing easier
- Pause after their answer to ask the next question for the same reason
- Do not talk over your interviewee's answers
- Outside noise ie. a humming fridge, rain on the roof. Use your earphones to check for peripheral noise- you may have to move rooms
- Running through your questions without listening to the answers, follow-up questions often get the best results, if they're saying something really interesting ask them more about it rather than just reading the next question
- There may be something else they want to say. Ask them at the end if there is anything they would like to add, often this is great stuff!
- Please remind subjects that they should not mention any names of doctors, hospitals, family or friends. If they do mention a name in a good bit, stop and ask them again or get them to repeat it after they have finished. Permission can be given by parents to use children's names if the child is under 16. Husbands and wives cannot give permission for use of each other's names – consent from both parties is needed.

## **Interview Set-up**

When filming in different environments with different equipment it is often difficult to produce consistent video footage.

When setting up the scene try and focus on the interviewee as much as possible and do not let the surrounding environment detract from the interview.

Issues to consider:

- Choosing a suitable place to film
- Lighting of the frame
- Framing of the subject.

### **Choosing a suitable place to film**

The first consideration is to shoot in a controlled environment. If it is noisy, find another room, or plan on spending time making the room sound right. Good audio is just as, if not more, important than good visuals, as you are there to hear the patient's account not to see the setting.

The interviewer should also pay attention in selecting the nature and composition of the background. Some past clips have suffered when the furniture or the surrounding wallpaper is garish or distracting. You should also consider what objects are in the background. Ideally the background should not be too busy and subtly lit.

Bad



Good



Once the subject is in place a little consideration must be paid to what he/she is wearing. Pinstripes or small checks look awful when compressed and scaled down; you should advise subjects not to wear any garments with pinstripes or small checks, for example:



Try not to place the subject with their back directly against a wall. The idea that a really plain background reduces the number of possible distractions is just not true. The subject will look tense, just as a person backed against a wall would look in conversation. If you have a wall immediately behind the subject you will just replace a few possible distractions with one big one: the wall. You want your subject to dominate the frame. So look for depth behind the subject. Keep the subject a good distance from backgrounds and try to find something with interest, shape, colour or texture. A background with interest and depth will enhance the subject if framed well. This makes the overall picture pleasing and keeps the viewer's attention on the subject.

Bad



Good



All photos should be removed from the background as we do not have permission to show these individuals. Also watch out for plants in the background. They can easily appear as if they are growing out of peoples' bodies.

Bad



Good



While it is obviously important that your subject is comfortable and as relaxed as possible, their favourite chair or sofa may not be in the best place. Try to find a suitable place with an interesting background if possible.

### **Three Point Lighting**

The most basic lighting arrangement uses a technique developed by photographers and cinematographers - the three-point lighting principle. This employs:

- KEY LIGHT (performing the job of the sun),
- the BACK KEY (as a counterpoint to the key) and finally,
- a soft or FILL light. Let's look at this arrangement in practice.

The key light is normally positioned to one or other side of the camera. As the word suggests, it provides the primary source of illumination of the subject (normally daylight in Healthtalkonline interviews). But a key light alone will generally produce a flattening of the image and the subject will appear two-dimensional and merge with the background. To alleviate this, a balancing light - the back key - is used to provide back-rim illumination on the subject's head, giving it a more three-dimensional feel. But you must be careful that this is not the only or the strongest source of light as it will make the subjects face very dark, for example:

Bad



Good



A third light – the fill – can then be applied to the opposite side of the camera to the key light. It will normally be much softer than the key, and will serve primarily to bring up detail on that side of the subject.

One word of advice in this respect: if you're shooting indoors, switch off all other lighting (especially strip lights) and build up the lighting arrangement from back to front.

You don't need three lamps to apply the three-point principle to a single subject. Using only a back key light and a couple of foreground reflectors (a Lastolite reflector), you can bounce the back light into the foreground to be used as a foreground fill. This way, you have two or more balancing light sources from a single lamp.

## Lighting

When choosing a suitable place for the interviews consider lighting. Aim to have a good source of natural light (if possible). Side or 'three quarter' front light is best. So try to place you subject with a window or practical light to the side or towards the front. You should not film directly into the light and it is important not to place the respondent in front of a window (even if the window is in the background)

### Bad



### Good



Try to avoid having only one light directly above the person's head as this will create big shadows under their eyes. You can use a reflector to bounce back light into the subject's face but it is always better to have more than one source of light. Most importantly, try to get some light into the eyes. If you can't see the subject's eyes then it will make it harder for the viewer to engage with what is being said. Use a silver reflector if you have one and try to bounce some light into the eyes.

### Bad



### Good



If the subject is wearing glasses they may reflect light into the lens and you will just see the reflected source and not the eyes. If this happens you could ask them to take the glasses off. The eyes are the most important thing in the frame. This is where the viewer will be looking so obviously you must be able to see them. Getting the subject to drop

their chin can often remove reflections in glasses.

Bad



Good



Also a strong background colour has the effect of producing a film of colour, which looks like there has not been a 'white balance'. A solution to this problem is to increase the amount of natural or bright light and seat the subject away from flat, heavy colours.

Bad



Good



Ensuring that the subject and room are well lit avoids problems evident in previous Healthtalkonline modules where video clips have been spoiled by how dark they are. It is vital that the lighting is judged not on the video display screen but through the view finder of the camera.

### Filming at night:

Bad



Good



## White Balance

White balance is a camera setting (both film and digital) that adjusts for lighting in order to make white objects appear white. Light is rarely truly white in nature, light cast from different sources is different in colour (technically called temperature). The light from an incandescent or halogen bulb is red/orange in colour, while daylight is relatively blue. A proper white balance setting in a camera will prevent a white shirt in a photo from appearing blue in colour when it is being filmed in daylight.

In both film cameras and digital cameras the white balance can be adjusted to ensure that all colours in the scene will be represented correctly. It can be adjusted automatically by the camera or manually, by selecting presets (tungsten, fluorescent, etc.) or by aiming the lens at a totally white surface (white card) and selecting "lock white balance."

Bad



Good





## **Framing**

Try to shoot on as long a lens as is practical. By this I mean try to place the camera as far from the subject as you can and still have enough range on the zoom to frame the size of shot you want. This has two main advantages:

1. The long (tight) lens will narrow down the background and cause it to drop out of focus. This will help to maintain the interest and balance in the frame but will reduce the likelihood of distracting the viewer. A soft focus background will concentrate the eye on the sharp focus foreground, the speaker.
2. Your subject will be less aware of the camera than if it were close. If you can keep the camera out of the subject's face the interview may be a little more relaxed.

Having found a decent well-lit background, adjust the camera so that you will be only be filming the subject's head and shoulders.

## **Eye line**

Make sure the camera is level with the subject's eye line, so it's not too high or too low.

Too high



Too low



Good



If you want your viewers to engage with the subject try to get the eye line as close as possible to the lens. This will involve you sitting as close to the line of the camera as is practical. If you have the camera a long way from the subject as suggested above then sitting right next to it may take you further from the subject than you like. In that case, sit closer with the camera behind you. Obviously check you are not blocking the shot.

Ensure that there is only a small space in the viewfinder between the top of the subject's head and the top of the picture. There is very rarely anything of interest above the subject's head. Try to put the top of the frame just, but only just, above the top of the head. If you divide the shot into thirds the eye level must be in the top third. In a wide shot, when you are looking at a person full length rather than in close up, the opposite tends to apply. In this case you are trying to put the subject into their setting and what is above them is often more interesting than the floor. Fix the camera setting on automatic focus.

Bad



Good



The subject should be instructed not to move around too much during the interview and should definitely not sit on a rocking chair or anything similar.

### **Positioning the subject**

Try not to put the subject in the middle of the frame. That is for newsreaders only! The subject should be either slightly to the right or left of the centre of the frame. But make sure the subject is in focus as the camera can often make the item in the middle of the screen the sharpest focus (even if it's in the background).

Bad



Good



The subjects should appear to be looking across empty space to the interviewer. This means that the subject will be looking diagonally across the frame towards the interviewer. Try not to put the subject on the "short side" of the frame with a lot of space behind them and not much 'talking room' in front of them. This creates tension and is uncomfortable to look at.

Bad



You should explain to the subject that they should look at you and not at anyone else in the room and not directly at the camera as this is too confrontational.

Bad



Good



Very bright areas in the background can also be distracting, particularly if they are the brightest thing in the frame. If they catch your eye they will probably catch the eye of the viewer. It can also distract the camera and make the subject out of focus as the automatic focus will focus on the brightest light source.

### **Multiple interview subjects**

- They may need to sit quite close together
- Put lapel mikes on both of them if possible or attach it to one shoulder in the middle. If one of the interviewees is holding the microphone please make sure it is out of shot.
- Take a still shot or short piece of film with them really close together for the thumbnail image on the site.

Bad



Good



- Make sure they're sitting at the same height otherwise it will look lopsided
- Best to frame them using a mid-shot ie, from mid-chest up and if possible angle the camera to make them appear closer together – front on is not as flattering. Avoid getting stomachs in the shot as this can be unflattering.

Bad



Good



- Remind them to pause between each other's answer as editing will be difficult if they speak over the top of each other

### **Filming people from ethnic minorities**

The skin tones of people from ethnic minorities work better against strong colours. On pale backgrounds the camera overcompensates and makes white very white and dark very dark.

Bad (Too pale background)



Good



The next photos highlight the difference a dark background can make when filming a person from an ethnic minority. The two clips were taken in the same place, same day, same lighting conditions. The dark background is the interviewer's coat.



## Audio

Setting the scene includes ensuring that the interview is audible. Place the lapel mike in a position where the audio is clear approximately six inches under the chin. Microphones must be raised away from clothing and hair. Clothes and long hair rubbing against the microphone will give sound distortions. Attention should be paid to animated respondents. There have been occasions where the subject has knocked the lapel microphone whilst making arm gestures. If this is happening an idea would be to stop the interview and move the microphone to a position that is not likely to be disturbed.

The lapel mike has the advantage over the gun microphone in that it gives the subject's audio more clarity as it is closer. Unfortunately, then you might be barely audible in the background. An alternative may be to have two lapel mikes (ie one for the interviewer) or make sure you speak loudly and clearly.

Background noise in the interview makes editing difficult, you should be aware of changing noise levels. You must check the audio levels in headphones before starting the interview as you may have missed some background noise (ticking clocks, fridge hum) or forgotten to switch on the microphone.

For example, one researcher was conducting an interview in a conservatory. She did not notice that the rain had started and was making quite a noise. The noise was quite apparent when listening to the tape later. In this instance the most sensible solution would have been to begin the interview again in another more suitable location. To give a truer impression of what the interview will sound like on the tape you should wear headphones while conducting the interview.

Where possible pets should be removed from the room, (unless the pet becomes noisier by being excluded, for example, by barking or scratching). Mobile phones must be switched off. If they are left on silent mode it causes electronic interference.

Health Experiences Research Group uses a digital audio recorder as well as a video camera to record the interview. This is primarily used to send to the transcribers, but it also acts as a backup if the equipment fails. The digital audio recorder also has a microphone which should be positioned close to the tie clip microphone. It is a good idea to put the digital audio recorder on the same side of the camera that you are sitting on so that if you need to adjust it you are not walking across the video shot.

## **Recording**

Check your equipment before going to your interview as it may have become damaged or the settings may have moved in your camera bag. Check your VDU screen to make sure these are correct. The interview should be recorded on battery and not plugged into the mains as this can cause audio feedback.

Your tape will never be better than the original. You should work as hard as possible to get the best picture and sound. There is no magic filter to fix things later. There is an argument for taking five minutes before the interview to test the audio, lighting etc on the tape. It's best to record a 30-second test before the actual interview and play it back in the viewfinder. This way any hiccups become immediately apparent and can be avoided.

If using DV tape remember to rewind the tape back to the very beginning before starting to record again. Before starting the interview, let the camera roll for at least 60 seconds before recording any part of the interview. It is often not possible for digital editing equipment to 'capture' video if it begins too close to the start of a DV tape. Similarly do not let the tape run within five minutes of its end (the camera will flash a warning that the tape is nearly at an end). Video recorded on this portion of the tape is frequently unusable due to poor picture quality. Do not rewind the tape in the middle of an interview to check that it is still working correctly. This causes the time code to reset to zero and cause confusion at the editing stage. If you have to rewind the video in the middle of the interview always start again with a fresh tape. It may seem a waste but it makes time coding and editing much easier.

If the subject wants to have a break, leave the camera on '*standby*' by pressing the red record button, and turn off the audio recorder.

### **Time codes**

The time code is particularly important when batch digitising. DV automatically writes its own time code to the tape whenever you film. This feature becomes very useful in editing stages, but it is important not to break the time code when filming. If you film a scene, then view the scene in the camera VCR mode and accidentally let the tape play or fast forward to a point beyond the end of the existing time code, it will interpret that blank section to be the beginning of the tape and will begin writing a new, second set of time code on the tape. Having two sets of time code on the tape will confuse any editing programme\*.

### **Interruptions**

Interruptions may occur. Sometimes other members of the family want to sit in the same room. Ask them to raise a hand if they want to speak. Then turn off the audiotape and put the camera on 'pause', so that their comments aren't recorded. If an interruption occurs in the middle of an important point, ask the subject to repeat the point again after the noise has stopped. This is important as background noise can ruin an interview.

### **Possible Additional Shots**

Once you have shot the interview, think about shooting a wide shot, a reverse of yourself and possibly some 'cutaways'. This will help the editor to shorten and tidy up the footage and allow some breathing space for the viewer. A change of scene – however brief – before returning to the subject matter can help to keep the piece interesting. It will also eliminate the occasional 'jump' in the footage where a section has been removed without inserting a change of shot. The shot of the interviewer may also help in this way and would give the viewer time to pause, and reflect on what has gone before.

If you choose to shoot some footage of yourself asking questions and listening this can be done after the main interview or even in another place altogether. Remember that if your subject is looking out to the left of camera then you should look to the right when shooting yourself.

**This material may not be used as it is dependant on additional funding for editing. So it is not a priority.**

### **Fallback Position**

All the above would help but may be impractical in many cases. I fully understand that some of what I have suggested may be difficult to do in some cases. I would suggest that you have a bare minimum 'fallback position' which will ensure that you have a reasonable shot with the minimum of fuss. Very simply;

1. Shoot a Medium Close Up (head and shoulders only) and try not to have a blank wall behind.
2. Balance the frame.
3. Make sure you can see the eyes.
4. Be sure that your shot is about the subject and not about the wall, window, curtains or anything else.

## More examples

### Couple problems:

#### Bad framing- stomachs



#### Angle of shot – small man



#### Knees!



#### Bad framing



#### Holding microphone



### Other problems:

#### Plants/ one source of light



#### Furniture blocking light source



#### Too cluttered background



#### Not framed close enough

