

**Ideas Into Words: Mastering the Craft of Scientific Writing (2003) by Elise Hancock –**  
Chapter 3 summary notes of important tips on how to interview effectively:

- The science writer's job is to translate the science, making science tangible and real for the audience. The scientist's job is to fact-check.
- Do your homework before an interview or even before initiating contact with a scientist to setup an interview.
- Make sure you understand the basic material so you can follow the train of thought. Look up previous journal article abstracts by the research group. Do you have a rough understanding of the articles' key words? If not, then look things up. You need to know enough to not waste the scientist's time.
- Read any press releases that are available, paying attention to the language (e.g., does it say that they've "proved" something?).
- Paraphrase as you take notes during your research, to avoid accidental plagiarizing. Or write down explicit quotes to use later.
- Be flexible on your interviewing. Interview over lunch or when they're on their car phone driving home. Interview a less senior associate who has more time.
- Interview in person if at all possible – in their lab or office, not in a restaurant. Otherwise do it over the phone, but not via email. Email only really works for follow-up questions.
- Tape and take detailed hand-written notes during the interview.
- Allow extra time for the interview, in case the scientist wants to keep talking, wants to show you the lab, etc.
- When you make the appointment, describe your purpose explicitly.
- Make sure you write down simple, straightforward questions ahead in a logical order. You won't ask them in order or as written, but it helps you sort out what you want to get from the interview. What is your goal for the interview? Imagine that you're the reader.
- Don't send the interview questions to the scientist ahead – you want spontaneous answers.
- Who, what, where, why, when? Funding agencies? How? Why should the readers care?
  - Who – Who are the principle researchers? Also interview the graduate students or postdocs that did the bulk of the work if you can.
  - What – Separate their research from the background explanation/research.
  - Why and When – Why this research? Why this approach? Why now?
  - How – How precisely was the research performed?
  - Why Readers Care – What are the long-term implications of the work?

- Some generic good questions to ask:
  - Did you have a Eureka! moment in doing this research?
  - What new possibilities do you see now?
  - Do others in the field generally accept your data? Do they agree on your interpretation?
  - What is the biggest surprise you got in this work?
  - How did you first get the idea?
  - What comes next? Is the next experiment already clear to you?
  - What is the next important question?
  - Do you have any intuition about what the answer might be?
  - Ultimately where do you expect this line of research to go?
  - Can you give me an example?
  - Can you give me an analogy?
  - Tell me more.
  - Who else should I be talking to (and can I use you as a referral)?
  - Is there anything that I should have asked you and didn't?
- Write a thank you note, or at least thank you email.
- Common sense preparation: be on time, dress professionally/appropriately, make sure your tape recorder works, bring your necessary supplies, eat ahead and void your bladder.
- Follow the thread of conversation, not your prepared questions in order. Let the interview flow. Listen. Pay attention to body language (yours and theirs).
- Don't hesitate to say that you don't understand and ask for clarification.
- Note mannerisms, interesting objects, actions, etc.
- Double-check your understanding as you go along.
- Double-check your questions near the end to make sure you've covered them all. This also makes it easier for the scientist to end the interview smoothly/easily.
- Write the story before discussing it socially, to keep it fresh.
- Don't write until you understand the material at least one layer deeper than the piece will go.