

Tips for High-quality Interview Audio

It can be challenging to get high-quality audio when you interview "in the field," whether that is outdoors, in a classroom, or in a less-than-ideal space. However, there are some important strategies for getting high-quality sound:

Equipment

- Know your recording equipment and practice using it, even if you use a smartphone. There are a myriad of digital recorders and microphones to choose from, so you must learn how your particular equipment works best. Ideally, you can practice interviewing a friend in different spaces before the interview.
- Make sure you have all the proper gear to conduct your interview. It is easy to overlook charged batteries, cables, windscreens, and SD memory cards.

Interview Space

- It can be challenging to find an appropriate space for interviewing. Typically, you want to find the quietest space possible, such as a meeting room or quiet living room. Pay attention to noises like electrical hums or air vents. If you're interviewing outside, make sure to use a windscreen on your microphone as even a light breeze can ruin the audio quality.
- If possible, minimize distractions. Ask the interviewee to set aside an hour or so when they know that they won't be interrupted. Make sure to turn off your cell phone ringer and ask the interviewee to do the same.

Interview Set-Up

- Before the interview begins, take the time to make sure that you will get good-quality sound. If you use a lavalier mic, position it a bit higher than the center of the chest, not off to the side. Make sure that the mic is well secured so there will be no extra noise from movement.
- Regardless of which mic you use, make sure the mic isn't too far away from the interviewee; in general, it is a more common problem to have the mic too far away rather than too close. If the recording level is too quiet, there will be too much background noise. However, if it is too loud, the voice will be distorted.
- Set your recording levels. Most portable recorders have a decibel (DB) meter and the ability to change the recording level to get an optimal volume. Do a test recording and look at the DB meter as the interviewee is speaking. Adjust the recording level so the interview volume is around -12 DB, with volume "peaks" at around -6 DB. Don't forget that the microphone distance to the speaker makes a big difference in the recording volume.
- If possible, use headphones to monitor the recording as the interviewee is speaking. Do a test recording and listen back to it to make sure you're getting good-quality audio.

During the Interview

- Try not to adjust anything during the interview, as you should have set up the equipment properly for a good-quality recording. If there is a significant interruption or disruptive noise, you may need to have the interviewee repeat what they were saying.
- If you want your questions to be part of the recorded interview, you should have your own microphone, connected to the same recording device. If you're using a single mic or smartphone to record, you should pass the device back and forth.
- Resist the urge to say things like "right, right," "exactly," or "Hmmm" while the interviewee is speaking. You'll appreciate this during interview editing!