

The Storytelling Exercise:
An Innovative Approach to Teaching Interview Techniques

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“The Storytelling Exercise” began as a way to introduce interviewing techniques to agricultural communications students, but grew into a lesson on audience analysis, context and accuracy. The exercise itself is low-key and old-school. Students interview a relative and condense the information into a roughly 600-word essay. Essentially, they are to tell a story, albeit a well-sourced one. The exercise is a simple, yet valuable, lesson aimed at working out students’ interviewing jitters and mistakes with their relatives before they are assigned to interview with subjects they do not know as well.

However, the assignment took on new life with the addition of a second component. In addition to interviewing and writing, students must have their interview subject read the essay and provide written feedback to the instructor regarding the accuracy and context of quotes, overall preparation, and writing. Students’ interview subjects generally provide authentic, constructive, and useful assessments of the work, often commending the assignment itself.

This written feedback portion has provided invaluable information to the instructor, allowing her to gauge how students conduct interviews, including preparation and incorporation of classroom techniques. For example, the assignment allows the instructor to assess whether students use “conversation starters” rather than questions, recognize quote-worthy statements, and take good notes. This assignment could be adapted for students of any major expected to perform in interview-type settings, including parent conferences, professional meetings, and presentations.

How it works

Students are assigned to interview their eldest relative (students define “relative”) for a general profile-type article. Students are to use techniques learned in class to prepare the interview and develop questions. The interview must be completed in person or via phone. Students are to take notes and compile the information into a two-page article, which they must have the relative read and provide critical evaluation. This feedback is delivered to the instructor in various ways: handwritten notes, emails, or transcription from a phone conversation. Students submit the article and feedback paragraph for a grade.

Students generally interview grandparents for this assignment and often end up retelling family stories they have heard for years. However, the assignment forces students to condense the information into a short story without straying off topic by trying to explain backstories and inside jokes. Students must tell the story without assuming the audience knows anything, which is often a tough concept for novice writers. Additionally, the assignment works as students’ first “real” interview experience. They prepare questions, take notes, and navigate the pitfalls of interviewing while learning about accuracy and context.

Goals. Students receive a practice-run at interviewing. The plethora of information, combined with family backstories (students’ “institutional knowledge”), forces students to consider the audience’s perspective while condensing the material to two pages. The feedback portion of the assignment allows students to consider the context of their writing and fact check.

Results

IRB approval was granted to review students’ storytelling assignments for this project. Students were asked to voluntarily provide their completed work for this research. The instructor noticed the following themes regarding the assignment.

Emotion. During a debriefing classroom discussion, many students reported navigating unexpected issues of sensitivity. For example, students often share that their interview subject

became tearful while recalling life events, which provides the instructor the opportunity to discuss professional decorum. Additionally, students commonly reflect on how to keep the interview on-topic without seeming impatient or brash. Students also often relate that their interview subjects required some level of accommodation; for example, asking to repeat questions or speak up.

Confidence. A first interview experience in a low-stakes environment allows students to work out mistakes without embarrassment. Students know the interview subject will provide a critique to the instructor, adding a level of rigor. The feedback portion of the exercise allows students to consider the interview from the subject's perspective, allowing students to adjust their technique before a higher-stakes interview.

Feedback. To be sure, some interview subjects critique lightly, if at all. However, the written feedback generally takes a constructive tone, with subjects gladly providing an assessment. Often, the feedback is written directly to the instructor. Formal letters and paragraphs written in a language other than English, but translated by the student, have all sufficed for feedback.

Examples of critique responses

The following statements are taken from critiques provided by interview subjects, allowing the instructor to assess students' abilities:

Approach to interviewing

- "The interview was really good. I didn't feel questioned, it was more of a friendly chat."
- "She was a great interviewer and got stuff (out) of me that I didn't even realize."
- "(Student) was prepared with her questions, worked with a timeline and was attentive to my responses to her questions."

Extra practice is needed

- "The article was accurate and her quotes were used to correctly reflect what I was saying. She has the habit of using the same phrases over again, so she needs to be careful of that."
- "I would have liked more specific questions. That would've been better for me, specifically."
- "His questioning ability was good, he is better at questioning strangers, believe it or not."
- A critique provided in another language via phone, transcribed and translated by a student: "She said I 'asked great questions, but needed to focus on asking one question at a time.'"

Context matters

- "My Nana liked that the article had details, but she felt that (a) specific detail made her appear mean."

Future plans and advice

As this project develops, the researcher plans to ask students to submit a list of questions in advance. Because students interview relatives, they may take preparation for granted. Requiring students to submit a list of structured questions would allow the researcher a better idea of how well students understand interviewing techniques (for example, open-ended questions) and ensure preparedness.

Resources and costs

Students need a computer equipped with Microsoft Word and a phone or communication software. In general, there are no costs associated with this project. However, phone charges could be incurred, and some students travel to meet interview subjects or use recording devices. However, online communication programs (Skype) may be used, and travel and recording are not required.