

Chapter 4

PRACTICAL SKILLS – TALKS, INTERVIEWS AND DISCUSSIONS

Introduction

This is the first of four chapters which introduce some of the main practical skills needed for the development and production of radio programmes and audio cassettes for distance and open learning. This chapter deals with:

- Planning and writing scripted talks
- Presenting talks at the microphone
- Briefing and supporting script writers
- Planning and conducting interviews
- Arranging and chairing discussions

The next chapter (Chapter 5) will go on to discuss the skills involved in:

- Recording interviews on location
- Editing audio material for studio use

Chapters 6 and 7 look at the planning and production of the following types of audio material:

- Documentary and feature programmes
- Magazine programmes
- Scripted and improvised drama
- Music for distance and open learning

Not everyone involved in preparing and producing audio for distance and open learning will need to acquire all the skills discussed in these two chapters. Some of the tasks will be mainly the responsibility of subject specialists; others will largely be carried out by audio producers. But most will be undertaken jointly; and will involve close collaboration between subject specialists and producers. For this reason, it is important for all those involved in developing and

producing audio to have a basic understanding and appreciation of the essential skills and professional practices involved in the process.

It is also important to recognise that these skills cannot be acquired simply by reading about them in a handbook like this. The development of skills comes through practice. What you will get from this chapter is a starting point – or if you are already experienced, a reminder – of the basic skills involved in audio development and production.

To develop and improve these skills, you need to put them into practice – writing scripts, conducting interviews, preparing documentary programmes and audio drama. And the practice needs to be self-critical. You need to review what you have done, and see how it can be improved. Practice may not make perfect: but it is essential to developing and improving your skills.

Planning and writing scripted talks

The scripted talk is a basic audio form. If well written and effectively presented, it is a very useful way of communicating information, experience and advice to students. If poorly written and badly presented, it can be difficult to follow, hard to understand, boring to listen to, and discouraging to the students. The suggestions that follow are intended to help you communicate clearly and effectively through the scripted talk.

There are two main ways of trying to help people write good talks. The first is to provide a set of rules to follow; the second is to try to help people understand the nature of the communication process in which they are involved. The second approach is adopted here. If you understand what you are doing when you write a talk, recognising and applying the rules will follow naturally.

Comparing print and audio

Perhaps the easiest way of approaching audio script writing is to compare what is happening when you communicate through print with the process of communicating through audio.

Print

When you communicate in writing, the readers can control the way they use the material. They can first skim it to get a general idea of the content and structure. They can then read it quickly or slowly, depending on how interested they are or how difficult they find the subject matter. If they don't understand something, they can go back and read it again; and they can do so as often as they like. And because print is a visual medium, you can help them navigate their

way around the text by using devices such as a table of contents, headings, icons, paragraphs and punctuation.

Audio

Audio is not a visual medium. Listeners can't move around radio programmes, or even audio cassettes, in the way they do with print. They can't easily skim ahead to see what's coming. They can't speed up or slow down the presentation. Nor do they have the visual clues to help them follow the sequence and structure of the material. All of these elements have to be built into the writing and presentation of the audio script. The scriptwriter has to present the material in such a way that it can be easily followed and understood by students the first time they hear it. Listening is different from reading. And 'writing for the ear' is different from writing for the eye.

Writing for the ear

The comparison outlined above has a number of implications for the drafting of scripted talks:

- At the beginning of the talk, you need to tell the student, not only what it is about and what they will learn from it, but also how the material is organised and structured. You need to give them a verbal map – to help them follow the material you are presenting to them.
- As you proceed through the talk, you need to give your listeners frequent signposts, so that they know where they are, where they have been, and where they are going. As you make each main point, you need to repeat and reinforce it, and make a clear link to the next stage of your presentation. Don't be afraid of planned repetition and cumulative reinforcement: it helps your students follow and understand what you are saying to them.
- You should also consider whether a visual presentation of the main points – e.g. through key words or diagrams presented in the main course text or audio notes – would help the students concentrate on what they are listening to, follow it more closely and understand it better.
- Remember too, that although you will be writing the script, its purpose is to help you **talk** to your students. Audio tends to be a more informal medium than print. The script is not a formal document to be read; but rather an aide-memoire to help you talk to your students in a natural, friendly and conversational way.

The script writing process

So how should you set about writing a good talk?

- First, be aware of your audience. Know who you are talking to. Have a picture of them in your mind. What assumptions can you make about them? Why are they listening? What do they know already? What do they want and need to learn? What level and style of language will be appropriate? What sort of examples and illustrations will be relevant to them?
- Secondly, be clear about what you want to say and why you want to say it. Set yourself clear objectives for the talk. How do you want your students to benefit from it? What do you want them to learn? How will the talk fit in with the rest of their course materials?
- Third, make a note of the main points you want to cover and arrange them in a logical order. Don't try to cover too much in the talk. It is better to deal thoroughly with two or three points than to cover a larger number of items superficially. Keep your talk fairly short. You can cover a lot of ground in five minutes. It is difficult for most people to hold the interest and concentrated attention of even the best motivated students for as long as ten or 15 minutes.
- Next, when you have outlined the content in note form, ask yourself whether a visual aid would help focus the students' attention. (Imagine you were covering the same material in a conventional classroom. What would you put on the blackboard to help students follow your presentation? Could you include this visual information in the course text or in audio notes?) If so, prepare these visuals first, before you start drafting the talk. Keep the visuals simple, direct and uncluttered.
- Now you can start to draft your script. Imagine you are having an individual tutorial with an intelligent and well motivated student. How would you **talk** your way through the points you want to make? If you are using visuals, have them in front of you as you draft the script. Say **out loud** what you would say to the student in a face-to-face situation. Then write it down. Try to capture the natural way you talk as you write the script. Keep it direct, informal and conversational. Say it first – preferably out loud – then write it down.
- At this stage, remember the importance of structure. For your talk to be effective, you will need:
 - a clear introduction – telling the students what the talk is about, what they will learn from it, how it relates to their other learning materials and how the subject matter is organised and structured;

- a well-structured middle section – which takes the student step-by-step through the material, with regular signposts, planned repetition of key points – both for emphasis and to make sure they are understood – and cumulative reinforcement;
 - a brief concluding section – which draws out and underlines the main messages, reminds students of how they can apply the knowledge and/or practise the skills you have been dealing with, and leads them on to the next stage of their studies.
- Some people find it helpful to use a tape recorder when drafting a scripted talk – recording the talk first, and then using the tape as an aid to writing the script. If this method appeals to you, try it out, and see if it works. Each scriptwriter needs to find an individual way of working that suits their own style and produces the best results.
 - When you have drafted your script, try it out on a friend or colleague, or preferably on the audio producer you're working with. Ask them to put themselves in the position of the student and listen to the talk as you read it through to them.
 - Is the purpose of the talk clear?
 - Is the language and style appropriate?
 - Are there sufficient practical examples and illustrations?
 - Can they follow what you are saying easily?
 - Do the main points come out clearly?
 - How could the talk be improved?

You will usually find that just by reading the script out loud, you will think of ways of improving it. But an extra pair of ears can also be helpful. Be open to other people's comments and constructive criticism. Remember, the aim is to improve the effectiveness of your communication to the student.

- Lastly, when you have finalised the script, read through it again and check the duration. If you find the script is too short for the time-slot you have been given, ask yourself whether there are extra examples or illustrations that your students would find useful. If the script is too long – as will probably be more often the case – look for a complete section to cut. It is usually better to drop one topic or part of the subject matter, than to cut down on the introduction, signposting, planned repetition, or concluding section.

Incidentally, in English, a good audio talk is usually delivered at about 130-140 words a minute. So a five-minute talk will be about 650-700 words. If you are working in a language other than English, you would probably find it useful to work out a similar words-per-

minute rate. Once you have this figure, you can use it to estimate the duration of written scripts.

Checklist on drafting scripted talks

- Be aware of your audience
- Be clear about what you want to say and why
- Make a plan of the main points
- Decide if a visual aid would help – if so, prepare it first
- Start writing – say it first, then write it down
- Read the script to a friend, colleague or producer – make improvements
- Check the duration against the time-slot available – adjust accordingly

Presenting scripted talks at the microphone

Drafting the script is only the first stage in developing a talk for audio. Once you have written the script, you need to present it at the microphone. Good presentation cannot make up for a poorly written script. But a well written script can be ruined by poor delivery at the microphone.

Laying out the script

The first thing you need for good microphone presentation is a well laid out script which you can read easily and confidently in the studio. Your script should therefore be:

- Word-processed, typed or written out clearly – so that you, your producer and the studio technician don't have to struggle to read it
- On one side of good quality paper – so that you don't make unnecessary noise when turning pages
- Double- or triple-spaced – so that when you read it you can move easily from one line to the next, and you also have space to write in any corrections you want to make during the rehearsal
- With each page ending on a full stop (end of a sentence or ideally a paragraph) – so that when you move from one page to the next, you can do so with a natural pause

- With wide margins – so that there is room for the producer and technician to write in production or technical notes during the rehearsal or recording
- And with the pages clearly numbered for easy of reference

Once the final script has been completed, you need to make at least three or four copies. In addition to your own copy, you'll certainly need copies for the producer and technician, and you might also need copies for colleagues or members of the course team

Script layout in brief

- Use good quality paper
- Word-process, type or write clearly
- Single-sided, double- or triple-spaced
- Wide margins
- End each page on a full stop
- Number the pages

Marking up the script

When you read a script at the microphone, you will be using your voice to bring out the meaning of the words on the page. To convey your meaning clearly, you will need to stress key words and phrases, to pause at various times in your delivery, and to vary the rhythm and pace of your voice. The more effectively you can use your voice, the better you will communicate, and the easier it will be to hold the interest and attention of your audience.

The most important thing in achieving good delivery is that you understand, care about and concentrate on the **meaning** of what you are saying. If the meaning is clear in your mind, and you are concentrating on communicating it effectively, the emphases, pauses, rhythm and pace of your delivery will emerge naturally.

However, some people are nervous at the microphone, especially if they are new to recording; and this can affect their concentration. And even experienced broadcasters sometimes find it difficult to sustain their concentration in a long or difficult script. For this reason, many people find it useful to 'mark up' their scripts, as an aid to concentration and as a way of improving their delivery.

There are two main marks that you might find particularly useful:

- You can underline key words or phrases, to show that you need to emphasise them, to bring out the meaning of a sentence
- You can use a slash or oblique (/) to indicate a pause, or a double-slash (//) to suggest a longer pause

Also, some people find it useful to include directions in the text – e.g. (PAUSE) or (REPEAT); or to make notes on delivery in the margins – e.g. 'Important Point!' or 'Emphasise!'. Personally, I don't find this particularly helpful. I think it's better to rely on your understanding of the text to know what is especially important and what needs to be emphasised. But I do find it useful to spell out phonetically words that I think I may have difficulty in pronouncing.

However, be careful not to over-use these techniques. If you have too many words or phrases underlined, or too many pauses marked (/), they begin to lose their meaning. And too many notes in the text or margins can distract your attention from the main content of the script. Use script-marking sparingly. Reserve it for parts of the script where getting the emphasis or pauses right is particularly important. Remember / concentrating on the meaning / is the best guarantee of success.

Getting the words off the page

Once you have read through, checked and marked up the script, you are ready to go on to rehearsal and recording.

Rehearsal

Rehearsal is very important. It gives you a chance to practise delivering your script in front of the microphone. It also helps you to relax and get used to hearing the sound of your own voice in the studio. During the rehearsal, the producer will listen to your delivery, and offer advice and guidance on how you can improve your performance.

Initially, most people – particularly if they are a bit nervous – tend to read scripts much too quickly. Usually, one of the producer's first jobs is to slow down your delivery. Slowing down the delivery has two advantages:

- First, it gives the students time to take in what you are saying to them.
- Secondly, it allows you to use the richness and range of your voice to bring out the meaning of what you are saying and to make your presentation more interesting and involving.

Don't be afraid of slowing down your delivery and using strategically placed pauses. It may sound very slow to you: but from the listener's point of view, it simply makes your talk more accessible and easier to follow.

Once you have got the pace right, then you can concentrate on the expression. Audio is essentially a very intimate medium. Although thousands of people may hear your voice, in fact you are normally speaking to them as individuals. The basic style of audio is therefore conversational – as if you were having a one-to-one conversation with an individual. However, since your listener can't see you, and has to rely only on your voice, your conversational style needs to be slightly heightened – i.e. you need to use your voice a bit more expressively than you would in a normal face-to-face conversation.

So how will you know when you have got the pace and expression right? This is perhaps a less difficult question than it seems. Most people know when they have got it right, because it feels right. You begin to feel that you are no longer reading a script, but actually talking to your students. This depends partly on how well the script is written – i.e. whether you have managed to capture the way you normally speak in the script. But it also depends on how well you are 'getting the words off the page' – i.e. whether the script has ceased to be a formal document you are reading and become a vehicle for talking to your students in a direct and personal way.

Once you get to this point, it's time to move on from rehearsal to recording. It is important not to over-rehearse a scripted talk. When you and the producer are satisfied that you are delivering the script to the best of your ability, then it is time to record. Over-rehearsal leads to staleness and frustration. After a certain point, instead of improving, the performance starts to get worse. One of the skills of a good producer is to be able to judge when this point is about to be reached.

Recording

If rehearsal has gone well, the recording should be straightforward. A good rehearsal will give you (and the producer) confidence. You will be familiar with the script. You may have made some marginal adjustments to improve it. And you can be relaxed in the knowledge that you have got the pace and expression about right.

Some people find it useful when rehearsing and recording to imagine one of their students sitting opposite them. Others find their presentation improves if they actually have someone in the studio with them – a person to whom they can **talk** the script, rather than read it. This is a matter of personal style and preference. Whatever produces the best performance is worth trying.

If the script is fairly short, most producers will record it in one go. If it is longer, the producer may decide to record it in sections. Whether the script is long or short, concentration is essential. When you are recording, you have a lot to concentrate on.

- First and foremost is the **meaning** of what you are saying: if you know exactly what you want to say, you'll probably say it well.
- But at the same time, you need to be aware of how you are using your voice. You need to vary your voice; make use of emphasis and pauses; keep it lively and interesting. If you begin to sound bored, you will soon begin to bore your listeners.

Still, however good your concentration, you will occasionally make mistakes. You may misread a word, stumble over a phrase, get the emphasis wrong in a sentence, or misjudge a pause. Don't worry about this. Even the most experienced of broadcasters make mistakes. This is something your producer will be listening out for. If he or she spots a mistake, they will usually stop the recording, and ask you to re-record the section.

But even producers are not perfect. Occasionally their concentration will lapse, and they may not always spot the error. However, if you make a mistake, you will usually be aware of it. You need to agree with your producer how to deal with this situation.

- If the producer is in a position to edit the tape (either by cutting or electronically – for more on this, see below), all you need to do is pause for a moment, go back to the beginning of the sentence or paragraph, and read it again. Later, the producer can edit out the mistake, and leave in the corrected version.
- Alternatively, if tape editing is not possible, you may need to pause for a little longer (while the technician re-winds the tape) and then record the section again, on a signal from the producer, from an agreed point in the script.

Either way, audio has the great advantage of easy editing – allowing you to deliver the script exactly as you want to. The relatively simple technology makes it possible to aim for and achieve the highest standards in scripted talks and other audio materials.

Getting the words off the page – a quick guide

- Mark up the script as an aid to concentration
- But don't overdo it, or the marks will lose their significance
- Concentrate first on meaning, then on presentation
- Always rehearse in the studio before recording
- Use the rehearsal to relax and improve your performance
- Develop a lively conversational style – talking to one listener
- Slow down – if you go too fast, you can't use your voice effectively
- Pauses and emphasis will make your meaning clear
- Don't be afraid of making mistakes – editing is easy in audio
- Keep up your concentration to the end – keep it lively and interesting

Briefing and supporting script writers

So far, we have been assuming that you will be writing and presenting the scripted talk yourself. But very often subject specialists and producers will be commissioning outside experts to prepare scripted talks for audio material. In this situation, most of the advice in the two previous sections still applies, but it will need to be mediated, through either a subject specialist or an audio producer. In either case, the suggestions below may be of value.

Selection

Make sure that you choose an expert who is authoritative, articulate and available. Be ambitious – aim for the best person you can find. But be careful – satisfy yourself that the person you choose is willing and able to invest the time and effort required to produce a good scripted talk.

Briefing

Once a suitable speaker has agreed in principle to write and present a talk, it's important to provide an adequate briefing. You will need to explain to them:

- Who the talk is intended for
- What you want to achieve through it
- What content the talk needs to cover
- What context it will be used in
- How long the talk should be (number of words)
- When you need the final draft, and when you plan to record
- Whether any payment is involved and if so how much
- How and when the talk will be delivered to the students.

Contracting

Once you have the contributor's agreement to the items above, you should issue a formal contract or letter of agreement covering the work, and including the main points on which you have agreed. This may seem unnecessarily formal. But a clear agreement at this stage can save you all sorts of problems later, and also protect the quality of your audio material.

Agreeing an outline

Before the contributor starts writing, it usually makes sense to agree on a detailed outline for the talk. This should indicate the main topics to be covered, the order in which they will be dealt with, and any support material and student activities that would be useful.

Support

Depending on their experience and skills, contributors may need more or less support in the preparation of scripted talks. For the relatively inexperienced, you may need to brief them in some detail about what is involved in writing a script for audio. This is a task which often requires a good deal of sensitivity and tact, particularly if you are dealing with high status people. Nevertheless, it is important that you should do it, in the interests of your students. Just because someone is in a senior position, it does not necessarily mean that they know how to write and deliver an effective script.

Discussing the draft

When writers produce a first draft of a talk, get them to read it through to you, as if they were in the studio. Listen carefully – and ask yourself:

- What does it sound like?
- Has it got a good opening?
- Are the main sections clear?
- Do they flow naturally from one to the next?
- Are the main points emphasised and reinforced?
- Is the language appropriate to the audience?
- Are there sufficient examples and illustrations?
- Does it sound informal and conversational?
- Can you follow the talk easily?
- Does it cover the subject adequately?
- Are the conclusions clear and relevant?
- Is it about the right duration?

Go through the script carefully with the writer. Offer encouragement, advice and guidance as appropriate; and discuss ways in which the script can be improved. If something **sounds** wrong in the script – if it is unclear, awkward or uncomfortable – ask the writer, ‘What exactly are you trying to say here?’. The answer to this question will usually give you the exact words you need for the script.

Unless time is very short, do not re-write the script for your contributor. Let the writers revise scripts for themselves. In this way, they will develop their skills, and also maintain ‘ownership’ of the script, which will be important when they get to the studio. Encourage them to prepare a second draft, and if necessary go through it again in the same way.

Rehearsal and recording in the studio

The conventions for setting out and marking up the script, and the disciplines of rehearsal and recording, were discussed in the previous section. Clearly, they apply as much to distinguished outside contributors as they do to colleagues within your own institution or project. However, these conventions and disciplines may be a bit more difficult to impose on outside experts.

It is always important to explain to outside contributors why you are doing things the way you do. If you explain why you would like the

script laid out in a particular way, or why it is important to slow down someone's presentation or get them to use their voice more effectively, contributors will usually respond positively. And you will also gain credibility for the professionalism of your approach.

Courtesies

When you are working with an outside contributor, make sure you ask them how they would like to be described in the audio material. And also, when they have completed the work, write them a brief note, thanking them for their contribution. In the case of particularly senior or distinguished people, it is often a good idea to ask the head of your organisation to write the letter. Courtesies such as these not only reflect well on the institution or project's reputation, they also encourage support and cooperation in the future.

Planning and conducting interviews

Unscripted interviews offer an attractive alternative to scripted talks as a means of presenting information and experience. Interviews have a number of advantages:

- They can be recorded either in a studio or on location using portable equipment.
- They do not require the preparation of a script. This saves time. It also means that the person being interviewed does not need to have script-writing skills – or even be literate. This latter point is of particular importance in non-formal distance education.
- Interviews produce lively natural speech. This provides an attractive contrast to more formal scripted material. Also, if interviews are recorded on location, they can be very atmospheric. They take the listener out of the studio and into the real world. This can add authenticity and immediacy to your audio materials.

However, compared to scripted talks, unscripted interviews have one major disadvantage. They offer subject specialists and producers less immediate editorial control over the content, structure and duration of the material. However, there are ways of overcoming this problem. For instance, through:

- The careful selection and briefing of interviewees
- The drafting of appropriate and well focused questions
- The ability to edit interview material after recording

You may find the following guidelines useful in setting up, preparing and recording interviews for distance and open learning.

Setting up interviews

Even though interviews are normally unscripted, this does not mean they are unplanned. The careful planning and preparation of interviews is essential.

Defining the purpose

As with the scripted talk – or any other type of audio material – you need to identify clear aims and objectives for the interview. What do you want the students to learn from the interview? What new knowledge and/or skills do you want them to acquire? What attitudes and values do you want to challenge or reinforce?

Researching the subject

You need to know enough about the subject of the interview so that you can:

- Explain what your students know about the subject already and what they need to learn
- Select a suitably qualified and experienced interviewee (person to be interviewed)
- Draft a set of questions that will bring out the information and opinion you and your students need
- Understand the answers and know when to seek clarification or ask a follow-up question

You do not need to know so much about the subject that you are better informed than the person you are interviewing. If that were the case, you wouldn't need an interview. It would probably be better for you to write a talk yourself!

Selecting the interviewee

The person you choose for the interview needs to be:

- **Authoritative** – have sufficient expertise and/or experience to talk in a well informed way about the subject of the interview
- **Articulate** – able to express themselves clearly on the subject matter, in a way that is appropriate to the target audience
- **Available** – willing and able to be interviewed at a time and place that is within your resources and schedule.

Availability is clearly essential. But you may sometimes need to make difficult choices between expertise and articulacy. The best informed person may not be most articulate; the best talker may not have the greatest knowledge. Go for the best mix you can. If in doubt err on the side of knowledge and experience.

Preparing the questions

As suggested earlier, keep your interviews fairly short. With careful planning, you can cover a lot of ground in 3-5 minutes. More than five minutes (after editing) is probably too long – unless there are particular reasons for having a longer interview.

For most interviews, four or five questions are usually enough. Arrange them in a logical order. Your last question should be designed to bring out and emphasise the main point(s) of the interview.

In general, your questions should:

- Be short and to the point
- Use simple and direct language that is easily understood by the interviewee and the listeners

You should avoid using:

- Double or multiple questions – i.e. two or more questions in one – instead, ask two separate questions
- Leading or closed questions – i.e. questions which invite a particular answer, usually ‘yes’ or ‘no’ (e.g. ‘Wouldn’t you agree that....?’) – instead, use open questions, usually starting with ‘what’, ‘how’, ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘why’

Briefing the interviewee

You need to explain to the person you are going to interview:

- Who the interview is intended for
- What it will cover
- How the material will be used
- Roughly how long you are aiming for
- When and where you plan to do the recording
- Whether payment is involved, and if so, how much

The interviewee may ask you for a list of questions. This often happens with senior officials. If possible, try to avoid giving a precise list of questions. If you do, there is a danger that the interviewee will

prepare written answers, and then want to read them when you come to record the interview.

This is usually disastrous. Instead of having a lively spontaneous interview, you end up with a dry, formal and uninspiring piece of audio. And even if you persuade them to give up their script, they tend to spend the interview trying to remember the script, rather than concentrating on what they are supposed to be talking about.

In general, it's much better to give your interviewee a list of the main **topics** you want to cover – rather than the precise questions. However, if you do have to put the questions in writing, make a point of asking the interviewee not to prepare written answers, and explain why. In some cases, you can suggest that the interviewee might like to make brief notes on the main topics, to which they can refer if they need to.

Contracting the interviewee

As with the scripted talk, once you have agreed on the form and content of the interview, there is a strong case for issuing a formal contract covering the work, including the main points listed above.

Recording the interview

Studio versus location recording?

The main arguments for studio recording are:

- It is usually more convenient and saves you time.
- You have the services of a technician. So you don't need to concern yourself with the technical quality of the recording. Instead, you can concentrate on the content of the interview.
- You don't need to worry about the availability of transport, portable recording equipment, batteries etc.

The main advantages of location recording are:

- It is usually more convenient to the interviewees, who may also feel more relaxed in their own environment, rather than in the less familiar atmosphere of the studio.
- Location recording will give you a more 'atmospheric' sound than the studio. This will add to the interest and attractiveness of the audio material.
- From the students' point of view, sounds recorded on location tend to give a greater sense of immediacy and authenticity to the audio material.

However, if you are recording on location, remember that you will need transport and recording equipment, and it will probably take you more time. In addition, if you are not familiar with or confident in using microphones and portable recorders (see below), you will also need the assistance of a producer or audio technician.

[**Note:** Technical aspects of choosing a suitable acoustic for recording, and using microphones and portable recording equipment are dealt with in Chapter 5. Here we concentrate on the non-technical aspects of the interviewing process.]

Establishing rapport

Before starting an interview, it's important to establish a good atmosphere and relationship with the interviewee. One useful way of doing this is to briefly remind the interviewee (and yourself) of the main topics you will be covering in the interview. However, at this stage, be careful not to slide inadvertently into a rehearsal. Interviews usually work best with careful planning and briefing, but without rehearsal. If you are not happy with any of the questions or answers when you record, you can always re-record them later.

Another technique for establishing rapport is to explain what is involved in obtaining a good recording. You can do this while the equipment is being set up, and when you are 'taking level', adjusting the balance and doing a test recording.

- Set up the equipment; take level and check the batteries.
- Ask a couple of 'throw away' questions (which you will not need for the interview).
- Then play back the recording to check the sound quality and balance.

[For more on these activities, see Chapter 5.]

You can use all of these activities as a way of helping your interviewee relax and establishing a good rapport in readiness for the interview.

Asking the questions

In preparing for the interview, you may have written out the questions in full. However, when you record, it's probably better to work from brief notes – e.g. a set of key words or phrases on a file card or the back of an envelope – which you can glance at occasionally (if you need to) during the interview. In this way, you can maintain eye-contact with the interviewee and concentrate on listening to the content of the interview.

Listening is the most important skill required of a good interviewer – far more important than the ability to ask elegant and erudite questions. You need to listen carefully to the answers being given – so that you can adjust your questions if necessary, and follow up any answers that need further expansion or illustration.

The interviewer is there to represent the student. You are asking the questions on the student's behalf. If **you** don't fully understand the answers, your students certainly will not; and if you feel the need for further clarification or examples, so will they. So listen carefully and follow up any points that you feel need further explanation – e.g. What exactly do you mean by...? Can you give me an example of that? Can you take that point a bit further?

Give the person you are interviewing your complete attention. This is why eye-contact is important. During the interview, you also need to give encouragement and positive feedback to the interviewee. But be careful to give this visually (e.g. by nodding and smiling), rather than vocally (e.g. through repeated sounds and expressions of agreement). Such sounds, if used regularly, can become extremely irritating and distracting to the listener.

In general, as we suggested earlier, it is best not to rehearse interviews. Unlike the scripted talk, the first version of an interview is usually the best. If you rehearse, what tends to happen is that when you come to the recording, instead of concentrating on the subject matter, the interviewees are distracted by trying to remember how they expressed themselves in the rehearsal. So it is best to go straight into the recording without rehearsal.

However, if you or the interviewee are unhappy with any of the answers, it is easy to stop the interview, and to go back and record the question and answer again. This can easily be edited later. Similarly, if any of the answers is obviously too long or too short, you can pause, go back and record them again.

It is often a good idea to ask a final question which is designed to bring out and underline the main point(s) of the interview. Also, after the final question, it's usually worth asking the interviewees if there is anything they want to add to what has been covered in the interview. This sometimes produces useful material which can be edited into the interview later.

With some contributors, particularly if they are new to being interviewed, the first version of the interview may not be very good. It may be too long or too short, pitched at the wrong level, or too rambling and diffuse. Some interviewees need to go through the interview once, to clarify their own thinking and to work out exactly what they want to say.

In this situation, after the initial (unsatisfactory) recording, give the interviewee positive feedback and encouragement. (There is always something good you can say about an interview, even if it was very disappointing!) You can then point out (politely) how you think the interview might be improved; and suggest that it might be a good idea to try the interview again.. Most interviewees respond well to this type of suggestion. They usually know when the interview hasn't been very successful, and welcome an opportunity to try it again. In most cases, the second version is a great improvement on the first.

After the interview

Once you have finished the interview, play back at least part of it to check that the quality is satisfactory. If so, fine. If not, you still have the interviewee with you to re-record. In addition, the interviewee is likely to want to listen to at least part of the tape. Incidentally, if you are planning to edit the tape extensively, it's a good idea to mention this to the contributor and explain why. Interviewees tend to assume that anything you record you are likely to use – which is not always the case.

After the playback, make sure that you label the tape or cassette (and its box) with the following information:

- The name of your institution or project
- The course for which the material is intended
- The name of the interviewee
- The subject of the interview
- When and where the interview was recorded
- Any special information about the recording – e.g. recording speed, mono/stereo, whether Dolby NR (noise reduction) was used, recording quality etc.

For longer interviews which you are planning to edit, and interviews you want to use in documentaries or features, it is useful to make a 'log' of the interview – i.e. a written record that will make it easier to locate relevant material later. The log can take various forms, but it should include the following main information:

- Basic information about the interview (as above)
- The questions asked, arranged in order
- Brief notes on the answers and their duration
- Brief notes on the quality of the answers and their usefulness

One way of presenting the information would be as follows:

Interview Log

Institution/project:		Course:	
Interviewee:		Subject:	
Date recorded:		Place recorded:	
Special notes:		
Questions	Answers	Comment	Duration
1:.....			
2:.....			
3:.....			
etc.....			

This type of interview log will be very useful and save you a lot of time when you are selecting and editing material for use in the studio.

Checklist on setting up and conducting interviews

- Define the subject of the interview
- Identify your aims and objectives
- Research the subject and possible interviewees
- Draft the questions
- Select, brief and contract your interviewee
- Meet to record the interview in the studio or on location
- Establish rapport, but avoid rehearsal
- Record the interview
- If necessary, record it again
- Play back at least part of the tape to check technical quality
- Label the tape and its box
- Prepare a written log of longer interviews as an aid for editing
- Write a thank you letter to the contributor

Arranging and chairing discussions

Panel discussions are useful when you want to expose your students to two or more different viewpoints on a subject that is relevant to their studies – for information, analysis, or to help them sort out their own views about the subject.

Planning and preparing discussions

Many of the steps involved in planning and setting up discussions are similar to those outlined above in relation to interviews. The main difference is that instead of talking to one person, you are dealing with a group of people, each of whom has a different viewpoint on the subject.

Defining the scope

What are the aims and objectives of the discussion? What do you want your students to learn from it? What do you want them to know and/or be able to do as a result of listening? What topic(s) will the discussion cover and in what order? How will you ensure that the students will be actively engaged in the discussion? Would it be useful to provide them with supplementary or support material – e.g. printed notes, preparatory reading, visual aids, follow-up activities?

Researching the topic

As the subject specialist or producer involved in arranging the discussion, you need to know enough about the subject:

- to identify and brief a suitable chairperson
- to select and brief suitably qualified participants
- to prepare a set of questions that will guide the discussion
- to make decisions about what support material (if any) would be useful
- to be able to select from the discussion the material that would be most useful to students and edit it accordingly

Selecting the chairperson and participants

The chairperson needs to know enough about the subject, the students and the course, and also have appropriate interpersonal skills:

- to lead the discussion effectively
- to ask relevant questions, to evaluate the answers
- to know when further elaboration or explanation would be useful to the students.

Two or three participants will usually be enough for most discussions. If you have more than this:

- The participants' voices become difficult to distinguish
- Individual participants don't have enough time to develop and explain their ideas and opinions to the listeners

In selecting these participants, make sure they have distinctive viewpoints or perspectives on the subject. Otherwise, the discussion will soon become repetitive and boring.

Drafting the questions

The framework of questions for the discussion should normally be discussed and agreed with the chairperson. As for the interview, the questions should be clear, sharply focused and non-directive; and organised in a logical and coherent pattern.

Three or four main questions will usually be enough. If you have more than this, there will not be enough time for each of the participants to express their views, nor will there be time for important or interesting follow-up questions. As a result, the discussion will tend to be shallow, and will not deal with the subject in sufficient depth. It is usually better to cover a few important questions in detail, than to cover a wider range of questions more superficially.

Briefing the chairperson and participants

Before you record the discussion, you need to brief the participants and the chairperson (if it is someone other than yourself) on:

- The relevant characteristics of the target audience (What are they likely to know already? What do they need to learn? What level of language will be appropriate to them? What type of examples and illustrations will fit in with their experience?)
- The aims and objectives of the discussion (What is the discussion intended to achieve? What new knowledge or skills should it offer? What attitudes is it designed to challenge or reinforce? Why should the students listen to the discussion, and what should they expect to learn from it?)
- The content and structure of the discussion (What subject matter will be covered and in what order? What are the key questions to be asked and answered? What different viewpoints need to be represented?)

It is important not to let the briefing drift into a rehearsal for the discussion. As with interviews, it is usually best not to rehearse discussions. If there has been a rehearsal, the participants try to remember what they said and how they said it, and the final

recording tends to lack spontaneity and liveliness. If the first recording does not work very well, you can always record all or part of it again.

It is also important to brief the participants on some of the practical aspects of recording a discussion for audio. For instance:

- To explain that the first question will usually require a short answer, designed to introduce the participants' voices to the listeners, and to establish their presence in the studio.
- The need to agree on who will lead on each of the main questions and who will respond and comment on what has been said.
- To explain how (usually later in the discussion) the chairperson will use hand signals to bring different speakers into the discussion or to ask them to expand on or draw to a close what they are saying.
- To explain the importance of keeping in more or less the same position in relation to the microphone during recording; and also the fact that if two or more people speak at the same time, the result (in mono at least) will be difficult to understand.

Recording the discussion

At the start of the recording, the chairperson will usually:

- Identify the institution and course for which the discussion is intended
- Introduce the subject of the discussion and the main questions to be covered
- Explain what students can expect to learn from the discussion and how it relates to the rest of their studies
- Introduce the speakers by name and explain briefly why they are taking part in the discussion

The chairperson should then ask each participant a brief question (inviting a brief answer) about their background, interest or experience of the subject under discussion. These short initial exchanges give a useful indication of the general viewpoint of each speaker. But they also serve to establish their presence in the studio and to give the students a chance to start identifying the individual voices.

In the early part of the discussion, the chairperson should also use the participants' names when putting a question to them or asking for comments. In this way, the students will soon learn to distinguish between the different voices. Later in the discussion, once students can

identify the different voices, this convention can be relaxed – which also means that the dialogue can often be allowed to flow freely, with the chairperson only intervening at key points.

During the discussion, the main role of the chairperson is to lead the participants systematically through the main questions, drawing out the different viewpoints and presenting them effectively to the students. As with the interviewer, the chairperson is there to represent the students:

- Asking questions on their behalf
- Listening carefully to the answers
- Seeking clarification or elaboration where necessary
- Emphasising and reinforcing the key points as they emerge

The chairperson also needs to keep an eye on the clock, to make sure that the time allowed for the discussion is allocated more or less as planned. He or she is also responsible for ensuring a rough balance between participants, so that a particular person or viewpoint does not dominate in the discussion.

If the discussion is being recorded in a studio, the producer will usually be listening to the output on headphones or loudspeakers, and will be able to talk to the chairperson (on headphones) via the studio 'talkback' facility. In this way, the producer can:

- Monitor the progress of the discussion
- Suggest supplementary and follow-up questions if and when they are needed
- Remind the chairperson when to move from one part of the discussion to the next
- Keep an eye on the time and the balance between speakers

The talkback facility can be very useful in this way. However, it should not be over-used. Producers need to be very brief and economic in their comments. They should limit themselves to essential comments and suggestions. And they should never use the talkback when the chairperson is speaking. Misuse or over-use of the talkback facility can be very distracting to the person who is chairing a discussion.

At the end of the discussion, the chairperson should not attempt to summarise all the points that have been covered. It's usually better:

- To draw out the main ideas and issues
- To point to the main areas of agreement and disagreement that have emerged from the discussion
- To thank the speakers for their participation
- And to suggest to the students how they can best use the material and where they should go next

After the recording, there is a good chance that you will want to do some editing of the discussion. This may be for editorial reasons – e.g. to highlight the key points, or to reduce or remove less relevant material. Or it may be for more professional and technical reasons – e.g. to improve the quality and audibility of the discussion by cutting out deviations and redundancies, or to reduce the length of the discussion. Or you may want to edit for a combination of both of these sets of reasons. If you are planning to edit the recording, you will probably find it useful to prepare a ‘log’ of the discussion, adapting the approach suggested earlier for interviews.

In terms of support material – e.g. preparatory reading, visual material for students to look at during the discussion, or follow-up activities – this should normally be identified **before** you record the discussion, and be included as part of the briefing for the chairperson and participants. In this way, the support material can be referred to and used during the discussion. This can not only enrich the audio material and extend its scope; it can also add to the student’s interest and interaction with the material. However, if you are planning to integrate support material in this way, it is essential that all your students have guaranteed access to it.

Discussions – the quick guide

- Define the topic and purpose of the discussion clearly
- Choose the chairperson and participants carefully – usually not more than two or three
- Brief them on the audience, the aims and objectives and the main questions to be covered
- Start the discussion by explaining its purpose and introducing the speakers
- Ask each speaker an initial question – requiring a brief answer – to establish their presence, voice and general viewpoint
- Refer to the speakers by name in the early part of the discussion

- Guide the discussion with a gentle but firm hand
- Keep an eye on the time and the balance between speakers
- At the end of the discussion, draw out the main ideas and issues, thank the speakers and suggest to the students what they should do next
- Producers – monitor the discussion carefully – keep an attentive ear on the content
- If necessary, use the talkback to help guide the discussion – but use it sparingly
- Discussions can usually be improved by editing