

Writing 2E: Assignment #4

Interview with a Scientist or Engineer

Objective

Interviews are a specialized form of writing that allow us to examine people as well as their disciplines. Why does this matter? Because people frequently tell us things about a discipline that we cannot learn any other way: How discoveries are made. What the measures of success are. The most important influences. Where the research is headed. How their discipline affects others. Interviews can tell us this and more. The secret to obtaining a successful interview is to motivate your subject to play an active role, rather than merely answer your questions. Ideally, they should volunteer to tell you more than you ask—perhaps even interview *you*.

Assignment #4 will require you to study someone in a scientific or engineering field. This might also include medical professionals, but you should select either an MD or medical researcher (rather than, say, a nurse or PA) who works with engineers. At the heart of your study will be the interview itself, which will necessitate a sit-down conversation with your subject. Schedule ahead and allow at least thirty minutes. Be certain to write everything down as you interview your subject, and make a careful list of your questions ahead of time. With interviews, preparation is all-important. It will help to use a sound recording device, but be sure to obtain your subject's permission first.

Tasks

Interview a scientist or engineer, taking notes as you go. Start with a brief opening paragraph or two to introduce your subject, then use a Q&A format, identifying both yourself and the subject. Be sure to double-space. For example:

Student Smith: Where did you go to college?

Engineer Brown: I went to UCSB, then got my MS at Stanford.

Your introductory paragraph(s) should summarize the subject's background and profession. What is their field of study? Where do they work and how long have they worked there? Where did they go to school and train? Which academic degrees have they earned? Which professional organizations do they belong to? Here are some more useful points and questions to cover with your subject:

- Describe your subject's contributions to his/her field. How and where does their work fit into the whole discipline? Do they play a leadership or a support role? Both?
- What kinds of changes has your subject seen in his/her field? Do they anticipate any specific changes in their field's near-term future? How do they intend to respond to these changes?

- What influences have been paramount in your subject's professional development? Did they have mentors? Role models from history? Who do they consider to be the most important contributors to their field today? Why? Does your subject play a mentoring role to others?
- Ask your subject any question that helps to explain who they are and what they do.

Remember to thank them!

In your concluding paragraph, reflect upon what you learned during the interview about the engineering profession. Did you learn something new? Were there any surprises? Did you gain a new interest in a different field?

Double-space; four-page minimum length.