



CAN I QUOTE YOU?

No matter how many yearbook staffers I meet, one of the first issues they identify is feeling uncomfortable interviewing other members of their school communities for all-important caption, copy and alternative coverage writing assignments.

WHY? The truth is no one automatically feels comfortable approaching people they don't know. It's human nature to stick to our circle of friends who have the same interests and hobbies. So, don't feel like you have failed Yearbook 101 if you are not comfortable as an interviewer. This information is intended to help you improve your interview skills.

The first, and biggest, mistake aspiring writers make is thinking they don't have to interview sources for their assignments. The simple fact is the yearbook, no matter how journalistic your staff's approach, is a historical record of your school's year. And to accurately capture that year, staff members must get descriptive reactions from as many sources as possible. Once you accept the need for attributed sources, or "quotes," the question remains, "How do we get them?"

I hear staffers - armed with pad and pen - heading to the cafeteria saying, "I gotta get a quote for volleyball." The idea is right on, but the approach is flawed. Don't look at your assignment as "getting a quote." Rather, understand you need to gather "some opinions" on volleyball.

If you ask a student a flawed question such as "Can I get a quote about volleyball?" they'll surely say, "No," brush you off and say something bland like, "Volleyball is great!" Or, they begin to formulate this great, stale sounding "quote" about volleyball in their heads. How you ask a question is as important as what you ask.

When you don't get the reactions you want, good reporters ask follow-up questions. For example: "Oh, I think volleyball is great, too. Tell me what you like so much about it?" That kind of probing question will tell the source you care about their real opinions, and will yield descriptive responses you can weave together for your assignment.

The response might be: "Oh, volleyball is a great sport to watch. The girls on the team are so aggressive, and long volleys get more exciting with each pass over the net. I love to see someone diving for a save." That's the kind of information you can edit into your story.

GET IT IN WRITING

In larger schools, I see advisers using "info sheets" for sources in stories. These can work well when used correctly. Just as asking a follow-up question in person yields better, more descriptive information, using the info sheet as the beginning of the reporting process can make life easier.

Info sheets are fill-in-the-blank forms distributed to several students, many times, as part of an English assignment. The sheets are turned in to the yearbook staff and are reviewed



for usable information. These sheets should have blanks for the source's name, homeroom, answers to several open-ended questions, required signature from the source and the source's home phone number. The sheet should also bear a statement telling sources their responses may be used for publication, and by signing the form they are granting permission for their views to appear in print.

Attach a yearbook order form to these sheets if the sources you are contacting haven't previously purchased books. You'd be amazed at how including someone's opinions prompts them to buy the book! Yes, the reporting process can also be a part of the sales process.

If the information on the sheet is good, but not great, reporters have home phone numbers to ask follow-up questions. If you feel more comfortable, make an appointment to meet the next day in school so you can conduct your interview in person.

Distributing several sheets with different open-ended questions will give you varied responses, more possible information to include and a wider array of sources for the index.

PUTTING YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD

Since we have acknowledged approaching someone outside your circle of friends is difficult, make that first impression count. Be confident, and introduce yourself, pronouncing your name clearly. Then, tell the source your purpose. "Hi Devon, my name is Steve Kent and I'm on the yearbook staff. I know you are a volleyball fan and I want to talk to you about the team for a story I'm writing. Do you have a minute to talk to me?" Your sources will be impressed and be willing to help.

You are thinking, "No way can I get all of that out!" Trust me, you can! If your palms are really sweating over this, practice with another staff member or take another staff member with you to the interview. Once you do this a couple of times, other students will begin to know who you are and will be more likely to participate because they will have seen you circulating through the halls.

While you have the sources' attention, take time to write down their responses. At the end of the interview, repeat what they've said and give them the chance to expand on any points they feel are unclear. Then, ask them to sign your note sheet to grant you permission to use the information and to agree the information is accurate.

QUOTES, QUOTES EVERYWHERE

The old school approach to yearbooking says we need at least three quoted sources per piece of copy. Today's books have a different standard. Plan for at least one quote per caption and some alternative coverage on the spread with more attributed sources (such as first-person accounts, talking head photos with quotes beside, he said/she said or point/counterpoint modules, etc.) in addition to the body copy. And, three sources may not be enough to tell the story completely. Some schools shoot for as many as five attributed sources per piece of body copy. Try not to repeat the same quote or the same source on the same spread.



LOOK BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

Football stories have to have quotes from the quarterback and the coach, right? Yearbook stories quote the adviser and the editor, right? Theater stories quote the director and the lead of the musical, right?

Reporters should look beyond the obvious, and even beyond the team, staff or cast for information. Many times, a student can be an avid football fan and can give much more descriptive opinions than the quarterback. The prop master may have a better story to tell than the lead of the musical. And, those first-year staffers may be able to tell about overcoming their fears when it came to writing great copy.

Let your sources paint the verbal images with their words, and you'll begin to love the reporting process. Keep a list of the entire student body and continue to include those students who have not previously appeared in the book. Once you look beyond the obvious sources, you'll see your coverage, your copy and, yes, your book sales impacted in a positive way.

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