Workshop 3a: Interviews, Quotes and Writing Dialogue Style

**Telling Better Stories about Small Farmers: Interviews, Quotes, and Dialogue**

*Adapted from materials available from Appalachian State University*

1. The informant who you plan to interview is the “owner” of the knowledge you request. Acceptance and respect are of utmost importance. Allow the informant to be “experts” about their own experience.

2. Learn as much as possible about the farmer prior to the interview. This can help you create a well-adapted guide of intelligent questions. Consider also the cultural dynamics and local politics it may be necessary to do preliminary research before you contact the informant for an interview.

3. Questions, answers, and conversations are only part of the interview. Describe your surroundings; include your personal observations, review documents shared by the informant.

4. Probing successfully is an art. Some questions stimulate a deeper response than others. “Silent probes” or letting the informant just continue their train of thought, may produce insightful information that your guide did not allow [most informants feel compelled to fill the void and talk]. You can start with one or two-or-no questions but that won’t get you anything you can write up. Write up some of your questions in advance and think about how you word the question. For example, instead of asking “Do you use integrated pest management on your farm?” one might ask, “What techniques for pest management have you found most successful?” or “What are your favorite strategies for insect pest controls?” or maybe as simple as “What do you do about bugs on your crops?” Each question will elicit a somewhat different response. Each may also apply to a different style of farming.

5. Listen to the responses. Ask more than what the farmer does: ask why it is done this way.

6. You aren’t just gathering quotes. You are a participant observer of farming. You might ask to lend a hand or ask to learn by doing.

7. Write a debriefing of the interview. Be sure to allow for at least one hour after the interview to write down thoughts, observations, ideas, and any related information.

***Write Up***

1. Your job as the writer is to introduce your readers to farmers, their methods, and their point of view upon first reference in more than an attribution tag. Write a physical and description of the farm and the farmer so the readers will see your interview sources. *Pre-writing stage.*

2. Sketch a rough transcript of the interview, including questions and answers and any follow-up information gathered from subsequent conversations. This does not have to be a literate, word-for-word account of the interview, but can be a summary of main points and issues raised in each question reconstructed from key-points written down during the interview and recollection. *Organizing stage.*

2. Personal observations of the interview process; in effect, a critique yourself. *Reflective stage.*

3. Identify the key quote(s) you will transcribe verbatim and do so. Place the quotes into the story structure as you tell the reader what they need to know when they know it. Introduce sources on first reference and deepen their characters with your descriptions based on observations with additional quote used from the same interview source later in the story. Populate your stories with people.

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