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## Straight from the Source: Primary Research and the Personality Profile

A key differentiator of literary journalism is the use of outside subject matter as a focal point, rather than concentrating on the life of the writer (as in memoir). This shift in emphasis requires not only secondary research to gain online and print knowledge of a particular source or topic, but also research in the field through interaction with sources. While most students have accessed secondary source materials in their research writing courses, they may be less familiar with primary research methods, such as interviewing. The personality profile assignment gives students an opportunity to gather primary research through both interviewing and observation, encouraging students to incorporate current information in a creative piece. Finally, the reporting role in this assignment reveals the complexity of character, from the source interviewed to the reporter, challenging students to depict both the personalities involved and their interaction.

The personality profile, as a mode of nonfiction, transcends disciplinary boundaries. I have taught this assignment to both undergraduate and graduate-level creative nonfiction students; in composition courses, I teach the interview as a research method for a cause and effect paper based on student majors – speaking with an expert not only provides evidence for student papers, but also motivates students to explore their areas of study. Providing students with experience as reporters and observers helps them engage with and learn from their communities. The applicability of the interview as a research method to several writing genres makes it a versatile learning exercise for students, whether undergraduate or graduate.

Through secondary sources such as web sites, newspaper articles, and journal articles, students arrive at the interview with an angle or theme in mind, be it the family business or a professor's research. As with any type of writing, a planned theme is also subject to change throughout the writing process, leading to unexpected discoveries.

### **Before**

I introduce research in the classroom by brainstorming types of secondary sources with students, from books, to peer-reviewed journals, to reputable web content. As we transition to primary research and the value of interviews and oral histories to various types of writing, whether academic or creative, students read samples of writers who have incorporated interviews into their work for models of the upcoming assignment. Some examples include Susan Orlean's portrayal of a taxidermy championship in "Lifelike" (*The New Yorker*); the Gay Talese profile of Frank Sinatra in "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" (*Esquire*); and the interviews with families Julia Alvarez conducts in her nonfiction book *Once Upon a Quinceanera: Coming of Age in the USA*.

Classroom discussion of the texts helps students focus on writers' rhetorical choices. Students are often surprised at the details Talese manages to convey about Sinatra despite the writer's distance from the source. In "Lifelike," students trace the ways in which Orlean melds scene and information without a shift in tone. *Once Upon a Quinceanera*, meanwhile, takes readers on Alvarez's own conflicted journey with quinceanera traditions, prompting a discussion of the writer's role as first-person narrator or as a silent observer using a third-person perspective.

Following discussion of these models, we discuss strategies for conducting an effective interview, from scheduling the interview in advance, to preparing questions based on preliminary research, to following up with a source for fact checking. Finally, students complete an exercise listing two people they would consider interviewing and five prospective questions for each. Students work in teams to compare

their ideas and questions, and make any additions – at the end of class, I collect the written exercise and make comments in terms of source viability (if someone selects an inaccessible celebrity, for instance). Often, both choices are possible, in which case students interview the source of their choice and have a second as a backup.

### **During**

While encouraging students to interview sources outside of their immediate circle, such as professors or an official from their hometown or local community, I allow students to interview individuals they know well if the family member or friend is involved in a specific subject area or field. Even individuals well known to students can reveal compelling insights in an interview setting. This setting ideally takes place in the source's environment, be it on campus, a workplace, or a performance site. Interviewing an individual in a relevant setting helps students become immersed in the scene, along with allowing them to incorporate descriptive details. Certain phone interviews can spring to life provided the student focuses on sensory detail related to voice and other nuances of the conversation.

After the interview, students determine how to best highlight the source, information learned, and even the interaction itself. Some writers place their writing emphasis on the source, modeling Lillian Ross' portrayal of Ernest Hemingway in *Portrait of Hemingway*. Other writers include their role in the interview, similar to Tom Wolfe's shadowing of a socialite in "The Girl of the Year" (*New York*). Student writers are encouraged to shape their profile toward a central theme or "occasion," well demonstrated by Shari Caudron's "Befriending Barbie" (*Workforce*).

Prepared with assignment models and criteria, students write drafts with a theme and a consistent structure, whether chronological or thematic. A few pitfalls may prevent writers from fully developing their profiles. Student enthusiasm for a person or subject matter, for instance, can cloud a writer's objectivity, resulting in a one-dimensional profile. Within creative nonfiction assignments, students are invited to

participate as narrators in the process and a reaction to the source is encouraged; that said, allowing the reader to learn source attributes through evidence such as examples and poignant quotes will build trust with the reader. In terms of structure, students occasionally write the interview using a question and answer format, which although appropriate for magazine or journal content, lacks the narrative component of a personality profile.

### **After**

In most cases, students share fascinating subjects and narratives, with some writers pursuing primary research in subsequent assignments. Several students from past classes have published profile pieces on blog sites and company newsletters, resulting in clips for their portfolios. Memorable examples include a musician conflicted about life on the road, a nurse interviewed by a student during a hospital stay, a student's mother and her rise in state politics, a student's father and his passion for car racing, and a librarian reflecting on the evolving role of the library in her rural community. Student writers in both composition and creative nonfiction courses have commented on the confidence and perspective they've gained through the interview process and the act of conveying someone else's story, passion, or viewpoint.

Blending primary research with narrative techniques, the personality profile eases students into literary journalism by providing them with a specific research component, resulting in essays that are entertaining and informative. This genre-spanning assignment shares primary research and a means of applying it, broadening student discovery through first-hand perspectives.