

ENQUIRING MINDS INTERVIEW MODULE

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Context:

This session was scheduled for the end of pupils' first term of **Enquiring Minds** sessions. It clearly comes at a transition point when pupils are moving from more structured classroom-based activities to tasks that will require them to be more self-starting and investigative.

The Task

Students are asked to conduct a short interview with a person known to them on an agreed topic or theme and then write this up as a brief interview-based article in as journalistic a style as possible.

My Involvement

I was invited to provide four separate sessions designed to give students a better idea of the kinds of questions they might ask in order to conduct a detailed interview. The session was also meant to illustrate the way in which an article might be structured.

Session Outline

Opener:

Students are reminded of the task that they have on the horizon and asked to think if they have anyone in mind they could interview? Some immediate suggestions were forthcoming in every group including a child who wanted to interview a friend from Thailand and another whose father was in the army.

I based the first part of my session on a short, light article I wrote for The Guardian concerning a '**beach library in Blackpool**'. I asked students to quiz me as if they were reporters and I was 'Charles Barker' of the Blackpool Library service – the person with all the details they needed to write an article about this beach library initiative. I was deliberately reticent when it came to providing details requiring the students to ask all the: who-what-why-when-where and how questions they needed to. Invariably, the need to get a formal statement in the shape of quotations from the speaker was something students overlooked. (See: Resource One: Beach Library Article)

Key Questions: Instead of itemising them, teachers are referred to the piece itself and ask themselves what questions would have been needed to write this article? It was conducted entirely over the telephone.

Differentiation: While active listening and note-taking (spider-diagrams) were a part of the skill-set of higher-ability groups, this was less true of the lower sets. For them, it was necessary to try to scaffold the mind-mapping – highlighting the generic (who, what, why? etc.) nature of the questions being asked.

Main Session

Stage One

Students are then invited to decide which of the facts they have 'captured' should be included in the introductory paragraph of an article. They were told that they should not get too bogged down in detail at this stage and the idea was to try to grab readers' attention so that they continued with the article rather than turning to something else in the newspaper. The importance of answering as many of the who-what-whys, etc in that opening was also explained. Students were told that they should try to condense what they wanted to say in that paragraph into two or three lines at most and keep the word limit below 40 words. Despite protests, students quite seemed to like this constraint and tried hard to meet the target.

A selection of students then read their opening paragraphs. It became apparent that a lot of pupils were unclear of the distinction between promotional/advertising writing and journalistic style. It was also a useful exercise for highlighting the need to explain a story in dramatic but not-too-detailed a manner.

Differentiation: More able groups were quick to tackle this task and explanations concerning the fact that they were meant to be writing an exciting article but not trying to advertise the beach library were quickly grasped. Many students spotted the need to highlight the incongruity at the heart of the story namely that 'the library was going to be on the beach' over the summer and lead with that as their dramatic opener. Lesser ability groups found it very hard to move on from key words to full sentences and chose instead to devise poster-style headlines. A way around this was to encourage groups to select the best information so that they could re-tell the story in their own words to make it as dramatic as possible.

Note: My use of the word 'story' and 'piece' to describe the news article was a source of confusion to a number of pupils and required unpicking.

Stage Two: Pupils are then given a copy of the original article which I deconstructed for them (see Resource One: Beach Library Article). The literacy and listening skills required here may prove challenging for lower sets – as it did at Ashton Park - and so needed to be abbreviated in one session and cut out altogether for another.

Differentiation: With the final and lowest ability group of the day, it was necessary to abandon the planned work and turn instead to a session in which students quizzed (me) about my work as a freelance journalist. The students were invited to mind-map what they heard and this was supported by my mind-mapping the questions and responses on a flip chart. (Note: Using the IWB would have been better as some students struggled to read the diagram as it became fuller.) This session was excellent as a means of exploring open and closed questions and also noting those that strayed into being inappropriate: e.g. "How much do you earn?" How to turn this into a more general kind of question was explained - such as: "How much can a freelance journalist expect to earn in the first years?"

Stage Three: Students were explicitly taken through some key 'ingredients' of successful interviewing and questioning. (See: Resource 2: Interviewing Checklist.)

Plenary

Students are then invited to think again about who they might interview. The problem of their interviewing their best mate was addressed, unless that best mate had a really interesting hobby which could then make a great article.

RESOURCE ONE: Beach Library Article

You are journalists. You have heard that Blackpool's library service is going to be launching a 'Beach Library' over the summer and you think it might make a good story.

In role as journalists – get the details – all that you will need to write a short article.

.....

Please photocopy this article and have it ready for distribution during the session. Do not give it out until it is needed. Thanks.

Blackpool's novel idea

There's reading matter for everyone as a seaside town launches its own beach library, says Jerome Monahan

Tuesday August 10, XXXX

[The Guardian](#)

Holidaymakers in Blackpool have no excuse to be beached without a book this summer, thanks to the launch of the UK's first roving seafront library. For the next month two local students will be manoeuvring a multicoloured wheelbarrow between deckchairs and windshields, dishing out novels and reading advice to some of the resort's 16.4 million visitors.

The scheme has been launched through the town's library service as part of the National Year of Reading. It relies on specially donated books for all ages which beach borrowers can keep, return or swap. In the event of poor weather the students, Charlotte Bonney and Melanie Jones, will be offering story-telling sessions for children in a former lifeboat station.

Both women have been selected for their combination of good humour, love of books and fitness. For 23-year-old Charlotte Bonney this will not be the first time she has worked by the sea. As part of her zoology degree she spent a summer protecting the nests of marine turtles in Cyprus. "More recently I have been studying chimpanzee mother and infant interactions," she said. "It will be interesting looking out for human equivalents this summer."

Seventeen-year-old Melanie Jones is in the middle of A-level studies and is relying on her experience in customer services to get the reading message across. "We'll be targeting the 'sitters', trying to persuade people to put down their newspapers and get into a book."

Blackpool's own reader in residence, Charles Bennett, says the scheme shows that libraries are about "enrichment - connecting people to books.

Holiday reading isn't just a fling. Books are not just for summer but for life. If the Blackpool idea is a success then this could be the start of beach libraries at resorts across the country".

One problem Charlotte and Melanie anticipate is that they might run out of books. "And if anyone looks too absorbed by their reading, we have a list of tide times to ensure they don't get marooned."

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/guardianeducation/story/0,,281799,00.html>

The following table sets out the Beach Library article alongside a commentary that includes some of the key questions and objectives that lay behind the writing and structuring of the article:

<h2>Blackpool's novel idea</h2> <p>There's reading matter for everyone as a seaside town launches its own beach library, says Jerome Monahan</p> <p>Tuesday August 10, XXXX The Guardian</p> <p>Holidaymakers in Blackpool have no excuse to be beached without a book this summer, thanks to the launch of the UK's first roving seafront library. For the next month two local students will be manoeuvring a multicoloured wheelbarrow between deckchairs and windshields, dishing out novels and reading advice to some of the resort's 16.4 million visitors.</p>	<p>Headlines and sub-headings are not written by journalists. They are created by the sub-editors on newspapers – people who are very skilled and dreaming up jokey lines that, ideally, capture the essence of each article.</p> <p><u>First Para:</u> This answers all the key questions, but does not go into too much detail. No need to mention the names of the students at this stage, for example.</p> <p>I wanted the opening paragraph to be lively and as entertaining as possible. I wanted it to create a picture of the library (wheelbarrow) in action. So I used a bit of alliteration and described the imagined scene as the wheelbarrow plus students negotiated their way around the beach.</p> <p>The figure of 16.4 million visitors is there just to give the piece extra significance. The project would only reach a minute proportion of these visitors.</p> <p>Second Para: This is similar to para. one in that it covers the same questions filling in</p>
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some of the details about why the scheme is being run, how it will be run, who the students are and also answering a crucial weather question given that the project is occurring over a British summer.

Third/Fourth Paras.: Here we move onto **'body copy'** and these paragraphs contain the main human element of the piece – the interviews with the students involved. It was great that they were studying such different subjects and I wanted the quotations to reflect this – even down to the kind of **diction** they employed. So Melanie James' quotation contains several bits of marketing jargon, for example. I wanted the quotations to contain little mini-hints like this of the speakers' personalities.

Fifth Para.: There was a need for an interview and quote with someone with a broader perspective – the person behind the scheme. It was here that details concerning **the legacy** of the project could be addressed.

Final Para.: Good to end with a neat, amusing sign off. This para. It returns us to the beach where we began and a joke about people getting so absorbed in books they forget the tides.

One problem Charlotte and Melanie anticipate is that they might run out of books. "And if anyone looks too absorbed by their reading, we have a list of tide times to ensure they don't get marooned."

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/guardianeducation/story/0,,281799,00.html>

Resource Two: Key Interview Techniques

Getting the Story

- Who?
- What?
- Why?
- When?
- Where?
- How?
- Quotations
- Legacy – what will happen now? How has this experience/hobby affected your life?

First Principles

Decide a topic – negotiation – ask your interviewee and discuss how they can prepare to chat to you – pictures might be a good way in? Have an objective.

Preparation – do your homework. Pre-prepare questions. Do not feel you have to stick to these questions – they are a framework.

The Importance of secondary and follow-up questions – do not abandon a topic too soon. If something you hear makes you curious ask for more information. You are having a conversation.

Surroundings – insights in the environment. This is a bit tricky, but interview-based profile pieces often include a brief introduction where the writer describes something about the circumstances and setting where the interview is taking place. This part of the article may also contain a brief thumb-nail sketch (description) of the interviewee. So, for example, a description of all the hurdles and delays the interviewer had to endure getting to talk to a celebrity gives a strong impression of the problems associated with fame or perhaps the person takes themselves rather too seriously.

When interviewing a friend or family member, then try to provide details of anything about their surroundings or their behaviour that might give a reader insights into their character or mood.

- What, for example, could your person be doing instead of being interviewed? That would be a good way to establish how busy your interviewees life is.
- Try to give your piece an introduction that then feeds directly into the theme of your article and interview: For example: “As I begin the interview with XX Horace his pet boa-constrictor stops coiling around his shoulders and turns his beady attention onto me in a most unnerving way.”

Warm up your interviewee – have a few simple questions to get the interview going.

Making it professional – undivided attention. Demand this of yourself and also of your interviewee. You don’t want the interview to be interrupted over and over again. State how long it will take – 20 minutes to half and hour.

Questions

Warm up questions

Open v Closed questions:

- Closed: Do you like wearing white shirts?
- Open: What do you think about having to wear a white shirt or any kind of uniform to school?

The classic ‘open question’: How does this make you feel?

Don’t interrupt

Listen – the follow on question is important; contradictions; clarifications

Take me through this – they are the expert.

Have we covered everything?

Capturing the interview. How are you going to capture the interview. If you can record it – that will enable you to concentrate more, but you will have to listen to the entire interview again in order to note down what was said. The quickest method is to use a mind-map/spider diagram approach. When the interview is over, go over your diagram and see that you can remember everything that you have noted adding to anything that you think will be confusing.

Try to write up your interview as soon as possible.

Resource Three: The Interview/Profile Article Deconstructed

What follows is the result of a series of **one-on-one interviews** conducted a few years ago for the Guardian. The subject was Alison Hatch – that year’s primary school teacher winner of a National Teaching Award. The interview with her and some of those who had nominated her for the award was conducted over the telephone so it was necessary to ask for information about **the setting** in which she worked so that some ‘location’ details could be provided in the article – to give the impression the interview had been conducted face-to-face rather than over the telephone.

It was also necessary to pretend to Alison that all the finalists in her category were being interviewed so that she did not realise (before the award ceremony) that she was the primary teacher winner. The event was due to be filmed and to make better TV, it was important that winners were caught looking genuinely astonished as their names were called.

What I have attempted to do here is to map out how I **structured** my eventual article. Just reading the notes should give you some ideas about the kinds of things you could include in your interview-based articles. **Think about the questions I would have had to ask to get this information.**

Also – look at how the article is **‘arranged’** – particularly how **quotations** are used: blended in with my ‘third person’ copy. Although, you are writing up an interview, it should not be one long quotation.

It is important to note how important **the pre-interview research** was. I had been given the forms that those nominating Alison Hatch for an award had filled in. I had read these notes carefully, so that I knew in advance what to ask her about.

She suffered from a very painful incurable disease called Lupus, and because this was mentioned in my notes, I felt it would be okay to ask her about it – though I did not dwell on it and I certainly did not include it high up in the article. She was an exceptional teacher with or without Lupus. Inevitably, her answers lead to more questions. As an interviewer, it is so important **to listen** to the answers you get so that you can ask good **follow-up questions.**

Comments

Headline:

Here's something I prepared earlier...

Subheading:

Jerome Monahan meets Alison Hatch, primary school teacher of the year, who could have had a career on Blue Peter, given her talent with chicken wire.

Date:

Tuesday October XX, XXXX

First paragraph: Who? What? Why? When? Where? How?

Alison Hatch is a great fan of chicken wire and Modroc, the stuff used to make plaster casts. They have played a part in her winning this year's Guardian Award for Primary Teacher of the Year. With them Hatch performs the feats of after-school artistry that transform her 4th Year classroom at Northdown School, Margate from a dragon's lair to an Egyptian pyramid by way of a WWII air raid shelter. One of her colleagues has described visiting her as being akin to "walking into a storybook".

Second paragraph: Builds on paragraph one:

"This term we are studying the Romans - hence the columns," she explains. On another wall is a gigantic pair of 3D lips. "That's made from corrugated card and it's linked to a unit we're studying about

Headlines and **sub-headings**

are not written by journalists. They are created by **the sub-editors** on newspapers – people who are very skilled and dreaming up jokey lines that, ideally, capture **the essence** of each article. This teacher's efforts creating wonderful resources for her children reminded the sub-editor who wrote this for me, of the programme Blue Peter. This lead on to the 'here's something I prepared earlier..' headline which referred to the standard thing that Blue Peter presenters often said during the 'create-something-out of cardboard and sticky-backed-plastic' parts of the show.

All of this '**description**' was explained to me over the telephone. I wanted to paint a picture of Alison's classroom. I also wanted to have a dramatic opening-paragraph – that raised questions in a reader's mind and made (I hoped) them want to read on. I made sure to explain what 'Modroc' was.

A dramatic list of three is a standard writer's trick.

I loved the comment by her colleague – that's why I included it here – it finished off the paragraph well and reminded everyone that Alison owed her award to the appreciation she had inspired in her fellow teachers.

More detail about Alison's classroom. I loved the weird mix of things it contained – like a lot of primary classrooms – what would a Martian make of them?

Notice how **the quotations** are chosen to prove what has

language. I'm also linking it to some work on a healthy diet and fillings." This capacity to squeeze the maximum from every resource seems to be Alison's style. She admits to sleeping with a paper and pen at her bedside - "in case I get a good idea in the night."

Body copy: the following paragraphs continue to build up a portrait of Alison Hatch.

It seems remarkable that Alison Hatch has any time for sleep. She is the team leader for Years 3 and 4, she is the PE coordinator, in charge of ICT, she runs dance and gymnastic clubs after school, and has recently taken on the role of teacher governor.

Hatch has been a teacher for 11 years; this is her third school. Northdown serves what has been described as one of the most socially disadvantaged communities in Kent. Many of the parents are living in B&B and refuge accommodation. "Just when you have got the class settled, there are newcomers. And as many of them come as refugees, their English is often non-existent. Hence, the interest in language and lips!"

Hatch aims to create a place of order and calm in the children's lives. Her headteacher, Jacqueline Cox, who nominated her, said: "Through her high expectations and warm personality she instills a sense of pride and delight."

Hatch's enthusiasm rubs off on the parents too. One parent who supported her nomination for the Guardian Award said: "Miss Hatch

been previously stated. Always think of quotations as the way to bang home or add to an assertion you have just made. Think of the speech marks as a kind of 'equals sign'.

This paragraph does the job of telling the reader about all the other things this teacher has to do.

Links from para. to para. are really important or articles can read as a lot of mini-articles rather than just one. So the bedside notebook leads onto the comment about possible lack of sleep.

This paragraph gives a bit of Alison hatch's **background story** and also puts her school **in context**. The fact she works with very disadvantaged youngsters, makes her achievements and dedication all the more important.

Notice how I refer to 'Hatch' – this is a **convention** in the Guardian. So the first mention of someone – name and surname, and all other references afterwards – just the surname.

This paragraph underlines Hatch's importance to her pupils and includes a quotation from the head. Her support of Alison's winning the award was important to include.

The fact that Alison Hatch was appreciated by parents was also a key part of her success with children and also in her getting this award. It was a great quotation that really painted a picture of Alison Hatch's enthusiastic, unselfconscious approach to all that she does.

was the only teacher who actually got on the bouncy castle with her class at a fund-raising event last year. There was much laughter all round. Her fondness for the children was so apparent."

Hatch is overjoyed at the attention the school is receiving as a result of her success. But this is not the first time she has put Northdown on the map. Her efforts have been central to the success of the school's football, rounders and netball teams. "I heard that we had won the Thanet five-a-side football trophy the first time when I was in hospital and my scream of joy scared everyone on the ward."

Hatch has a severe form of Lupus - which causes her immune system to turn on her own organs and joints. All the more remarkable then, that the children praise her for her consistent good humour.

Concluding Paragraph:

Alison sees her award as a vote of confidence for the whole school and pays tribute to the teamwork that makes Northdown such a happy place. The £20,000 prize will be spent on networking. "We hope to set up a web link to cameras in the pond and some nesting boxes in our environment garden," she explains. "The children will be able to keep an eye on the caddis fly and check out what the snails are doing."

More information about all that Hatch does. Her school had benefited each time Hatch won earlier rounds of this awards scheme.

Her reference to 'being in hospital' provided the perfect lead into an explanation of her health problems – which was lucky, or I would have been scratching my head about how to mention the Lupus in a way that did not seem crude or clumsy or over-sentimental. Alison was 'matter –of –fact' about it and I hope that came across by mentioning it here so deep into the article.

A typically selfless comment about her colleagues – nice people always want to thank all the other people that contribute to their work!

Here's the place to mention what Alison wants to do with the prize money her school wins – **the legacy**.

The final quotation links back to all the fun and inventive and interesting subjects Alison Hatch likes to cover in her lessons which was mentioned in the opening paragraph. This kind of '**back-to-the beginning**' effect is sometimes called '**concerto structure**.'