

Chapter Sixteen – Interviewing

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Restaurant fire in Great Britain. Courtesy of Paul Ivison

Interviewing

Introduction

The purpose of the interview is to gain information from witnesses who were present at the time of the fire, including fire fighters, eyewitnesses to the fire, or others who may have knowledge of the design, installation or maintenance of the system and equipment.

The interviewers' task is to convince interviewees to answer questions honestly. If interviews are conducted later and the fire scene is no longer available, a combination of graphics or photographs can be used to place the witness at the scene for orientation purposes.

The interviewer's role is to assist the investigator by providing the information they possess. The witness may have observed something during the incident or may have knowledge about the facility or equipment of importance to the investigation. The interviewer's attitude and approach will greatly aid the process. The interviewer should maintain a positive attitude toward each person interviewed. Remember that the interviewer's behavior toward the interviewee will influence that person's response. Use the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy in a positive way.

*"If you expect to uncover the truth in your investigations, treat your interview subjects as though they want to provide you with truthful information - and most of them will."*¹

Note: It is suggested that preliminary interviews with the owner and key employee witnesses be conducted before proceeding with a fire scene examination. A basic understanding of the building, cooking equipment, and fire story will assist in determining the plan and scope of the scene investigation. Detailed follow-up interviews may be conducted later. Be flexible since key witnesses may be available at the scene, but difficult to locate later on. See the *Conducting the Investigation Chapter*.

When conducting interviews in the field:²

- Document the interview by tape recording and/or written notes³
- Preserve all notes from interviews in your file so that you can corroborate later summaries of statements in reports, testimonies, etc.
- Properly identify the interviewer and the person interviewed. The date, time, and location of the interview and others attending the interview should be documented.
- Prepare a flexible outline for the interview
- Try to locate a place away from others (i.e. a spare room or your vehicle)
- Interview witnesses separately so you can compare the information from each source
- Establish rapport with the interviewee
- Set a positive tone by treating the interview process as a conversation
- State the reason for the interview
- Seek assistance from the witness
- Begin with easy questions - spelling of the person's name, position, contact information, etc.
- Be aware that different jurisdictions have different legal requirements on digitally recording interviews. Have a working knowledge of local requirements.



¹ Yeschke, Charles L, *The Art of Investigative Interviewing*, page 100.

² NFPA 921, 13.4 Interviews provides guidance for planning and conducting interviews.

³ Taping should be in accordance with applicable laws and regulations.

The Interview

Maintain an open mind when interviewing witnesses. As the interview progresses, ask open-ended questions to establish the ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ information about the incident.⁴ For example, “Where were you standing in the kitchen?” “What did you see, hear, and smell?”

Ask clarifying follow-up questions. These should be asked in a direct or close-ended manner. This will elicit specific information with yes/no or multiple-choice answers. For example, “Did you hear the fire alarm sound?”



Courtesy of Alex MacRae

By being a good listener you will encourage positive responses to the questions. Be attentive to what is said and not said. Show acceptance of the witnesses’ answers. Keep questions simple and direct. Use positive silence after each question to give the witness time to reply fully. Pursue unanswered questions or incomplete answers by rephrasing the question or asking clarification questions. Be patient.

Obviously not all who are interviewed are going to be favorable to answering questions, for whatever reason. Some witnesses, such as the fire-extinguishing system service technician or exhaust systems cleaner, may only provide an interview to the investigator hired by that service company’s insurance liability carrier.

When terminating an interview, assume that more information may be forthcoming. Ask, “What else can you tell me about the incident?” Consider a second interview as more information is developed from the scene examination or other witnesses.

Word Interpretations

“Did you ‘service’ the ‘system’?” An interviewer may ask the question to different service providers and get confusing and misleading answers. Interviewers need to be more specific. The words *inspect*, *service* and *system* are each very transposable.

Have the service provider expand on exactly what action they performed and on what pieces of equipment. Have them expand their explanation until you are sure you have a clear understanding of what they did.

Commonly used words for:

Fire-Extinguishing Components

- Fusible Links: Links, diffusers, melt points, quartzoid links (which is a type of link)
- Nozzles: Spray tips, distribution nozzles, hoses, sprayers.
- EMT cable piping: Cable pull pipe, cable piping, tubing, pipes.

Exhaust System Components

- Hood: Vent-a-hood, box, water wash (a type of hood). The hood may be called by its manufacturer’s name, such as a Gaylord, Quest, Avtec, etc.
- Filters: Racks, filtration units, baffles, mesh, boxes
- Plenum: The area behind the filters in a hood, behind the filters, hood, back of the hood, behind the hood.
- Duct: Shaft, vent-a-hood, pipe, vent.
- Fan: Blower, hood fan, duct fan, ventilator (or power ventilator), utility, upblast fan, circular fan, spun aluminum fan, centrifugal fan, silver fan, scroll, wheel.

⁴ For more information see *The Art of Investigative Interviewing*, Second Edition, by Charles L. Yeschke, Elsevier Science, 2003. This sub-section, in part, was derived from this source.

The Investigative Interview

Accumulate as much foundational information as possible prior to interviewing. Based on the information gathered at the scene, questions will be modified. In the sample questions the pronoun “you” could apply to the individual, the company, employees, sub-contractors or others.

The questions are broken into a number of witness categories to isolate various subjects. Questioning formats will change depending on the fire scenario, system particulars, context of the interview and other circumstances.

Questions may apply to eyewitnesses or responsible persons. They may be asked at the fire scene or later during follow-up data collection. Many of the questions are obviously of an “if applicable” nature. The interviewer should ask for documentation (such as drawings, acceptance tests, test reports) wherever appropriate. When discussing any component (appliances, exhaust, fire-extinguishing, other), ask for the make, model and manufacturer.

The following questions are provided in a “topical” format. It is up to the interviewer to determine which are appropriate for a specific interviewee. Later, during the litigation support phase, a consultant may find these questions useful in assisting attorneys to prepare for the depositions of witnesses.



Courtesy of Villagesoup.com

Questions for Fire Officials

Contact the local Fire Department to obtain a copy of the fire incident and fire investigation report. These reports will verify the times of alarm and arrival, how the alarm was received, the first arriving fire companies and fire officers, and key fire scene observations. Interview the first arriving fire officer(s) and firefighters. Face-to-face informal discussions with first responders will reveal helpful facts, which sometimes do not appear in reports.

When did you arrive at the fire scene?

What did you observe outside? From what location?

Where did you enter the building? Was forced entry necessary?

What were the flame/smoke conditions inside?

Was a fire alarm sounding? What system?

When did you enter the kitchen? What did you observe?

What was the extent of flames on the cooking equipment or in the hood and duct system?

Did the flames spread beyond/outside the hood and duct system?

Had the fire-extinguishing system activated? How do you know this?

Did the system operate at the control head?

Was the manual pull station activated?

Had any fusible links melted? How many melted? Identify.

Did the fire-extinguishing system shut off the fuel or power supply?