These are my notes on conducting good informational interviews from the Top Performer course by Cal Newport and Scott Young. I found the course useful and recommend you check it out if you find these notes useful - they present the information significantly better than I do here!

Note: These tips are from the course several years ago, and the course might have changed since then.

Tl;dr

Look for people 5ish years ahead, maybe 10, e.g. prospective grad students ask phds about to graduate, someone new to a field should talk with someone 5-10 years into it. You'll need a couple people to compare, since you're looking for trends (3-10 according to Newport).

If you can, ask them in person for an interview. If not, email. (They might also say you can email questions instead.)

Email tips:
- Keep it short, you should be able to read it aloud in 60 seconds.
- Don't be too humble, let them know why you're interesting/important or have potential.
- Don't be arrogant. Instead, show sincere admiration for their work. The best way to show sincere admiration is to do your homework before reaching out and show you know them.
- Show you have something in common, e.g. went to the same school or have a friend intro you.
- Give them a specific ask, e.g. I want to chat.
- If they don't propose a time, suggest multiple broad ranges of time (3-4 days with a big swath of time) when you are free, and lock in anytime they suggest in response. Supply your contact information. (I like Calendly here, plus making sure I have really wide availability, e.g. 7am to 8pm.)
- Make the interview convenient for the other person (time and location). Offer to go to them.

Research and prepare questions beforehand. Check for easy online information before you jump to live people, since e.g. a podcast is easier to obtain than an interview. Then you can use the live person to fill in the gaps. You'll also want to do some research on the particular person, so you can ask better questions and not waste the interview time asking about information freely available online.

Good questions tend to be ones closely related to your hypothesis about what makes the experts good, but open ended enough to give them room to surprise you. So "Which are the most important skills you've deliberately developed?" reflects that I think developing particular skills is important, while leaving them open to choose their answer. If I know particular skills I think they do well, I might ask them how they developed those particular skills or what their workflow looks like when doing the task. E.g. "What does the writing process look like for you step by step, from how you get ideas to publishing?"

During the interview, have an actual conversation. Come prepared with good questions, but then follow the flow of conversation.

According to Newport, assuming the expert could easily say exactly what mattered to their success resulted in unhelpful interviews. Instead, assume they may not be able to explicitly say what mattered (especially on the spot). So, instead of just asking for advice, ask for the story/specific details of how they did it. E.g. "the last time you got an A on an exam, tell me exactly what you did to prepare step by step." Ask them to retrace their steps of their rise, what actions they took, instead of just their synthesis and summary.

Ask if there are other people you should talk to. "Is there anyone else who I should talk to?" or "Who else knows a lot about this topic?"

Write a thank you email to your expert, thanking them for their time and help. Be sure to ask them if it would be okay to send a follow-up question to clarify some matters.

How to decide who you need to talk to

If seeking career advice, look for people 2-3 steps ahead.

Avoid populating the list with unreachable candidates too many steps ahead of you in their careers. Interviewing superstars is unlikely to help you, particularly if they are not in the same career space.

You want people who have first-hand experience, and different career stages have different obstacles, so you're looking for someone closer to where you are so they won't have forgotten where you're at. E.g. if you're just starting a blog, you want to produce quantity, later you want to aim for quality.

So look for people 5ish years ahead, maybe 10, e.g. prospective grad students ask phds about to graduate, someone new to a field should talk with someone 5-10 years into it.

You'll need a couple people to compare, since you're looking for trends (3-10 according to Newport).

Maybe try checking out a control condition? You could talk to some people who aren't doing as well, so you can rule out similarities with the control condition. Ideally these would be people with similar backgrounds as your "successful" cohort.

How to find people to interview and get their email

Start by tapping your existing network for possible candidates. Who do you already know (directly, or through a mutual contact) that is 2-3 steps ahead in this career direction? Brainstorm 10-15 people.

Next, consider some people that you know about, but don't know personally. This could include coworkers, members of a professional organization you belong to, or even mildly famous people. Looking at EAG attendees, people on the EA forum, or EA fb groups might be a good way to find people within the EA community.

Look for relevant experts or people in the field. E.g. Newport found ivy league straight-A students by looking at phi beta kappa rolls. Once he found those names, he would check the school directory if he can, if not he would google their name plus "@schoolname.edu". Or look at the guest speaker lists for relevant podcasts. I found sleep specialists to interview by looking at the faculty in my alma mater's division of sleep science. Once you've identified the people who would like to talk to, first seek their emails in the obvious places. Often professionals will list their email publicly online. If you know the structure of email addresses at their organization, you can try the appropriate combinations of their name. Otherwise, try googling their name and "@".

How to arrange an interview

If you can, ask them in person for an interview. If not, email.

Email tips:
- Keep it short, you should be able to read it aloud in 60 seconds.
- Don't be too humble, let them know why you're interesting/important or have potential.
- Don't be arrogant. Instead, show sincere admiration for their work. The best way to show sincere admiration is to do your homework before reaching out and show you know them.
- Show you have something in common, e.g. went to the same school or have a friend intro you.
- Give them a specific ask, e.g. I want to chat, but not overly specific, e.g. I want to talk for 30 minutes.

- A good response rate is 3-5 of 10. If you get responses from less than 2, you're reaching out poorly or reaching out to people who are too busy.
- Looking at the examples, I notice that Scott is introducing himself as a peer, not a supplicant.
- If they don't propose a time, suggest multiple broad ranges of time (3-4 days with a big swath of time) when you are free, and lock in anytime they suggest in response. Supply your contact information.
    - I'm available …. Let me know if there is a time in here that works for your schedule.
    - They don't mention Calendly-type scheduling tools. Personally, I would offer them for convenience sake, but make sure I have really wide availability (e.g. 7am to 8pm).
- Make the interview convenient for the other person (time and location). Offer to go to them.
- I like using skype or rev audio recorder to record the call or video chat. Obviously, ask permission first! It's illegal if you don't.

How to prep for interviews

It seems best to check for easy online information before you jump to live people, since e.g. a podcast is easier to obtain than an interview. Then you can use the live person to fill in the gaps. You'll also want to do some research on the particular person, so you can ask better questions and not waste the interview time asking about information freely available online.

Another approach could be to study people who've done it well, and use that to make good questions. Find three superstars in your career space and read biographies/in-depth profiles about them. What key skills did they develop which enabled their success? (Estimated time: 10+ hours)

Write down the hypotheses (if any) you have, and prepare questions to check if the person's story matched your hypothesis.
1. To start, you should spend at least 15-30 minutes doing background research on your expert BEFORE the meeting. In particular, you should try to do what you can to piece together the career path they followed. Where did they go to school? Where did they work after graduating? What important milestones did they cross? If your expert doesn't have any online presence, you may need to do this in the interview. However, doing this beforehand will avoid wasting time getting biographical details when you should be digging deeper.
2. Next, you should choose a focus of the interview. The best candidates for focal points are how the person went from roughly the same stage as yourself to the next stage. This will allow you to drill down onto focusing on what matters at that particular stage of career development.
3. Do some reflection on your expert at that particular stage of his or her career. What skills and assets did they possess that you currently lacked? What skills and assets do you possess that put you at an advantage to them?
4. Make some guesses as to what you currently believe are the skills which matter to getting to the next stage of your career. This will be good to reflect upon after your interview, to see whether

you've changed your mind on any of them. It will also allow you to guide your questions to verify/reject these theories in the actual interview.

5. Prepare at least three potential questions you'd like to ask. Remember we are conducting a journalistic interview, not a mentor-style interview, so start questions by asking for facts. Good example questions: "Walk me through your career between your post-doc and getting tenure." "How did you end up specializing as a Rails developer?" "What led to getting your first big client?"

6. Finally, have a pen and paper to take notes during the interview (even if you're planning to record the interview, have these so you can take notes in case the participant doesn't agree to be recorded, or if the recording fails). Double check you know when and where you're going to meet with the expert, including correct timezone differences if applicable.

First interview should be with a book

- Study the person
- Read as much as you can prior to meeting the person. Gives you better questions, and more efficient interviews.
- Read books about superstars, ideally biographies.
- Hunt out profiles in newspapers, etc. to look at the trajectory of their career.
- Look on linkedin, personal webpages, bios, published work, blogs. Sketch out the evolution of their career and mastery.
- Then use the interview to fill in the gaps in your research. What's not commonly known? What did the feel they learned at each work stage, what skills did they acquire? How much did those skills matter?
- Spend at least an hour for a 15 min interview. If the person is important and hard to access, spend 2-3 hours.

What to do during the interview

Have an actual conversation. Come prepared with good questions, but then follow the flow of conversation.

According to Newport, assuming the expert could easily say exactly what mattered to their success resulted in unhelpful interviews. Instead, assume they may not be able to explicitly say what mattered (especially on the spot). So, instead of asking for advice, ask for the story/specific details of how they did it. E.g. "the last time you got an A on an exam, tell me exactly what you did to prepare step by step." Ask them to retrace their steps of their rise, what actions they took, instead of their synthesis and summary. Learn from actions, not interpretations.

However, you probably want to ask about what set them apart from their less successful peers.

Ask specific questions. E.g. how do you efficiently understand and commit to memory what you need to know?

Ask if there are other people you should talk to. "Is there anyone else who I should talk to?" or "Who else knows a lot about this topic?" This is a good way to get leads to other people who know a lot about the subject. I could imagine this isolating you to a bubble if the only way you get leads is through referrals, however.

Walk the expert chronologically through his or her career. Strive to get the facts straight.

- Take notes to show you're making the most of their time.
- Make sure you know how much time they have, and follow that.
- Let them know exactly why you're there. Explain why you're doing the interview, briefly explain who you are, to give them context for the career interview.
- Look for the big jumps. When did they seem to change or progress dramatically?
    - Use comparisons to other people to better understand the jumps, e.g. why were you given the promotion and not your coworkers?
- Look for skills
    - Skills: things they are good at that directly create performance
    - Habits: routines that they use. Skills often more important, but habits easier to spot.
    - Assets: connections, credentials, reputation. Usually come around because of skills.
    - So focus on the skills.
- Look for surprises
    - Are there skills that you hadn't considered or that seem less critical now?
- Connect skills with experiences
    - Understand how they came to possess their skills. What led to them doing so?

- Ask an open-ended question such as "Is there anything else you think I should know?" at the end – it often turns of something you didn't know to ask about.

When people aren't sure what makes them successful, they will latch onto easily visible stuff. But the poor performing folks may give the same advice.

- Trivial habits are probably only loosely related to what makes them successful. E.g. exact patterns of what they do. So we want skills, not habits. What is this person really good at that others aren't?
- Look for skills that define where people end up. Habits define growth trajectory, skills define levels of achievement.
    - Habits are productivity routines, organization.

- - Skills are being able to write compelling content, mastering cutting edge research techniques.
  - So how can you tell what things are core?
    - It should be quite abnormal for someone to be good at X and also be unsuccessful.
    - It should be hard to imagine the person being successful if they didn't have the skill. If you had the ability to do this skill, could you perform at their level?
    - Ultimately, you'll need to experiment. Theorizing will help you, but you won't be able to tell without trying.
    - Be willing to accept some initial vagueness.

What to do after the interview

After you do the interview, analyze it. Compare across interviews for patterns.

Consult your notes from the interview and reflect on your pre-interview hypotheses. Note which hypothesis you feel more strongly about, after having done the interview. Cross out any you feel less strongly about after the interview.

What are the big takeaways from your interview?

What skills do you think this person developed to get from where you are, to the next stage of their career? Side note: If you feel strongly about a particular skill being important, you're ready to move onto the next phase of this course, building a deliberate practice project. If you aren't sure whether the skills you've identified really mattered, or were just coincidental, you may want to repeat this process with other experts until a clearer pattern emerges.

Followup

Write a thank you email to your expert, thanking them for their time and help. Be sure to ask them if it would be okay to send a follow-up question to clarify some matters. (Generally experts will consent to follow-up if they agreed to the interview in the first place, however it is always a good idea to ask so that future questions are seen as something they agreed to, rather than a nuisance.)

What question would you like to have asked, but either didn't have time or didn't think of them during the interview? You can use these questions either as a follow-up, or as a resource for future interviews with other experts

Create a document explaining how each person you interviewed went from a stage in their career similar to yours to where they are now, as if it were an instruction manual.

- Afterwards, send a thank you note. Mention a specific thing to show you were paying attention.

- If they agree to follow up later, make a calendar reminder to contact them again in 2-6 weeks to show concrete progress and ask a good follow-up question based off what you've learned

Try to have a good results/advice ratio, show that you did a lot based on the person's advice.

If there is something concrete you can do to help them, do it. Otherwise, thank them by showing that you used their advice.

Differential analysis or RCT for interviews

- Treat interviewing experts as a RCT. You need to look at the experts, and people who are similar but less successful, and compare their results. The control should be in the same field, has similar early advantages (pre where you are), and similar time in career.
- E.g. Cal studied professors' CVs to identify young professors and then compared similar profs with and without tenure. He found venues where they published didn't matter, a bit of difference around number of publications, but number of citations for papers was a huge factor. So important goals was publishing papers that have the potential to matter.

Top Performer interviewing techniques for career advancement

Exploring career paths
- Exploring hidden career paths
  - You probably only know of a handful of career paths, so you can use the interviews to find out more options. Be careful to watch out for default options, such as getting more school.
  - Also don't try to plan everything because you likely don't know enough. Instead "stay upwind", which means work on hard problems that offer lots of options afterwards, take responsibility for yourself and curiously explore. 80k's description of option value is probably simpler. Try to do things that put you in a better position later to have more options. http://www.paulgraham.com/hs.html
  - "Just pick a project that seems interesting: to master some chunk of material, or to make something, or to answer some question. Choose a project that will take less than a month, and make it something you have the means to finish. Do something hard enough to stretch you, but only just, especially at first. If you're deciding between two projects, choose whichever seems most fun. If one blows up in your face, start another. Repeat till, like an internal combustion engine, the process becomes self-sustaining, and each project generates the next one. (This could take years.)"
- Try to create a map of branches via your options. How winner-takes-all is your field?