

Interviews: How to Do Them Right

Getting the Story · By Simon Townsend · 13 min read

Interviews: how to do them right (5 pages)

1. Obtaining an interview Phone the person and ask. Or go through another person, such as a secretary or manager, or through a PR (public relations) person. But you start by ASKING. Never assume someone isn't in the phone directory. Never assume someone's un-contactable by phone.
2. Wiifm Your interviewee is like everyone else in the world, including you. Everyone wonders: "Wiifm? What's in it for me?" People who are used to being interviewed automatically know what's in it for them: publicity. And publicity helps them push their sport, career, invention, company, cause, product or whatever. You may have to do a bit of "selling" here. I recently talked a reluctant interviewee into it by convincing him how much his son living in Italy would love to read about his father, and I'd email him a copy.
3. Preparing for your interview Prepare as many questions as possible, in list form on paper. Do research by reading everything ever published about this person, and make lots of notes. If interest in this person centres around a topic (tennis, dieting, candle-making) then read up on that topic.
4. Business card Like anyone else, start by handing over your business card. This makes your interviewee comfortable, knowing he has your numbers in case he wants to call you later.
5. No permission needed Some students imagine that they must first obtain a signed agreement from the interviewee. Nonsense. The fact that he/she GIVES the interview is proof-enough he/she is giving permission to you to publish the interview.
6. Make small talk until you switch on your recorder. WHEN do you switch on your recorder? When the small talk feels like it's at an end, and now it's time for business.
7. Questions In a sense, questions don't matter. It's the answers that matter. Beginner freelancers spend ages thinking up "clever" questions, mostly from ego, because they want to look good in front of the interviewee and anyone sitting in on the interview. Then they want to quote themselves in their article: I then asked Professor Smith: "How would you sum up your life's thoughts on evolution, pre-determinism, existential philosophy, agriculture in the 1400s, The Beatles' lyrics and the meaning of life?" Duh. Often simple questions produce the best answers. Like: "Why?" and "But why?" or "Can you go deeper into that?" or "How did you FEEL about that?" or "Anything more?" or "Tell me more."
8. Your ultimate goal is to get your interviewee to say something new. Or something he/she shouldn't say . . . to say something surprising. You are trying to avoid him/her saying only the same kind of old quotes said many times before.
9. Nerves You wouldn't be human if you weren't nervous interviewing, for the first time, someone important or famous. If you're nervous, you can't hide it. Your nervousness will be obvious. The

best way to deal with this is to start the interview by being blunt and honest: "It's marvelous to meet you Prime Minister, and I have to tell you, boy, am I nervous!" Your interviewee will immediately understand and will try to put you at your ease. He will appreciate and admire your honesty and courage. Most people are too frightened to admit they are nervous, even though it is obvious. Once you admit openly to being nervous, it's amazing how quickly your nerves disappear (and how comfortable you make everyone in the room).

10. Conducting your interview Be friendly, but not overfriendly. Be complimentary, but not fawning. Be pleasant and well-mannered, but also be business-like. Let the interview flow, but occasionally check to see you've asked all you set out to ask. You may make the judgment to abandon some or even most of your questions, but at least you have them ready to ask. Many new questions will jump into your head as the interview proceeds.
11. This is not a conversation You know what a conversation is . . . it's usually words between you and a relative, friend or colleague. When a skilled interviewer like say, TV's Michael Parkinson, interviews someone he makes it sound like a conversation. But in a conversation both people ask questions and exchange information and opinions. In interviews it's pretty much one way. Only you ask questions and the interviewee gives you answers in the form of information and opinions.
12. This is not about you Don't (DON'T!!!) talk about yourself, no matter how relevant it might be to the topic, no matter how much you're busting to show off. Talk about yourself only if asked, and keep your answers short-short-SHORT!!!
13. It can be tough Interviews don't always go as you think they might. I have been an interviewer and an interviewee for print, radio and television. I am qualified to write about interviewing. Interviews for the three different mediums are remarkably different experiences for both interviewer and interviewee. Television is the hardest: the interviewee wonders "How do I look?" and the interviewer ponders "What questions will elicit the best answers?". And to be truthful the interviewer also wonders "How do I look?". Radio is easier for both. The interviewee wonders "How do I sound?" and the interviewer worries about the time constraints. But on radio you don't have to worry if your hair looks okay.
14. Print the easiest Interviewing for print is the easiest. Neither interviewer nor interviewee (usually) is pressed for time. Neither worries about what he sounds like or looks like. Social niceties can take place during a print interview such as asking about the dog, commenting on the flowers and serving tea and scones. Questions can be repeated, explained, expanded, commented-upon and repeated again. You can't do all that on TV and radio.
15. The danger of "closed questions" Just as in TV and radio, don't ask closed questions like: "Was your trip worthwhile?" because it can be answered with one word ("yes" or "no"). Ask open-ended questions like "WHY was your trip worthwhile?" or "What was the highlight of the trip?" or "What do your lowly-paid workers think of you taking such an expensive trip?" That is, ask questions that demand long and full answers.
16. Opinions, feelings Don't waste a lot of time asking for facts. You should have most of the facts before the interview starts. Be sure to ask questions that elicit OPINIONS and FEELINGS. "What's your opinion of James Packer?" "What's Packer's opinion of you?" "How did you FEEL

- when Packer said you were incompetent?" "How did you FEEL when your Mum agreed with Packer?" "What did you FEEL at the moment James Packer said 'You're fired!'?"
17. Fact-then-question You'd sound pretty silly if you asked Dawn Fraser "How many Olympic gold medals have you won?" This is such a famous fact, you'd be a dill to not know it. Consider using the "fact-then-question" style of interviewing: "Miss Fraser, you won four gold medals in three successive Olympics. How do you feel about being an Olympic icon?" By stating a fact about the person TO the person, you make your interviewee confident that you're an informed interviewer, and by following up asking for an opinion or emotion, you show you're interested in how your interviewee feels.
 18. Anecdotes All articles benefit from anecdotes. An anecdote is a small story. Column 8 is full of anecdotes. An anecdote is a short story relevant to your article. It might be as short as: "I was so surprised the night Clint Eastwood walked in to the restaurant, I called him Mr Westwood and then dropped my tray on his foot. He laughed good-naturedly. Two years later I met Clint again in my first acting role and he remembered my disaster and this time we both laughed." The test of an anecdote is whether it is short and simple, and can be easily remembered and re-told fairly accurately. An anecdote enlivens an article, humanises it and brings an entertainment element to the article. You get anecdotes by asking questions like: "What's the saddest/happiest event in (so-and-so)?" "What's the strangest thing that's happened here?" "Can you tell me of some coincidences here?" "What incidents do you most remember?" "What's your favourite story of those times that you enjoy re-telling?" That kind of OPEN-ENDED question. Once you get one anecdote from your interviewee, other anecdotes tumble out.
 19. Trust no-one and double-check Just because you've read a certain fact about a person in several old clippings doesn't mean it's true. I have often been told by interviewers that I was born in Woy Woy. I am unable to kill off this "fact" because it appeared in an encyclopedia in 1979 and has been repeated in articles many times. (My first job was in Woy Woy but I was born in Randwick, Sydney.) So you must say: "Can I get you to confirm this quick list of facts?" And read them out quickly. Your interviewee will appreciate your attention to detail and your commitment to accuracy. Do not be afraid to say: "And Fraser IS spelt with an S, not a Z, right?"
 20. Physical Make notes on the physical: what your interviewee is wearing, his body language and gesticulations, the furniture and surroundings. This could be important in painting a pen picture (or word picture) for your readers.
 21. The manipulative interviewee Many skilled interviewees (politicians particularly) enjoy manipulating interviewers. A favorite trick is to turn the tables on the interviewer and ask him a question and badger him for an answer: "Well alright, what the hell would YOU do about this debt, seeing you've got all the answers, eh, what would YOU do?" Don't answer! Ignore it. You and your interviewee agreed to an interview and he knows full well that HE is the one who has to answer the questions. Don't be argumentative and say: "I'm not here to answer questions, YOU are!" Just ignore your interviewee's attempt to manipulate and unsettle you, to stop you asking the hard questions. Just continue on as if you didn't hear the challenge.
 22. The well-schooled interviewee Many interviewees are spokes-people for good causes, worthwhile enterprises, interesting businesses and so on. They are well-schooled in getting across one or two

key ideas. You must open them up to talk about MORE than just these key ideas they want to push.

23. Don't YOU be boring Think up at least one surprise question, something your interviewee would never have been asked. Like, "When you're long dead, what will your great grandchildren think of you?" or "What's one of your guilty secrets?" or "How important is sex to you?"
24. Finishing up When you've finished, finish fast and get out. Any person worth interviewing is usually a busy person. They don't appreciate you hanging around wanting to talk about other matters. So say goodbye quickly and leave a good impression for next time.

Interviewing children

MY TIP: Young children often ramble, use wrong words and misinterpret your questions, so always tape-record children's interviews. You are not legally or morally required to get permission from a parent. But many journalists like the parent to be present when interviewing a child, so that later, the parent can't claim the child was exploited.

The rules for interviewing children are no different to the journalistic rules for interviewing anyone. Here is the Code of Ethics for journalists who are members of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, the union for all journalists and photographers. I'd say the last part of No. 8 is particularly applicable to interviewing children.

Check later with your interviewee?

Is a journalist wise to check a completed article with the interviewee?

If you agreed to check, then you must keep your promise.

Letting the interviewee know what's in your article may be a good way to protect against inaccuracies or misunderstandings.

However when I do this, I NEVER send my interviewee a copy of the article. That leads to problems. He has it in his possession for too long and starts fretting and then decides he wants to change his quotes, even though I've quoted him accurately. Or worse, he starts showing it to family and friends, and suddenly he's back wanting all kinds of changes made, or says something silly and vague like "My family says it doesn't sound like the way I talk".

All of this has nothing to do with the original idea - protecting you the journalist and him the interviewee against inaccuracies.

So what I do is telephone him and read it out loud over the phone.

This is fair and this is his chance to correct any inaccuracies, but doesn't give him a chance to brood over the article.

If he then says he needs a copy to show his boss/wife/mum, whoever, you must be extremely firm and say NO, you had an obligation to only him, and no one else, and you have now discharged that obligation . . . "goodbye".

Code Of Ethics

MEAA members engaged in journalism commit themselves to:

- Honesty
 - Fairness
 - Independence
 - Respect for the rights of others
1. Report and interpret honestly, striving for accuracy, fairness and disclosure of all essential facts. Do not suppress relevant available facts, or give distorting emphasis. Do your utmost to give a fair opportunity for reply.
 2. Do not place unnecessary emphasis on personal characteristics, including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, sexual orientation, family relationships, religious belief, or physical or intellectual disability.
 3. Aim to attribute information to its source. Where a source seeks anonymity, do not agree without first considering the source's motives and any alternative attributable source. Where confidences are accepted, respect them in all circumstances.
 4. Do not allow personal interest, or any belief, commitment, payment, gift or benefit, to undermine your accuracy, fairness or independence.
 5. Disclose conflicts of interest that affect, or could be seen to affect, the accuracy, fairness or independence of your journalism. Do not improperly use a journalistic position for personal gain.
 6. Do not allow advertising or other commercial considerations to undermine accuracy, fairness or independence.
 7. Do your utmost to ensure disclosure of any direct or indirect payment made for interviews, pictures, information or stories.
 8. Use fair, responsible and honest means to obtain material. Identify yourself and your employer before obtaining any interview for publication or broadcast. Never exploit a person's vulnerability or ignorance of media practice.
 9. Present pictures and sound which are true and accurate. Any manipulation likely to mislead should be disclosed.
 10. Do not plagiarise.
 11. Respect private grief and personal privacy. Journalists have the right to resist compulsion to intrude.
 12. Do your utmost to achieve fair correction of errors.

Who To Interview?

If you're having trouble coming up with interview ideas . . . what about all the interesting people in your own life who you can easily ask for an interview? A relative, friend, neighbour, workmate. Have your list of questions ready. What about:

- A person who's been job hunting for a long time

- A musician . . . hopes, dreams, opinions, experiences
- A teacher . . . thoughts on career, kids, education system
- A keen bingo/pokies/bridge player
- A student who believes he has too much homework
- A good surfboard rider
- Secretary of the local RSPCA
- Your local delicatessen owner

The list goes on. People are often coy and shy, and even a little suspicious. "Why would you want to interview ME?" they say. Part of a freelancer's job is to persuade people. Often the person you approach will be flattered and excited to be asked, but conscious of not wanting to appear egotistical, will falsely protest. It's your duty to talk them into it, putting them at their ease. Again I say, have your list of questions ready. There's a thousand stories in your own backyard.

Eight mistakes to avoid

1. Never arrive (or phone) late

And if you arrive late, don't make an excuse. No one cares about your reason (excuse), and everyone will believe you're lying. Just apologise very briefly and plunge in to your interview. If you think there's any chance of being late (like using public transport to get to your interview), aim to arrive two hours early.

1. Your research must be complete

Particularly, you should have PRINTED, and have with you, everything available on the internet (the interviewee's background, the company's profile, the topic's website, etc, etc). This SHOWS how prepared and interested you are.

1. Turn off your mobile

Pull your mobile out, in front of your interviewee, and announce "I'm turning this off." If suddenly your mobile rings before you have a chance to turn it off, DON'T ANSWER IT . . . turn it off anyway. Demonstrate how polite you are. All that matters to you is talking to your interviewee.

1. Be dressed appropriately

You know what this means. Anything from being naked (if you're interviewing a nudist at a nudist camp) to wearing formal clothing (if you're interviewing a movie star at the Academy Awards?). Your being dressed inappropriately can make your interviewee uncomfortable, embarrassed or angry - and even if this is unreasonable, you must do the right thing.

1. Never gossip about your other interviewees

Your interviewee may say to you: "I read your interview with [famous person]. Tell me what he's really like." Say something vague, nice and innocuous. You must not gossip about other interviewees, or anyone else for that matter. You'll make your current interviewee nervous that you may later gossip about him/her.

1. Do not take a toilet break

If you have to go, you have to go. But it's much more professional if you don't take a toilet break during your interview.

1. Be nice to others

Your interview may be sat-in on by other people in the life of your interviewee. Such as a spouse, a publicist, a personal assistant, a lover, a bodyguard, a manager and so on. Be careful to not start interviewing them because it can make your interviewee nervous. On the other hand your interviewee may say: "You can ask my husband about that." It would then be appropriate to ask a question of the other person. Just don't forget who you're there to interview.

1. Don't forget details

A famous journalist who's won Walkley Awards for his terrific interviews, admitted to me that in the middle of one interview with a celebrated sportsman, this famous journo forgot the name of the sportsman. I hope such a disaster never happens to you. Don't forget important details. Keep vital notes close by. END

Reprinted from The Wonderful World of Journalism. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit simontownsendjournalist.com for the full archive.