

# Sweet talk

The Craft of Writing · By Simon Townsend · 13 min read

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## Sweet talking

: Let me tell you the hard truth - you **MUST** train yourself "SWEET TALK" people. You must train yourself **NOT** to take "no comment" or "I can't put you through to her" for an answer. I can only repeat the most important parts of my advice in my full FactSheets titled:

- "Interviewing"
- "Phone manner"
- "Phone shyness"

If you want these FactSheets in full, ask for them by email - by those exact names.

Maybe people are embarrassed about your topic you sent me. But still, you have to sweet talk your way in. Be nice, be pleasant. All journalists - fulltime, casual or freelancers - obtain most of their quotes and much of their information over the phone.

Editors do not forgive journalists who say: "She wouldn't talk to me . . . he just hung up in my ear . . . I couldn't get a word in . . ."

Often you **MUST** "sweet talk" people. People are busy, scared of the topic, and not interested in your needs or your deadlines. If you have a persuasive manner, your freelance life will be easier.

## Interviewing

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. 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.
5. 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?"
6. 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.
7. 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).
8. 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.
9. 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.
10. 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!!!
11. 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.

12. 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.
13. 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.
14. 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!'?"
15. 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.
16. 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.
17. 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?"
18. 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.
  19. 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.
  20. 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.
  21. 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?"
  22. 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.

## **Your phone manner**

All journalists - fulltime, casual or freelancers - obtain most of their quotes and much of their information over the phone. Often you have to "sweet talk" people. People are busy, and not interested in your needs or your deadlines. If you have a persuasive manner, your freelance life will be easier. Fill-in all and return this questionnaire. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers, only your opinions.

## Attitudes

Tick one box and PRINT your comments about yourself

1. I WILL get the information and quotes I need even if I make the person on the other end uncomfortable.

• agree strongly ? agree ? don't know ? disagree ? disagree strongly

1. If I force myself to sound friendly, perky and interested, my pretence will show through.

• agree strongly ? agree ? don't know ? disagree ? disagree strongly

1. Giving compliments is one of the best ways to get an interviewee's time and attention over the phone.

• agree strongly ? agree ? don't know ? disagree ? disagree strongly

1. The secret of a good phone manner is to keep smiling at someone who can't see me but who hears my smile.

• agree strongly ? agree ? don't know ? disagree ? disagree strongly

1. I always speak slowly and distinctly.

• agree strongly ? agree ? don't know ? disagree ? disagree strongly

1. It's phony to address people as "Mr Smith" or "Dr Jones" as people now like to be addressed by a first name.

• agree strongly ? agree ? don't know ? disagree ? disagree strongly

Ask for "Phone manner" in full by email

## Phone shyness can be controlled

You can't beat shyness, but you can control it. I can show you ways to help yourself. I have no magic answer, like "Take this pill and you'll instantly never have shyness . . ." I hope the following thoughts may be of some help.

1. I know a successful freelance journalist who reviews computer games under one name and reviews TV shows under another name, neither her real name. She is terrified of new people - in person or on the phone. The games and tapes are mailed and couriered to her, and she never talks to anyone. She never attends industry social functions even though she receives five invitations a week. She uses faxes and emails to contact her editors. But because of her highly specialised work with products rather than people, she manages to succeed without human contact. Few journalists have this situation. A lousy way to live . . . agreed? ?Yes ?No

2. Any information or any interview worth having is worth asking for. But this truism doesn't help painfully shy people. You've been experiencing phone shyness long before you started your journalism journey . . . agreed? ?Yes ?No

3. If you have phone shyness now, you'll probably have it for the rest of your life. So what? Some movie stars, rock singers, national TV stars and politicians suffer great nervousness and insecurity, and they NEVER get over it. They ALWAYS feel sick in the stomach before each public performance. They have to do their work not one-to-one over the phone, but in front of vast audiences. "Not feeling like it" is just an occupational hazard. So what? The job has to be done . . . agreed? ?Yes ?No
4. Is feeling comfortable what life is all about? I don't think so. I think feeling discomfort is just part of life. Do Bill Gates and James Packer never feel discomfort? Can their billions ensure they never feel shy, embarrassed or inferior? Every day of their lives Bill and James and Julia Roberts and Luciano Pavarotti and all the other rich, famous and talented people feel discomfort. You can never be SO successful in life that all discomfort disappears. Discomfort stays with all of us, for all our lives . . . agreed? ?Yes ?No
5. In the past some students with shyness have told me that they have sought professional help. They have had sessions with counselors, life coaches or psychologists. These are people trained in dealing with lack of assertiveness, extreme self-criticism, low self-esteem, uncontrollable blushing, phobias and other problems associated with shyness.

?Interested ?Not interested

1. A popular and successful type of help available today is called Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. It examines people's thought patterns and teaches them to challenge negative attitudes and behaviour in themselves and in their lives. There's an excellent \$15 book about CBT called Feeling Better: A Guide to Mood Management by Dr Antony Kidman. This book helped me tremendously when I was going through a difficult period following a slight stroke in 2003. Remember, it's more stressful to NOT telephone than to go through the making of the call. Could this book be for you? ?Yes ?No
2. I have conducted many auditions of people seeking jobs as television presenters. I tell them beforehand: "Nervousness will not lose you this audition. I EXPECT people to be nervous. I worry about people who are NOT nervous, as they may not be fully human. At the beginning of your audition, speak first about your nerves and how you feel you're dealing with the problem." This works like magic. As soon as people stand in front of the camera and admit openly to shyness and uncertainty, suddenly the nerves decrease 90% or disappear altogether. I advise my freelance journalism students suffering phone shyness to tell the person on the other end of the phone: "Look please forgive me if I sound raw and inexperienced, because I am. I'm new to this, and boyo-boy, talking to you Lady Zillionaire, I'm extremely nervous. So just bear with me if I make a silly fool of myself." The person at the other end will be impressed at your good humor, modesty and willingness to admit to nerves, because she has had to put up with people who lie and big-note themselves. It's refreshing to meet polite, frank, honest interviewers. The truth will set you free . . . agreed? ?Yes ?No

Comments to Simon: ?????..??..

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