



## How to Conduct a Strong Interview

Whether you are interviewing to discover someone's life story, or investigating a specific issue such as what's causing so much asthma in your neighborhood, you will learn even more than you set out to find out. This is the wonderful, adventurous nature of interviewing: You can learn about any subject or person that interests you, just by asking questions.

### GETTING READY

The interviewer is a guide into the unknown—and, like a good guide, you come with tools, a map, and a plan.

#### **Pack your tools**

Have all of your equipment at the ready—whether it is pen and paper, a survey, a tape recorder and tapes, or a video camera. Pack extra batteries, tapes, pens, film, and copies of forms. Practice ways of explaining your project in a confident voice.

#### **Make your map**

If you are interviewing people on a specific topic, read and research as much about the subject as possible. You will want to know what's important to you and come informed. If you are interviewing people to find out their stories, learn a little bit about them beforehand, if possible. Think ahead and try to plot out the possible path of an interview.

#### **Create your plan**

Have a list of questions on paper—but also keep a list in your mind, so that you can have the most natural conversation possible. Make a date and time to meet your interviewee in a quiet place. If your method is spontaneous (talking to homeless folks on the street, for example), set up a starting and ending time and place for yourself, and maybe a buddy system. Then, stick to your plan.

### DESIGNING GOOD QUESTIONS—AND GOING WITH THE FLOW

Organize and group your questions in the order that makes the most sense. For example, a *chronological* interview will start at one point in time, and follow an event or change. A *thematic* interview will focus around selected issues, and explore each one in turn. There are many ways to organize questions for specific inquiries, and a little experimenting will help you craft a structure and flow.

There are also many styles of questions—as many as there are personalities of people. *Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no.* Try to include some of all of the kinds of questions below, for a thorough interview.

**Open-ended.** Short, simple, open-ended questions have many possible answers, and are a good backbone for an interview. Instead of, "Did you have a hard childhood because of the economic downturn and Federal wrongdoing of the Great Depression?" ask, "What was your childhood like?" "Did you have enough to eat?" "Tell me about the buildings in that block."

**Specific.** Specific questions examine historical details. For example, "How many times did this happen exactly?" "When and where were you born?" "When did you start thinking about dropping out of school, and what was the trigger?" Use specific questions to establish the framework of facts.

**Sensory.** Sensory questions bring an interview to life. "What did the tornado sound like?" "How did the city smell?" "Was it hot or cold?"

**Meaning-seeking.** Questions that seek meaning are best asked after you and your subject have built some trust during the interview. They reveal feelings, long-term insights, and unique personal viewpoints. For example: "How did your feelings about the school change when your school broke up into smaller schools?" "What did you draw on in your spirit to survive the loss of your first-born child?" "What will it mean to you to get a college diploma?"

**Elaboration and clarification.** These little questions go a long way. "Can you tell me more about that?" and "Is there anything else you would like to add?" elicit greater detail and encourage more information. At the conclusion of an interview, encourage a speaker to tell you anything you might have missed in your questions.

## IN THE MOMENT: INTERVIEW DYNAMICS

Some interviews cover well-worn territory; others involve entering the wilderness of a story that has never been heard before. Wherever you go, the dynamics between the interviewee and the interviewer will influence what you find. Below are key points to keep in mind during the interview.

### **Make your approach polite and respectful.**

Explain what you're doing. Be confident. Assume your subject will want to talk to you. The way people respond depends on how you approach them. The trick is to make people realize that your project is both fun and important.

### **Listening is the key.**

A good interview is like a conversation. Prepare questions, but don't just follow a list. The most important thing is to listen and have your questions come naturally. If your questions are rehearsed and hollow, the answers will sound that way, too. If you are curious and your questions are spontaneous and honest, you will get a good interview.

Give the interviewee a lot of cues that you are listening and you care about what they are saying. Maintaining constant eye contact, nodding, not interrupting, and offering some facial or verbal encouragement are great ways to listen actively.

### **Interviewing is a two-way street.**

Conducting a good interview depends, in part, on asking the right questions. But it's also important to establish a relationship with the person you are interviewing. Sometimes it is appropriate to share some information about yourself in an interview. Remember that it's a conversation. What's more, for it to be an honest conversation, people must feel that you care about what they say and will honor and respect their words and stories.

### **Don't be afraid of pauses and silences.**

Resist the temptation to jump in. Let the person think. Often the best comments come after a short, uncomfortable silence when the person you are interviewing feels the need to fill the void and add something better.

**Accept emotion.**

Sometimes an interview can bring up strong emotion. If an interviewee cries or gets emotional, there is usually nothing wrong—but offer them the opportunity to end the interview or to keep going—and offer to get them a tissue!

**Maintain neutrality.**

It is important to ask questions that do not reveal your bias or an expected answer. Especially when handling political, moral, religious, or societal issues, make sure your own convictions do not come into the interview.

**Use the small details to tell the big stories.**

Look for the little things that surprise you. Here's an example: Mrs. Jones is forty-five years old, a doctor, has a family and a dog. But even more interesting—and revealing—Mrs. Jones sets every single clock in her house five minutes fast, and she collects bus transfers from her workday commute and keeps them all in a shoebox in the closet. You can learn a lot about people from a few unexpected details.

**Take notes.**

Remember specific details. Take notes on your impressions immediately after the interview, while it's still fresh in your mind. You can also use the tape recorder as a dictating machine, to record your own thoughts.

**Be genuinely curious.**

One simple rule gets people to talk openly and honestly: Ask your own real questions about the world around you.

**Express thanks.**

Be sure to thank the interviewee for sharing his or her words and time. Let them know what it means to you, and its usefulness for your project.

## **WRAPPING UP AND FOLLOWING THROUGH**

Once you've finished the interview, there's a bit of business to take care of.

**Obtain permission.** If you are going to publish the interview or share it publicly, the interviewee should sign a permission or release form that allows you legally to share her or his words. [We have included a sample consent form at the end of this tip sheet.]

**Label your materials.** If you haven't labeled your tapes before the interview, do so now! Label your tapes or notes with the name of the interviewer, the name of the interviewee, the place, the date, and the name of the project. Write down any reflections you have on the interview experience and keep them with the tapes.

**Send a thank-you.** Send the interviewee a handwritten note of thanks, and keep him or her updated about the course of your project. If you publish your findings or write a paper, send a copy of it to the interviewee.

## **WORKING WITH TAPE RECORDERS: TECHNICAL TIPS**

We can't say enough about the value of making audio recordings of your interviews. It allows you to focus on the give-and-take of the interview, to think on your feet, to be spontaneous in ways that are

impossible if you are madly trying to take detailed notes. It preserves the words and ways of speech of the interviewee—which is what makes an interview come alive. And it assures accuracy. Recording does mean that you will have to spend time transcribing the tape, but it's worth the time and investment.

However, it's amazing how such a simple machine can cause as much havoc as the voice recorder sometimes does. (You don't need a fancy audio recorder to get the job done. A standard, small tape cassette recorder does fine, when your goal is limited to preserving what was said as opposed to creating a broadcast-quality recording.) Even seasoned professionals will find themselves pushing a wrong button, forgetting to bring extra batteries, or ending up with a tape where voices aren't loud enough or background noise interferes.

So here's what the pros want you to know.

**Get comfortable with the equipment.**

Play around with the tape recorder on your own until you are very familiar with all the buttons and knobs. It's important to do this before you begin; if you're relaxed with the recorder and the microphone, the people you're interviewing will be too.

**Get organized.**

Always make sure you have enough cassettes and an extra set of batteries. Get a shoulder bag to hold the recorder, the cassettes and batteries. The more prepared you are, the more you can concentrate on the important things.

**Do a test.**

Always do a test before you begin. Record a few seconds, then play it back to make sure the sound is good.

**Label your tapes.**

Always label the tapes before you start. When you're in the field, it's easy to forget and tape over something you've just recorded. (It happens.)

**Record interviews in the quietest place possible.**

When picking a spot to conduct the interview, be careful of traffic noise, hissing radiators, talk from the room next door, munching on snacks—anything that will distract from the interview and make it hard to hear the recorded tape. Even refrigerators can make an annoying sound that you might not notice until you get home and listen to the tape. If you have to record an interview in a loud place, it can help to bring the microphone even closer (2–3 inches) to the speaker's mouth.

**Make the interview situation comfortable before you start.**

Move chairs around so as to get close to the person you are interviewing. For example, sit at the corner of a table, not across, so you can hold the microphone close and your arm won't grow weak, or so you can place the tape recorder immediately between you on the table.

**Keep the recorder or microphone close to the speaker.**

Just as when you are recording yourself, the most important thing is to keep the microphone close to the speaker's mouth (5–6 inches). If you want to record your questions, too, you may have to move the tape recorder or microphone back and forth.

**Put people at ease.**

Talk about the weather. Joke about the tape recorder. It's a good idea to begin recording a few minutes before you actually start the interview. That helps you avoid the uncomfortably dramatic moment: "Okay, now we will begin recording." Just chat about anything while you begin rolling tape.

Before they realize it, you've started the interview.

**Beware of the pause button.**

When recording, make sure the tape is rolling and that you're not in pause mode. Don't use the pause button. It's a very tricky little button—it can make you think you are recording when you're not.

**Record everything.**

Long pauses are okay. *Umm's* are okay. Saying stupid and embarrassing things is okay. Often the stuff you think is weird, worthless, or that you initially want to edit out, will end up being the best and most surprising parts of the interview.

**Keep it rolling.**

The golden rule of taping an interview is that the best moments always happen right when you've stopped recording. There's a reason for that: As soon as you push "stop," people relax and are more themselves. Natural, truthful moments are priceless. Tape is cheap. Keep it rolling.

*NOTE:* Parts of this tip sheet have been adapted from *The Teen Reporter Handbook: How to Make Your Own Radio Diary*, by Joe Richman, Producer of the Teenage Diaries Series on National Public Radio.