**Twenty-five Steps to a Good Interview**

**By Russell Chandler**

*Editor's note: This article came from a workshop that Russell Chandler gave at the 1992 Evangelical Press Association meetings.*

**1. Interview in person or on the telephone?** If convenient, it's best to do it in person. Then you can catch the essence of the person in their surroundings and home.

**2. Call ahead for an appointment and indicate your publication.** If you're a freelancer, then say so when scheduling the interview. Don't underestimate the time you'll need for the interview.

Where will you meet? Their home? Their office? I prefer a neutral location. It helps set the person at ease and cuts down on interruptions. I dislike using restaurants since taping is impossible. If you do interview at a restaurant, be prepared to pay.

Is your interview an exclusive or will it be shared with others? Find out ahead of time so you are not surprised.

**3. Before the interview, know as much as possible about the person.** Have a current bio sheet sent to you ahead of time.

**4. Cultivate a relaxed atmosphere.**

**5. When you first arrive, utilize the informal moments to gather impressions--atmosphere of the house, details like flowers or cars in the driveway.** Pay your subject a sincere compliment to set the person at ease from the beginning.

**6. To tape or not to tape.** In a number of states, the law requires that the subject knows you are taping. If it is a sensitive interview, you will want to keep that tape for your records.

Always inform the person, asking, "If it's all right with you, I'm going to tape this conversation because you may be speaking faster than I can write. I want to make sure it's right."

If you record the interview, also take notes since nothing is failproof.

**7. On or off the record?** I assume it is on the record, unless the person says that it is not. I prefer not to go off the record. When part is on and part is off, I mark my notes clearly.

**8. Prepare your questions before the interview.** Write out a short list but don't show the questions to your subject. The only exception is when you have to interview through the mail or email. Some times this is the only way to get the information. You can also interview by tape. Send a tape with the questions and get tape recorded answers from the person.

If sharing the interview with a competing publication, try to get a portion where you ask your questions in private.

**9. Begin with the non-threatening, non-emotional topics.** Usually this means you will begin with something about their life background. I check the information from their bio and the clips to see if there are any gross errors of fact.

**10. Then move the interview to the person's achievements, ideas and beliefs.** You will begin to ask and talk about areas which are more conceptual.

**11. Catch the uniqueness, the mannerisms, and the feelings of the person.** That's why interviewing in person better than on the phone.

**12. Observe the person's features.** Good stories will include this information in the article.

**13. Let the person reminisce, but if time is limited, be aware that you may have to interrupt.** The more limited your time, the more you have to keep the interview on track.

**14. Here's some techniques to get people talking:** "Tell me about..." Or "Did you ever..." Or "How did you feel when..." If you need to play the devil's advocate, instead of direct confrontation say, "Suppose a critic were to say..."

**15. Know your market for the article.** What would your readers ask? What would they sense and hear?

**16. At the end of the interview, lay down your pen, turn off your laptop computer and have a little chat.** This is where they may remember things they haven't before. Provided they aren't spooked, it's all right to open up your notebook and take more notes.

**17. Use the feedback principle to restate the views of the person.** Sometimes I'm not sure what they are after. "In other words, your theory is..." Sometimes I want them to say it better than they have but don't want to ask them directly. I use phrases like, "What I hear you saying is..."

**18. Don't allow yourself to become the subject and tell your life story.** When the subject says, "Tell me about yourself...," use something like, "The reason, I'm here is to talk with you."

**19. Do you send a copy of your story to the subject beforehand?** You may have to. I agree to send it after publication--and only if they ask for it.

**20. I agree to check all direct quotes or factual matters, but I don't agree to their editing my story.** An exception is when your publisher has already made such an agreement before the interview.

**21. Ask ahead of time to call back for clarification or additional input.** This paves the way for any possible gaps from your interview. Stress that you want to be careful and accurate.

**22. Anticipate any possible objections and opposition to your story but go in with an open mind.**

**23. Don't argue or try to prove the interviewee wrong.** This is not the forum for that. If the article is to include opposite views, tell the person that you're looking for diversity of views.

**24. If your interview is refused, you can simply say, "Thank you anyway and that's that." Or "Thank you.** But if you don't mind, I'll check with you again in a month. Or "The story will be more balanced and fair if your views are represented. I wanted to hear your side. Are you sure that you won't change your mind?" Or in a hard ball approach, "I'm writing the story anyway, so it will be a better story if your views are included?"

Ask if they will answer written questions. Or would they be willing to give a 15-minute phone interview or do it by tape?

**25. Be genuinely interested in the other person.** Thank them for the interview. They've given of their time about themselves. Remind them of the publication and the date. Make arrangements for the photos.
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13 simple journalist techniques for effective interviews

By [Sarah Stuteville](http://matadornetwork.com/author/sarah-stuteville/) On March 26, 2007 · [35 Comments](http://matadornetwork.com/bnt/13-simple-journalist-techniques-for-effective-interviews/#comments)

**Journalism is a creative job.**

DESPITE ALL THE professors who told me articles were a fixed formula plugged up with simple facts and despite the avalanche of clichéd crap that passes for most mainstream journalism, I stand by that statement.

Like any creative profession, you use your perception to re-interpret the world around you. You try to engage an audience with ideas and issues-you create something meaningful from all the incoherent information and noise out there.

But here’s the catch: good journalism is dependent on a total stranger’s cooperation and participation.

At the heart of this issue is the interview. The finished product may be a piece of writing that you craft, but the material a result of the interviews you conduct.

And while sources vary-some people know exactly what they want to say while others love to make you sweat for a basic quote-how you conduct the interview has more to do with the outcome than anything.

It’s odd that so much emphasis is put on teaching journalists how to write an article when that skill is useless without also teaching journalists how to develop strong interview techniques.

In an effort to help other aspiring reporters develop this crucial skill-I brought together some of my colleagues and journalist friends to ask them what interview tips they think are most helpful:

**#1 – Find a good location**

Avoid Starbucks! It’s often easiest to suggest a centrally located corporate coffee shop but if there is any way you can interview in a place that has some relevance to the story or your subject you’ll have much greater success.

Not only because you’ll gain a further sense of context, people are often more comfortable (and open) when they’re in a familiar place or what feels like “their territory.”

Ask to meet at your subject’s house, work, or the location of an incident relevant to the story. Even meeting at the interviewee’s favorite restaurant is more interesting than a Starbucks.

**#2 – Prepare Your Goals Ahead**

Know what questions you’re going to ask and why you’re going to ask them.

Heading to an interview with a sense of what you want to get out of it (a colorful re-enactment of an event, an on-the-record opinion on the issue you’re covering, general background, etc.) is critical to conducting a successful interview.

You should already be thinking about what you want your piece to look like and what you need from this interview to get your article closer to that end result.

**#3 – Write down your questions**

Be sure and bring prepared questions with you. I usually go into an interview with twice as many questions than I expect to ask. The security of knowing that I’m not going to get stuck helps my confidence and you never know what question will get you the information you’re really looking for.

**#4 – Work on your flow**

This is probably the most challenging, but also the most important interview skill you can develop.

You want to strike a balance between a conversation (which helps make your subject feel comfortable and aids candor) and getting the job done. As your subject is answering your question, be thinking about what you’ll ask next and why.

The flow of questions needs to seem natural and conversational, don’t spin your subject off on a completely different topic just because that’s the next question on your list-think about segue’s and transitions.

This way your subject doesn’t feel forced to give you sound bites and may open up a little (particularly important for anyone working on an audio piece where you may need blocks of the raw interview).

**#5 – Think about the medium**

Interviewing techniques defiantly vary for different mediums. If you’re interviewing for audio or video you want to ask two part questions which encourages subjects to talk for longer blocks of time.

Conversely, when you’re interviewing for print, try and break questions up so you can get shorter and more concise answers (easier for taking notes and for quoting later). You can be more conversational with interviews for print, you can say “yeah,” and “uh-huh,” etc.

Not doing this is one of the biggest challenges when you’re interviewing for audio. Nodding and smiling accomplishes the same sort of conversational encouragement and keeps your tape clean.

Another great trick for audio interviews is to have your subject re-enact the story. It makes for good sound and helps you avoid having too much of your own narration later on.

**#6 – Bring a buddy**

I find having a second person as a note taker and extra set of ears can be very useful.

If you don’t think another person will overwhelm or distract your subject (I find that is pretty rare) it can be a lifesaver to have that second set of notes to check your quotes and information.

**#7 – Avoid Obsessing**

While good notes and recording are very important, you can do yourself a disservice by obsessing about recording every little detail of what your subject says.

As you’re interviewing you should be able to discern the gems from the chatter-focus on the quotes and info you know you’re going to use and make sure you get that right!

**#8 – Be a little annoying**

Don’t be afraid to relentlessly revisit a question or topic that you feel hasn’t been properly addressed by the interviewee. Sometimes people need time to warm up to you or a topic, or will respond better if your question is worded differently. Keep trying.

**#9 – Be a little sneaky**

Continue taking notes even after the interview is officially over. Sometimes people say the most revealing or intimate things when they feel that they’re out of the “hot seat.” If they don’t say “off the record,” it’s all game.

**#10 – Empower them**

A great question to ask if you don’t fully understand the perspective of your interviewee is “what is your ideal solution/resolution?” Obviously this only works in certain circumstances, but when appropriate it can help clarify a person’s point of view or opinion.

**#11 – Work them up**

Another great question is “Why do you care about this issue?” This can be an effective way to get a strong and emotional quote about why the topic you’re covering is so important.

You can also ask for the turning point in a story, the moment when everything changed or catalyzed. This can help you shape the narrative of your story as well.

**#12 – Endure awkward silences**

I know this is totally counterintuitive. My instinct is to keep chattering and asking questions to keep people feeling comfortable, but sometimes, especially when you’re dealing with sensitive subjects, you need to shut up and wait.

Ask your question, let them give you the rehearsed and generic answer, then sit there quietly and see what comes next. You’d be amazed how often this technique yields powerful results.

**#13 – Ask for what you need**

Seriously, sometimes interviewees are frustrating not because they’re trying to bust your chops but just don’t understand what you want from them.

I find that many interview subjects get a kick out of having you “pull back the curtain” a little and tell them about your process.

You can say, “Listen, I really need a quote from you encapsulating your feelings on this issue,” or “I really need you to walk me through the chronology of this,” or even, “I really need you to take me to a location that is relevant to this issue so I can set a scene.”

For the most part people want to be helpful and you just need to tell them how they can.

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As you gain more experience interviewing, you’ll hone your own techniques. Your personality as an interviewer also plays a huge role in how you develop your approach.

In the meantime use these hints to help you mine the information you need to get down to the creative business of crafting a great piece of journalism.