

Interviewing techniques for journalists



- Preparing for Interview
- Interviewing Techniques Strategy
- Tips on Interviewing Techniques
- Handling Tough Interviewees

T. SELVA
Chief News Editor
The Star

Interviewing techniques for journalists

Journalism is a creative job

For a journalist, the finished product may be a piece of writing that he or she crafted, but the material is a result of the interviews the individual conducted.

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.

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.

Below are some tips for aspiring reporters to develop and help them in their skills.

1 – Find a good location

Avoid fast food joints! 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, etc.

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 (Yes/No)

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 (sometimes the personality may not talk freely). Using a tape recorder to conduct the interview may be unfavourable because the personality may freeze, not relaxed and will be extra careful.

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 witty

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 jaw 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.

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

The good thing about recording interviews is that accusations of misquotation can be avoided by playing back the section in question.

14. Maintain eye contact!

A reporter who spends most of the interview bent over taking notes or looking into a notebook can be as disconcerting as a tape recorder in an interviewee's face. While taking notes and recording the interview, maintain as much eye contact as possible. Learn to take abbreviated notes looking down only once in a while so you can focus on your interviewee. This will make the interview more like a conversation, and enable everyone to be more relaxed.

15. Before your leave...

Ask your source if there is anything that you might have forgotten to ask. Perhaps the interviewee is burning to tell you useful information, but you did not even think to ask that question. Don't leave without getting a contact number or e-mail address and a good time to call with follow-up questions. Always ask for other sources. Colleagues or friends of the interviewee may be more knowledgeable or willing and able to speak to you. Thank your source for spending time talking with you before you leave.

16. Review your notes right after the interview!

Don't wait until the end of the day or later in the week to review your notes. Go over them right away, while everything is fresh in your mind, filling in your shorthand and elaborating on your observations. Skip that date for drinks with your office pals until after you have reviewed and organized your notes.





Interviewing Techniques - Strategy:

- Plan your strategy carefully. Start with the easy questions first to get them talking about themselves
- If you have been commissioned to write the article, ask the magazine or newspaper beforehand if they have any information
- Don't do all the easy ones first - save some to intersperse with the more difficult ones.
- People find it much easier to tell stories than to give a precise answer, i.e. "Could you tell me something about your village?"
- Try to keep your questions interesting, especially when with someone who is in the public eye and has been interviewed hundreds of times.



Interviewing Techniques - Writing Profiles:

There may be occasions when you will be asked to write a profile about someone, rather than actually having to do a face-to-face interview.

Profiles often contain interviews but they don't have to. Journalists can draw on newspaper clippings, previous magazine stories, books, and anything else that might provide anecdotes or suggest clues to the subject.

Your greatest source of subjects for profiles is newspapers and magazines - all of which can be checked out on the Internet. Don't think that just because somebody has already written a profile of a Superstar you can't write one. Read the profile and look for aspects of the celebrity that were not covered. That could be your angle for writing about her for some other publication.

Almost every newspaper prints profiles regularly. For example, profiles of a football coach, singer, actor, a woman who runs a half-way house for kids, or a local author - local newspapers are very interested in profiles if the person lives in their circulation area.

A good interviewer is a person who is interested in other people and is curious about what makes them tick.

It is also very helpful to have made in advance a list of questions he is planning to ask so that he can be certain that he will cover all the vital points. It is suggested that the journalist should spend a few minutes in small talk with the interviewee-especially if the former is not used to dealing with the media and thus he may be nervous talking to a journalist- to make him feel comfortable and create a rapport.



After the ice has been broken, the journalist should start with basic questions, such as what is the person's name and profession, guiding the conversation smoothly to the main part of the interview. Then, he should follow the structure of a written news story.

Tackle the vital angles first, so that he can be sure that he will have covered the most important issues before time runs out. Finally, it is preferable to leave the most controversial questions for the end of the interview so that if the interviewer gets offended and wants to stop the interview, the journalist will have already got the information he needs.

The Element of Surprise

Of course an interview is not a run-of-the-mill procedure. Even though, having prepared a list of questions is a very useful tool for doing a productive interview it does not mean that the journalist should stick rigorously to it. He must always be prepared to adjust the questions to the flow of the interview. Sometimes, an answer of the interviewee might open an unexpected rich new seam. If the journalist is not afraid to abandon his prepared questions and follow it, he might end up with a far better story than the one he started with.

Interviews are not scripted, therefore the journalist's full attention must be on the interviewee. More specifically, his attention must not be focused solely on what the interviewee says but also on how he says it. Indeed, if the interviewee hesitates to answer a question, there is always the possibility that a story is hidden behind his hesitation. The journalist should be persistent and ask the question again without of course ending up being rude.



Besides the body language of the interviewee the journalist should also pay specific attention to his own. For instance, he should keep plenty of eye contact with the interviewee but not stare at him all the time as that would make the interviewee feel uncomfortable. Most importantly, the journalist must always appear to be interested in what the interviewee is saying, however tedious it may be. By doing this the latter will feel more at ease and will be willing to open himself up.

Controlling the Flow

However, this does not mean that the journalist must give over the control of the flow of the interview to the interviewee. Those who are experienced in dealing with the media know how to use the interview as an opportunity to get across their own agenda, avoiding answering to the journalist's questions.

Even those who are not under the media lights may disturb the flow of the interview by rattling on, leaving the journalist with not a lot of material worthy to write about. In such cases the journalist, without being impolite, should regain control of the interview making sure to elicit the information he believes would be of interest to his readers. Combining politeness with persistence is ultimately the most important quality that a journalist must possess when facing the demanding but often thrilling task of conducting an interview. For useful tips on how to conduct other types of interview please click



Handling Tough Interviewees

Veteran reporters can easily recall those first and most difficult times in their careers when they felt they had been deceived, manipulated or misguided by people they interviewed.

"I wish I'd known better" is a common reaction among experienced journalists who reflect on the early phases of their careers. They now admit their first interview subjects "played dirty tricks" to retain the high ground and put them at a disadvantage during the interview.

In some press cultures, reporters tend to be overly solicitous of officials and elderly people, unfamiliar with the modern techniques of interviewing or simply fearful of the consequences of asking probing questions. Taking advantage of these constraints, a shrewd politician, for example, has the luxury of rambling along from one extreme (making a long-winded, empty statement) to the other (giving snappy yes and no answers).

But what other tricks should journalists be aware of and how can they counter attack?

When interviewees take an aggressive posture by denouncing the press in general (e.g., "Can't you ever get quotes right?" or "You people are only interested in bad news and in getting people."), try to keep calm, let them vent their hostility and then proceed courteously with the interview.

When an interviewee turns the question around and seeks to interview you, the journalist ("What do you think?" or "What would you do?"), you can reply, "I'm sure our readers are much more interested in your opinion on that."



When an interviewee tries to go off the record, you can explain the need for attribution and urge that the material be placed on the record for the sake of credibility, or return to the subject later with a rephrased or related question to get the information on the record. You also may flatly refuse to take off-the-record information.

Don't be intimidated by hostile interviewees who go on the offensive by saying things like "That's a stupid question," or "You didn't do your homework," or "That's none of your business." Keep calm. Tell them about the sources you checked before the question was asked. Explain why the answer to the question is necessary.

Many interviewees choose to wander widely off the track as one way of dodging a question. Allow them to ramble on but look out for any useful information they might inadvertently reveal. Otherwise, try to bring them gently back to the question by saying, "That's very interesting, but..."

Other interviewees use the easier tactic of giving curt "yes" and "no" answers. To make it difficult for them to employ this tactic, phrase your questions so that they cannot be answered by one word, or ask "Could you elaborate?" or "Why do you say that?"

As a journalist, every so often you will come across people who, for reasons of their own, will try to make your life difficult. Instead of answering a question, they will refer you to an obscure or inaccessible source-e.g., "Look up my book X, in which I discuss that question thoroughly." Plead deadline pressures or ask for a summary of the interviewee's views on the subject.

One of the most popular tactics employed to confuse reporters is the use of jargon (political, economic, scientific, etc.). Don't let jargon-speakers fool you. Raise your hand, stop them and demand an answer in plain English-language that your average reader or listener can understand.

Claiming to be interested in the accuracy of what you're going to say about them, some interviewees insist on seeing the story before it is published. If your employer's policy permits, agree to check major points with them by telephone. Allowing interviewees to "edit" your story in advance is not to be encouraged.

An interviewee is likely to be suspicious of how much you know about the subject at hand and, therefore, might not take you seriously. Do your homework. Be prepared. But share your knowledge with the interviewee without trying to prove that you're an "expert."

Don't pretend to be dumb, either. If you do, one of two things is likely to happen: your sources will dismiss you as unprofessional and refuse to waste their time with you; or they might use you as a vehicle to publicize their views.

Finally, you can be provocative without being confrontational. Tell interviewees what their critics say about them, but don't give your own opinion. Remember that you're there to collect information, not to fight anyone.





T. Selva's career in journalism spans over 33 years and he is currently the Chief News Editor of The Star in Kuala Lumpur.

He is a trained and qualified journalist and public relations practitioner and comes with a wealth of knowledge and experience in journalism, media handling, crisis management and public relations.

He studied journalism at the London School of Journalism and public relations at the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) and holds a Master of Arts (Communication Management) from the University of South Australia.

He received his Honorary Doctorate of Oriental Learning (PhD) from the Indian Institute of Oriental Heritage in West Bengal.

He has held various positions in the editorial department of The Star since he joined in 1980.

He has served as the Sunday Metro Editor, Maritime Editor, Assistant Metro Editor, and Bureau Chief of Klang and Kuching state bureaus.

Under his editorship, the Maritime Section had won three awards – from the Malaysian Maritime Institute, Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport Malaysia, and Malaysian Airlines Cargo – for media excellence.

He is currently the council member of the Malaysian Press Institute (MPI) and a member of the National Press Club of Malaysia.

He is a regular speaker on understanding the media and crisis management at local and international conferences and workshops.

In addition, he writes a popular column in the Sunday Star on Ancient Secrets and Vasthu Sastra (Indian feng shui) and has authored five books on ancient Indian sciences.

Contact

Tel D/L : 603-7967 1273

Mobile : 019-2728464

Email : tselvas@pd.jaring.my

References

- University of Missouri
- Lincoln University
- Committee of Concerned Journalists
- International Center for Journalists