Interviewing Principles

Reporters conduct two kinds of interviews:

· News interview: The purpose is to gather information to explain an idea event or situation in the news.

. Profile: The focus is on an individual. A news peg often is used to justify the profile.

For effective interviews, reporters prepare carefully, and they ask questions that induce the source to talk freely. Questions are directed at obtaining information on a theme that the reporter has in mind before beginning the interview. If a more important theme emerges, the reporter develops it.

The reporter notes what is said, how it is said and what is not said. Sources are encouraged by the reporter's gestures and facial expressions to keep talking.

In the stadium locker room, the half-dressed hurdler was stuffing his warm-up suit and track shoes into a battered black bag. Seated on a bench nearby, a young man removed a pencil and a notepad from a jacket pocket.

"I'm from the paper in town," the young man said. "You looked sharp out there. Mind if I ask you some questions?"

The athlete nodded and continued his packing.

"First time you've been to this part of the West or this city?" the reporter asked. Another nod. This was not going to be easy, the reporter worried. The editor had told him to make sure he brought back a good story for tomorrow's paper, the day the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics would begin its outdoor track meet at the local college. The tall, lithe young man standing in front of the bench was a world record holder in the hurdles, the editor had said, and worth a story for the sports section.

The reporter tried again. "What do you think of our town?" The athlete seemed to see the reporter for the first time.

"I don't know anything about this town," he replied. "I'm here to run. I go to the East coast, the West coast, here. They give me a ticket at school and I get on a bus or a plane and go. My business is to run." He fell silent.

Rebuffed, the reporter struggled to start the athlete talking again. In the 20‑minute interview, the hurdler never really opened up.

**Four Principles**

**1. Prepare carefully, familiarizing yourself with as much background as possible.**

**2. Establish a relationship with the source conducive to obtaining information.**

**3. Ask questions that are relevant to the source and that induce the source to talk.**

**4. Listen and watch attentively.**

Because much of the daily work of the journalist requires asking people for information, mastery of interviewing techniques is essential. The four principles underlie the various techniques the reporter uses. Clearly, the sportswriter's troubles began when he failed to prepare by obtaining background about the athlete he was to interview. Lacking background, the reporter was unable to ask questions that would draw out his source. Furthermore, he had failed to establish a rapport with the hurdler, so that the session was more like dentistry than journalism, with the reporter painfully extracting bits and pieces of information from an unwilling subject. Fortunately, the reporter had listened carefully so that he managed to salvage something from the interview.

If we analyze news stories, we will see they are based on information from several kinds of sources: physical sources, such as records, files and references; the direct observations of the reporter; interviews with human sources; online sources. Most stories are combinations of two or three of these sources.

Glance at today's newspaper. Listen carefully to tonight's evening news­cast. You will be hard‑pressed to find a story that lacks information from an interview. A front‑page story about a court decision on welfare assistance, for ex­ample, has a quotation from the governor about the consequences of the decision. A story about the city's plan to put desk officers on the street quotes the police chief. An obituary contains an employee's comments about the generosity of his late boss.

Straight news stories seem to consist of physical sources and observations. Yet if you examine them closely, you will more often than not find information a source has supplied through an interview, brief as that interview may have been.

Let's examine in detail the four principles of interviewing that we mentioned following the young reporter's frustrating interview with the hurdler.

Preparation

There's a saying in newsrooms that good interviews follow the two “P's” ¾ persistence and preparation. Persistence is necessary to persuade people to be interviewed, and it is essential in following a line of questioning that the subject may find objectionable.

Preparation may consist of a few minutes spent glancing through a story in last week's newscast before dashing out to interview a congresswoman on a flying visit to look at the local Veterans Hospital where cutbacks have affected care. It may be a prolonged examination of clippings, material from Nexis and articles that databases have turned up for a profile of the new university president.

Clyde Haberman, a New York Times columnist, says “exhaustive research is the basic building block of a successful interview.”

Research

A.J. Liebling, a master reporter who moved from the newspaper news­room to The New Yorker magazine, is quoted in The Most of A.J. Liebling, edited by William Cole: “The preparation is the same whether you are going to interview a diplomat, a jockey, or an ichthyologist. From the man's past you learn what questions are likely to stimulate a response.”

Research begins with the library's clippings about the subject. If the topic has more than local importance or if the interviewee is well‑known, The New York Times Index, Facts on File or a database may have a reference that can be useful. The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature may list a magazine article about the topic or the person. Who's Who in America and other biographical dictionaries can be consulted. Most of these reference works are on CD‑ROM and are accessible online. People who know the interviewee can be asked for information.

These resources provide material for three purposes: (1) They give the reporter leads to tentative themes and to specific questions. (2) They provide the reporter with a feel for the subject. (3) They provide useful background.

Rapport

This was the fifth session Claudia Dreifus was spending with Dan Rather for a profile, and she knew a mile‑high barrier separated them. Finally, she told Rather, “This isn't working.” Rather agreed and he invited Dreifus to accompany him in his pickup from Sam Houston State University in Hunstville, from which he graduated, south to Wharton, where he was born, and then over to Austin for dinner.

Back home, Rather relaxed and opened up, complaining about his ill‑fated pairing with Connie Chung on “The CBS Evening News” and worrying about the cost‑cutting that has affected news coverage.

“At CBS News, we're down to the bone, past the bone, and we've been there a long time,” he told Dreifus.

With experienced subjects, interviews usually go smoothly as both stand to gain from the interview: The subject will have his or her ideas and comments before the public, and the reporter will have a story.

But with less‑experienced sources or with those who are reluctant to speak to the questions the reporter is there to ask, there can be tension. The reporter has to find ways to reach the source.

Advance Work

Fred Zimmerman, a long‑time reporter for The Wall Street Journal, has these suggestions about how to prepare for an interview:

1. Do research on the interview topic and the person to be interviewed, not only so you can ask the right questions and understand the answers, but also so you can demonstrate to the interviewee that you have taken the time to understand the subject and also that you cannot easily be fooled.

2, Devise a tentative theme for your story. A major purpose of the interview will be to obtain quotes, anecdotes and other evidence to support that theme.

3. List question topics in advance ¾ as many as you can think of, even though you may not ask all of them and almost certainly will ask others that you do not list.

4. In preparing for interviews on sensitive subjects, theorize about what the person's attitude is likely to be toward you and the subject you are asking about, What is his or her role in the event? Whose side is he or she on? What kinds of answers can you logically expect to your key questions? Based on this theorizing, develop a plan of attack that you think might mesh with the person's probable attitude and get through his or her probable defenses.

The Questions

Careful preparation leads the interviewer to a few themes for the inter­view, and these, in turn, suggest questions to be asked. But before the specific questions are put to the interviewee, a few housekeeping details usually are at­tended to, vital data questions. For some interviews, these may involve age, education, jobs held, family information. For well‑known people, the questions may be about their latest activities.

Questions of this sort are nonthreatening and help make for a relaxed interview atmosphere. Also, they are sometimes necessary because of conflicting material in the files, such as discrepancies in age or education.

People want to know these details. Harold Ross, the brilliant and eccentric former newspaperman who founded and edited The New Yorker, slashed exasperatedly at the pages of profiles and interviews that lacked vital data. “Who he?” Ross would scrawl across such manuscripts.

Even the obvious questions about background can result in fascinating and revealing answers. For a personality profile, the interviewer asked Whoopi Goldberg why she adopted Goldberg as her stage name. She replied:

Simple question. Fascinating quotation.

Direct Questions Most questions flow from what the reporter perceives to be the theme of the assignment. A fatal accident: Automatically, the re­porter knows that he or she must find out who died and how and where the death occurred. The same process is used in the more complicated interview.

A reporter is told to interview an actor who had been out of work for two years and is now in a hit musical. The reporter decides that the theme of the story will be the changes the actor has made in his life. He asks the actor if he has moved from his tenement walk‑up, has made any large personal purchases and how his family feels about his being away most nights. These three questions induce the actor to talk at length.

The Interviewer's Ground Rules

Both parties in an interview have certain assumptions and expectations. Generally, the reporter expects the interviewee to tell the truth and to stand be­hind what he or she has told the interviewer. The interviewee presumes the re­porter will write the story fairly and accurately. Both agree, without saying so, that the questions and answers mean what they appear to mean‑that is, that there are no hidden meanings.

Having said this, we must admit to the exceptions. Sources may conceal, evade, distort and lie when they believe it is to their advantage. The reporter must be alert to the signs of a departure from truth.

The rules that govern the reporter's behavior in the interview can be de­tailed with some certainty. Reporters, too, conceal, mislead and, at times, lie. Few reporters justify these practices. Most agree the reporter should:

1. Identify himself or herself at the outset of the interview.

2. State the purpose of the interview.

3. Make clear to those unaccustomed to being interviewed that the material will be used.

4. Tell the source how much time the interview will take.

5. Keep the interview as short as possible.

6. Ask specific questions that the source is competent to answer.

7. Give the source ample time to reply.

8. Ask the source to clarify complex or vague answers.

9. Read back answers if requested or when in doubt about the phrasing of crucial material.

10. Insist on answers if the public has a right to know them.

11. Avoid lecturing the source, arguing or debating.

12. Abide by requests for nonattribution, background only or off‑the-record should the source make this a condition of the interview or of a statement.

The Profile

The profile should be seen as a minidrama, blending description, action and dialogue. Through the words and actions of the subject of the profile, with some help from the reporter's insertion of background and explanatory matter, the character is illuminated. Profiles should include plenty of quotations.

For a retrospective piece on the 1980 championship University of Georgia football team, U.S. News & World Report interviewed the starting offense and the punter in the team's Sugar Bowl victory over Notre Dame. The magazine found: 9 of the 12 did not graduate; none of the 6 black starters received degrees.

In a series of miniprofiles, the magazine reported on the players' careers in school and later. Herschel Walker, the star of the team, left the team after three years. “I had to worry about what was best for Herschel ¾ and leaving school was best for Herschel,” he is quoted as saying. He was signed for a reported $5.5 million by a professional team.

Not so fortunate was Walker's gridiron blocker, Jimmy Womack. Like Walker, he did not graduate. But he had no professional career and regrets his role in Walker's shadow. “If I had gone to Florida State, I could have been in the NFL somewhere,” he said. There were, the magazine reports, “compensations . . . in the form of wadded‑up $100 bills, passed along in 'padded handshakes' from alumni and boosters.” Off the field, he remembered, there were “these girls that liked football players, not one at a time either.”

Nat Hudson, who went on to play in the NFL for five years, says that when he goes to a Georgia game or to the athletic area, he feels “like a social outcast.” The attitude, he says, is that “we've exploited your talent and we're through with you, so you go back to your business.” Racism, he says, is the source of his cool reception.

Ingredients

The profile consists of:

· The person's background (birth, upbringing, education, occupation).

· Anecdotes and incidents involving the subject.

· Quotes by the individual relevant to his or her newsworthiness.

· The reporter's observations.

· Comments of those who know the interviewee.

· A news peg, whenever possible.

Fred L. Zimmerman, Wall Street Journal reporter and editor, suggests the following:

1. Almost never plunge in with tough questions at the beginning. Instead, break the ice, explain who you are, what you are doing, why you went to him or her. A touch of flattery usually helps.

2. Often the opening question should be an open‑ended inquiry that sets the source off on his or her favorite subject. Get the person talking, set up a conversational atmosphere. This will provide you with important clues about his or her attitude toward you, the subject and the idea of being interviewed.

3. Watch and listen closely. How is he or she reacting? Does he seem open or secretive? Maybe interrupt him in the middle of an anecdote to ask a minor question about something he is leaving out, just to test his reflexes. Use the information you are obtaining in this early stage to ascertain whether your preinterview hunches about him were right. Use it also to determine what style you should adopt to match his mood. If he insists upon being formal, you may have to become more businesslike yourself. If he is relaxed and expansive, you should be too, but beware of the possibility the interview can then degenerate into a formless conversation over which you have no control.

4. Start through your questions to lead him along a trail you have picked. One question should logically follow another. Lead up to a tough question with two or three preliminaries. Sometimes it helps to create the impression that the tough question has just occurred to you because of something he is saying.

5. Listen for hints that suggest questions you had not thought of. Stay alert for the possibility that the theme you picked in advance is the wrong one, or is only a subsidiary one. Remain flexible. Through an accidental remark of his you may uncover a story that is better than the one you came for. If so, go after it right there.

6. Keep reminding yourself that when you leave, you are going to do a story. As she talks, ask yourself: What is my lead going to be? Do I understand enough to state a theme clearly and buttress it with quotes and documentation? Do I have enough information to write a coherent account of the anecdote she just told me?

7. Do not forget to ask the key question‑the one your editors sent you to ask, or the one that will elicit supporting material for your theme.

8. Do not be reluctant to ask an embarrassing question. After going through all the preliminaries you can think of, the time finally arrives to ask the tough question. Just ask it.

9. Do not be afraid to ask naive questions. The subject understands that you do not know everything. Even if you have done your homework there are bound to be items you are unfamiliar with. The source usually will be glad to fill in the gaps.

10. Get in the habit of asking treading‑water questions, such as “What do you mean?” or “Why's that?” This is an easy way to keep the person talking.

11. Sometimes it helps to change the conversational pace, by backing off a sensitive line of inquiry, putting your notebook away, and suddenly displaying a deep interest in an irrelevancy. But be sure to return to those sensitive questions later. A sudden pause is sometimes useful. When the subject finishes a statement just stare at her maybe with a slightly ambiguous smile, for a few seconds. She often will become uneasy and blurt out something crucial.

12. Do not give up on a question because the subject says “no comment.” That is only the beginning of the fight. Act as if you misunderstood her and restate the question a little differently. If she still clams up, act as if she misunderstood you and rephrase the question again. On the third try, feign disbelief at her refusal to talk. Suggest an embarrassing conclusion from her refusal and ask if it is valid. Later, ask for “guidance” in tracking down the story elsewhere, or suggest nonattribution, or get tough ¾ whatever you think might work.

13. Occasionally your best quote or fact comes after the subject thinks the interview is over. As you are putting away your notebook and are saying goodbye the subject often relaxes and makes a crucial but offhand remark. So stay alert until you are out the door. (Sid Moody of the AP says that interviewing gems can come after the notebook is snapped shut. “I've found almost as a rule of thumb that you get more than you've gotten in the interview.”)