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Art of Interview

Good interviews make for good stories. They provide insights into people and events. Reporters conduct two kinds of interviews:

1. **News interview:** The purpose is to gather information to explain an idea event or situation in the news.
2. **Profile interview :** 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.

The four principles of interviewing:

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 fail to prepare by obtaining background about the athlete he has to 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.

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.

Preparation

There's a saying in newsrooms that good interviews follow the two "P's" – 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 few week's newscast before dashing out to interview a political leader

Research

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

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, 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

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

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 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.

Give and Take

Give and Take The early stage of the interview is a feeling out period. The interviewee balances his or her gains and losses from divulging information the reporter seeks, and the reporter tries to show the source the rewards the source will receive through disclosure of the information publicity, respect and the feeling that goes with doing a good turn.

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.

Simple question expects Fascinating answers.

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.

Open- and Closed-Ended Questions - When the sportswriter asked the hurdler, “What do you think of our town?” he was using what is known as an *open-ended question,* which could have been answered in general terms. The sports editor's suggestion that the reporter ask the athlete about the condition of the track would have elicited a specific response-fast, slow, or slick-as it was a *closed-ended question.*

The open-ended question does not require a specific answer. The closedended question calls for a brief, pointed reply. Applied properly, both have their merits.

The reporters often begin their interviews with open-ended questions, which allow the source to relax. Then the closed-ended questions are asked, which may seem threatening if asked at the outset of the interview.

Television and radio interviews usually end with a closed-ended question because the interviewer wants to sum up the situation with a brief reply.

The reporter who asks only open-ended questions should be aware of their possible implications. To some sources, the open-ended question is the mark of an inadequately prepared reporter who is fishing for a story.

Tough Questions Sometimes a young reporter finds that posing the right question is difficult because the question might embarrass or offend the interviewee. There is no recourse but to ask.

Intrusive Questions - Still, there are questions that few reporters like to ask. Most of these concern the private lives of sources the mental retardation of a couple's son, the fatal illness of a baseball player. Some questions are necessary, some not. The guidelines for relevance and good taste are constantly shifting, and reporters may find they are increasingly being told to ask questions that they consider intrusive. This is the age of intimacy.

Listening, Watching

"Great reporters are great listeners," says Carl Bernstein of the Woodward-Bemstein reporting team that exposed the Watergate cover up that led to President Nixon's resignation.The good listener hears good quotes, revealing slips of the tongue, the dialect and diction of the source that sets him or her apart.Sometimes, a single quote can capture the person or illuminate the situation the interview is about.

Types of Interviews

News Interview

Although the reporter was not present when firefighters battled the fire during the early morning hours, the interviews with the lieutenant and the eyewitness give his story an on-the-scene flavor. Because these interviews help explain the news event, we describe them as *news interviews.*

The extended news interview can provide readers and listeners with interpretation, background and explanation.

The rules that govern the reporter's behavior in the news interview can be detailed with some certainty.

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 no attribution, background only or off the-record should the source make this a condition of the interview or of a statement

The Profile Interview

The profile should be seen as a mini drama, 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.

The profile consists of:

1. The person's background (birth, upbringing, education, occupation).
2. Anecdotes and incidents involving the subject.
3. Quotes by the individual relevant to his or her newsworthiness.
4. The reporter's observations.
5. Comments of those who know the interviewee.
6. A news peg, whenever possible.

Quotes, Quotes

Research shows that quotations are useful. S. Shyan Sundar of Pennsylvania State University found "the credibility and quality of stories with quotations to be significantly higher than identical stories without quotations." Sometimes, sources reveal themselves as much, perhaps more so, in their actions as they do in their statements. The profile blends background, quotations and observations.

Some Guidelines:

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 wit 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 no attribution, or get tough 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.