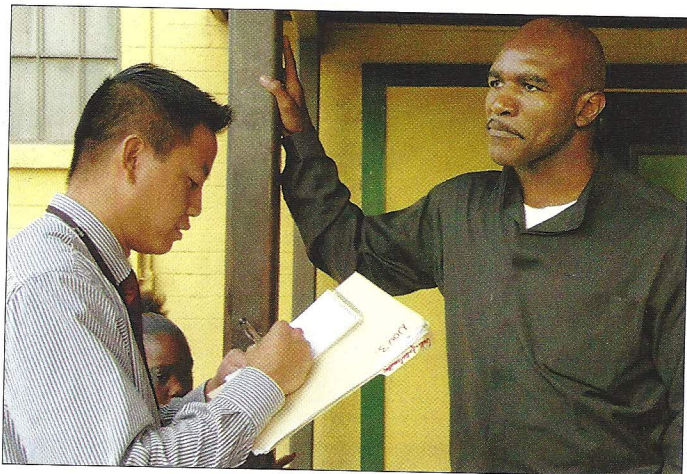


# Interviewing

*Interviews, like stories, come in an endless variety of shapes and sizes.*

They can be fast five-minute phoners where you ask a senator for a sound bite ("What do you think of the new tax proposal?"). Or they can be intimate interrogations of the rich and famous (like the 1977 Playboy interview with Barbra Streisand that took nine grueling months to complete\*).

Writing may be a solitary art, but interviewing is a social skill. You must be friendly, but aggressive.



Orlando Sentinel reporter Ken Ma takes notes during an interview with former heavyweight boxing champion Evander Holyfield.

Polite, but probing. Sympathetic, but skeptical. You need to hurl hard questions at complete strangers who may be shy, sneaky, suspicious of the media or emotionally distraught from the car crash they just survived.

But for many reporters, it's the most fun part of the job. It offers you a fascinating opportunity to pick the brains of the stupidest and smartest and most successful people you'll ever meet. If you're a good listener, you can be a great interviewer.

\*Each month, the Playboy Interview provides a fine example of a celebrity Q-and-A. In fact, many men read Playboy just for the interviews. No, really.

## QUOTED

"One thing I've learned about doing interviews: it's important to establish early on that you're not a schmuck."

Joel Siegel, movie critic

"Interviewing is one of those skills that you only get better at. You will never again feel so ill at ease as when you try for the first time, and probably you will never feel entirely comfortable prodding another person for answers that he or she may be too shy or inarticulate to reveal."

William Zinsser, writer, editor and teacher

"If you let the other person control the interview, then you've lost."

Ted Koppel, ABC News

"The better I treat people, the better the information I get. My M.O. is to remember that just because I have a press card in my pocket, it gives me no special claim. People have no obligation to let me into their life and ask probing questions."

Ray Suarez, host of NPR's *Talk of the Nation*

"There is almost no circumstance under which an American doesn't like to be interviewed. We are an articulate people, pleased by attention, covetous of being singled out."

A.J. Liebling, legendary mid-20th-century journalist

"People are interesting. You just have to ask them the right questions."

John Travolta, actor

"Play with the quotes, by all means — selecting, rejecting, thinning, transposing their order, saving the good one for the end. Just make sure the play is fair. Don't change any words or distort the context."

William Zinsser

## ASK YOURSELF: WHICH TYPE OF INTERVIEW SHOULD THIS BE?

Anytime you talk to someone to gather material for a story — facts, quotes, opinions, reactions — it's called an interview.

But no two interviews are alike. They'll vary according to the time you have, the facts you need and the accessibility of the interviewee. You might wind up with:

◆ **A long, formal interview** where you sit privately in a room, asking probing questions and getting revealing answers.

◆ **A quick phoner** where you seek fast facts to plug into a story.

◆ **A walkaround** where you accompany your interviewee as he/she does that newsworthy thing you're writing about.

◆ **An on-the-fly chat** with a news-maker (say, a politician or athlete) where you fire off questions as they walk through a public place.

◆ **A backgrounder** where you informally pick an expert's brain on a topic you're researching.

But before you start asking any questions, decide whether it's best to conduct your interview in person, over the phone or via e-mail.

	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
<b>IN PERSON</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ It's the best way to build rapport and encourage sources to cooperate.</li> <li>◆ A subject's physical surroundings often provide useful information.</li> <li>◆ You can pick up cues by watching a person's gestures, body language.</li> <li>◆ People take you more seriously when you're right in front of them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ You can waste time setting up a meeting, traveling, waiting, making friendly small talk, etc.</li> <li>◆ Distractions (people, phone calls) often interrupt the interview.</li> <li>◆ If you're uncomfortable (or not a pleasant person to be around), it soon becomes obvious.</li> </ul>
<b>BY PHONE</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Fast, efficient way to get answers (IF they answer their phone).</li> <li>◆ For many people, talking to a reporter isn't as intimidating when they can't see you taking notes.</li> <li>◆ With cell phones, conversations can occur anytime, anywhere — no advance notice is even necessary.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ It's impersonal. You can't tell what people look like, what they're doing, how they're reacting.</li> <li>◆ It's difficult to record a phone conversation without buying a reliable recording gizmo.</li> <li>◆ You're much more likely to mishear or misquote someone.</li> </ul>
<b>BY E-MAIL</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Gives interviewees time to ponder and construct intelligent responses.</li> <li>◆ Offers the most flexibility; you can ask and answer questions whenever it's most convenient.</li> <li>◆ Since responses are typed, they're easy to copy and paste — and they provide a record of all that's said.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ There's no personal interaction.</li> <li>◆ The lag time between questions and answers makes it hard to ask immediate follow-up questions.</li> <li>◆ It takes people an hour to type what they could say in five minutes.</li> <li>◆ Are you sure this is really the person he or she <i>claims</i> to be?</li> </ul>

## TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEWS: BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER

You're a reporter now. You've got stories to write. You need to interview people who possess information your readers require. So what do you do? Here's how the process works.

### SETTING UP THE INTERVIEW

- ◆ **First, do your homework.** Get familiar with your subject. Read old news stories. Do online research. Check with

affiliated organizations. Talk to your editors. Then:

- ◆ **Think through your story.** Decide who your best sources will be. Who are the experts? Who's in charge? Who's being affected? Who has strong opinions? How many sources do you need to contact?
- ◆ **Determine the best way to interview those sources.** Who's your key source? Should that interview be done face to face? Should others be done by phone or e-mail?
- ◆ **Set up the interview(s),** usually by phone or e-mail.

Be persuasive and polite; if necessary, be nicer *than you actually are*. Act like you need help (which you do) and describe what you want. People are more likely to assist you if they know what you're looking for.

- ◆ **Decide where and when to meet.** Find a quiet, convenient location — or should you meet them in their native habitat (a doctor in a hospital, a mechanic fixing a truck)? Would background activity help your reporting, or would it be distracting?

- ◆ **Ask if photos will be allowed** or if tape-recording is OK. It's always smart to clear these issues in advance.



A British reporter climbs a rope to interview an acrobat practicing a circus routine in London in the 1990s.

### PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

- ◆ **Continue your research.** The more you learn about your subject, the more productive your interview

will be. DON'T waste people's time forcing them to explain basic stuff you should already know; instead, use interviews to collect details, insights and opinions.

- ◆ **Organize your questions.** For your first few inter-

views, you may feel more confident writing out entire questions ahead of time. Some veteran reporters do that; others simply itemize key topics on the covers of their notebooks, glancing at them as they scribble notes.

- ◆ **Prioritize.** Decide which questions require simple yes-or-no answers (to quickly nail down essential info) and which should be phrased more open-endedly (for more detailed, thoughtful answers).

- ◆ **Rehearse your interview with a friend** if you're not feeling comfortable with the process. See how questions sound when you ask them. Fine-tune your phrasing.

- ◆ **Get to the interview on time.** And another thing:

- ◆ **Dress appropriately.** Don't wear jeans and a T-shirt to interview a banker; don't dress like a banker when you interview a poor farmer. Remember, your appearance can help you gain the confidence of the people you interview.

### DURING THE INTERVIEW

- ◆ **Relax.** Be friendly and curious. Don't be afraid. Granted, interviews aren't exactly casual conversations, but the more comfortable things feel, the more success you'll have loosening your interviewee's lips.

- ◆ **Never forget: You're in charge.** Once the interview starts, it's *your* show. You'll ask the questions, and you'll keep asking until you're satisfied. Don't let anyone intimidate you, not even powerful bigshots. Remember, there's real power in that story you're going to write.

- ◆ **Start with the basics:** name, age, address, title, etc. Be sure to double-check spellings as you jot them down.

- ◆ **Budget your time.** If you've only got five minutes, don't waste time with chitchat or inessential facts. Get right to the meat of the matter. If it's a longer interview:

- ◆ **Begin with softball questions.** Warm up with the big-picture, nonthreatening stuff. Save the complex, controversial topics for later.

- ◆ **Focus your questions.** Broad, vague queries (*What's it like being on the soccer team?*) aren't as effective as precise ones (*How'd it feel to score that winning goal?*).

- ◆ **Keep it simple.** Avoid long, rambling, two- or three-

part questions. It's more efficient to ask one question at a time, about one thing at a time.

- ◆ **Limit questions that can be answered simply "yes" or "no."** Questions like *"Were you worried on election night?"* are called close-ended questions, and they often yield dull answers: *"No, not really."*

Instead, ask open-ended questions — *"What was going through your mind as you waited for the election results?"* — to reveal the thoughts and feelings that explain *why* and *how* things happened.

- ◆ **Make sure every question gets answered.** Pay constant attention. Listen closely. Don't let interviewees out-clever you and sidestep sensitive issues.

- ◆ **Rephrase questions** when you think an answer is unclear or contradictory, or if you think you'll get a more quotable response.

- ◆ **Ask follow-up questions.** The best ones are:

- 1) How do you know that?
- 2) Can you give me an example?
- 3) And...?

- ◆ **Stay flexible.** Sometimes an interview takes a turn you never predicted. Go with the flow. Some of your best material may come out of deep left field.

- ◆ **Ask people to slow down** if you're falling behind in your notes — or slow them down deliberately when they get to the good parts of their stories, so you can gather more interesting details (*"What were you thinking? So then what happened?"*)

- ◆ **Don't worry about asking dumb questions** if they lead to smart answers. Better to sound stupid in an interview than to write a stupid story later. Don't ever be ashamed to say, *"Sorry . . . you lost me."*

- ◆ **Remember to look around** and note what you see. What gestures, physical descriptions or activities will add color to the story — or trigger new questions?

- ◆ **Use reassuring body language** (facial expressions, nodding, making friendly eye contact, etc.). But keep unnecessary comments to a minimum.

- ◆ **Try using silence as a tactic** to prod people into saying more. Sometimes just gazing blankly at somebody makes them uncomfortable, and they keep talking.

- ◆ **Don't interrupt.**

- ◆ **Don't take sides.**

- ◆ **Save your toughest question — "the bomb" — for last.** If they trust you, they'll answer. If they stomp off in anger, at least they answered all your *other* questions.

### AFTER THE INTERVIEW

- ◆ **Review your notes with the interviewee.** Recap what you've discussed to fill in gaps, correct errors or clarify any confusion.

- ◆ **Ask, "Who else should I contact?"** Often, the most valuable thing you get from an interview is discovering a better source — a person, a Web site or an organization you didn't previously know about.

- ◆ **Ask permission to call back later** in case you have more questions. If the interview went well, your subject will be glad to help further.

- ◆ **Ask interviewees to call YOU** if they think of anything else that might be helpful to your story.

- ◆ **Say thank you.** And mean it. These people have just given you their time, their trust and their information. Show a little gratitude, eh?

- ◆ **Review your notes again, privately,** to add further observations, clean up illegible entries and mark the most noteworthy passages. That's always a good time to ask yourself: *Do I have the lead for my story yet?*

- ◆ **Check back with your sources after the story runs.** They may offer useful feedback or tips for new stories.

FOR MORE ON INTERVIEWING, SEE NEXT PAGE ►

# Interviewing (Continued from previous page)

**GREG ESPOSITO,**  
*The Roanoke Times:*  
"After a day of covering flooding throughout Giles County, we saw a man standing on his front porch, surrounded by water. We yelled over to him to see if he needed help. Talking to him over the rushing water proved impossible, so I put my hand up to my ear to let him know I wanted to call him. He gave me his phone number by holding up his fingers. I sat down on the edge of the road, pulled out my notebook and dialed my cell phone. The scene of Bill Turner watching ducks swim in his front yard became the lead for the story."



## THE Q-and-A FORMAT: CAPTURING CONVERSATIONS VERBATIM

Most interviews are worked into stories. But for an engaging alternative, you can run a transcript as a Q-and-A.

Q-and-A's usually look like the one at right, with questions posed in one font, the answers in another. They can be light or serious, long or short. You can even edit remarks for brevity, as long as you don't distort their meaning.

The best Q-and-A's let us feel like we're eavesdropping on a stimulating conversation. Consider this excerpt from an interview with Mel Gibson.

"My ears were burning with joy!" interviewer Lawrence Grobel recalled. "I've talked to hundreds of movie stars, and not one of them had ever expressed such rigid beliefs on the record. If this isn't manna for an interviewer, I don't know what is!"

**Q:** *Do you believe in an afterlife?*

**GIBSON:** Absolutely. There's just no explanation. There has to be an afterlife. Otherwise, where is the evening-out process? There has to be an afterlife because Hitler and I both walked the planet and I'm not going to the same place as Hitler.

**Q:** *Is there a hell?*

**GIBSON:** Absolutely.

**Q:** *What's your image of the devil?*

**GIBSON:** The beast with eight tongues and four horns and fire and brimstone. Probably worse than anything we can imagine, as paradise is probably better than anything we can imagine.

**Q:** *Do you believe in Darwin's theory of evolution or that God created man in his image?*

**GIBSON:** The latter.

**Q:** *So you can't accept that we descended from monkeys and apes?*

**GIBSON:** No, I think it's bullshit. If it isn't,

why are they still around? How come apes aren't people yet? It's a nice theory, but I can't swallow it. There's a big credibility gap. The carbon-dating thing tells you how long something's been around, but how

accurate is that, really? I've got one of Darwin's books at home and some of that stuff is pretty damn funny. Some of his stuff is true, like that the giraffe has a long neck so it can reach the leaves. But I just don't think you can swallow the whole piece.

**Q:** *I take it that you're not particularly broad-minded when it comes to issues such as celibacy, abortion, birth control —*

**GIBSON:** People always focus on stuff like that. Those aren't issues. Those are unquestionables. You don't even argue those points.

**Q:** *You don't?*

**GIBSON:** No.

— From *The Art of the Interview*

## ... AND REMEMBER: ALWAYS STRIVE FOR RACIAL AND GENDER BALANCE

Look at the photos on these two facing pages. How many women do you see? How many minorities? Children? Poor people?

That's a problem for most publications: the faces and voices look too much alike — usually white and male, in other words. They don't reflect their community's diversity. Too often, minorities appear only on the sports and entertainment pages.

To connect with *all* your readers, try to vary the ages, genders, races and lifestyles of the sources you select for interviews. That often means you'll need to challenge your own subconscious stereotypes. Or venture outside your personal comfort level. Or even monitor the makeup of your sources to ensure you're striking a fair balance.

**QUOTED**  
"If someone calls me up and says her toaster is talking to her, I don't refer her to professional help. I say, 'Put the toaster on the phone.'"

**Sal Ivone,**  
Weekly World News editor

"You may have to act like a jerk at times, or you may have to challenge, tease, coax or goad your subject into saying something provocative, but that's part of the job description of an interviewer. You have to be willing to think on your feet, to change directions quickly and to take charge."

**Lawrence Grobel,**  
celebrity interviewer

"I compare myself to a gold prospector... I start asking questions and up comes all this ore, dirt, everything. Now you gotta find the gold dust. I start editing, cutting. Now you've got to find a form. Then it's not just gold dust; it becomes a ring, a watch, a necklace."

**Studs Terkel,**  
legendary oral historian

"It's pretty common for me to be in the middle of an interview, hear something, and think, 'Well, there's my lead.' If I walk out of an interview knowing my lead and my conclusion, I know I'm in pretty good shape."

**Steve Pond,**  
music journalist

"Long, complex, multi-part questions generally do not elicit very good information. I find that most of the news I've ever gotten in my career has been when I ask very short and specific questions that just come to the point. And when I'm talking to young reporters, that's always my advice. Just ask the question."

**Bob Schieffer,**  
host of CBS' *Face the Nation*