

# INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUE

MC 4324: VISUAL STORYTELLING

## OVERVIEW

Once you have set up your equipment for the interview, focus on your subject.

Don't pay any attention to the microphone that you're holding two inches from someone's lips. Look them in the eyes, not the mouth. Listen to what they have to say and show them that their story is important to you. Soon, the subject will forget about the microphone, and they will relax enough to give you a good interview.

Sit close to the person with no furniture between the two of you. This close proximity will foster a more intimate conversation.

Nod as someone speaks but avoid saying "uh huh" or "ok" or "mmm." When you acknowledge a speaker's comment out loud, your voice will be recorded and you may find it hard to edit out your voice later. Limit yourself to keeping good eye-contact and responding with a head nod.

## WHAT TO ASK

Most good interviewers have a list of questions written out or memorized before they start recording an interview. You may even want to speak to the person on the phone in advance. A pre-interview like this can help generate your final list of questions.

Ultimately the responses to your researched questions will provide the following necessary information for the final, edited piece.

- The essence of the story
- The information the viewer needs to know
- What viewers will learn from the story

## OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS

When composing your list of questions, start with a neutral question such as "tell me how you got into your profession." Wait until much later to spring a killer question such as, "Are you still beating your husband?"

Save the harder questions for later in the interview lest the subject get angry and refuses to continue. Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” Ask questions that will elicit a thoughtful response instead of a factual reply.

- Why did you start...?”
- What was happening when you arrived?

Ask questions related to the senses. “What did it feel like, sound like, smell like...?”

Tip: When editing, put answers to questions like “how many, how much, when?” in a voice-over. You do not need a series of fact-laden statements from an interviewee for the final sound track.

## **FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS**

Listen to the subject’s answers. Do not be in a rush to get to the next question on your list. You may want to ask a different question based on the person’s response. If your subject says, “I’ve been studying astronomy for 20 years,” follow that response with a question like, “What motivated you to start studying astronomy 20 years ago?”

Be direct with critical information. A subject is probably not going to like all your questions. “If you are going to say anything critical about a subject,” says Ira Glass, “Say those criticisms to their face, up front, during the interview... It’s just simple fairness. You have to give them a chance to respond to the criticism.”

Stay on topic. “If an answer seems boring, politely move things along,” says Glass. “Challenge. Cajole. React with amazement. Laugh if they’re funny.”

Ask “what it all means.” For “This American Life,” each segment requires the subject to reflect on “what it all means.” This kind of question is an excellent interviewing device for any journalist. The interviewer tries out a hypothesis on the subject.

- “Do you think that people tend to act this way in this kind of situation?”
- “Do you think it’s as simple as ‘There are a lot of people who feel defeated’?”
- “What does this say about small-town America?”

Eventually something sticks. This kind of reflection on the part of the subject provides a perfect summary ending to most pieces.

## **INTERVIEWING STRATEGIES**

Your original question list is a guide. If a subject opens up a surprising area of the past that he or she wants to reveal, follow the lead. Time and tape are cheap. Digital storage is practically free. If you have time, follow the conversation in unplanned directions. Of course, if you are pressed and on a deadline, steer the conversation back to your main thread.

Ask questions in pairs. If you ask questions in pairs, people will always qualify their answers. Brian Storm of MediaStorm.org, gives this example. “Suppose you’re interviewing the paperboy. You ask, ‘How long have you been a paperboy?’ He says, ‘Two years.’ ‘Two years’ is what you have on tape. What are you going to do with that statement? The phrase ‘two years’ cannot stand alone, because there is no context to the response unless you include the question.

“Ask instead, ‘How long have you been a paperboy, and what’s your favorite part of the job?’ Now he must qualify the order of his answer, ‘I’ve been a paperboy for two years, and I love throwing the paper at garage doors.’ Now you’ve got something you can use.”

Include the answer in the question. Ideally, you can build a report by stringing together quotes from your subjects. If the subject’s answers are clear and complete they will tell the story for you, and a narrator will not be necessary. To accomplish a report like this, ask your interviewee to repeat your question when he or she starts to answer.

For example, suppose you ask, “Why did you burn down the house?” If the subject responds, “I did it to get back at my mother,” you’re going to need to a “voice-over” to set up the response. “Jane burned down her house. When asked why, she said, ‘I did it to get back at my mother.’”

Instead, if the subject repeats a question before answering it, all the information will be contained in the remarks: “Why did I burn down the house? I burned down the house to get back at my mother.” In this form, the answer requires no “setup” in narration. You will edit out your own question and be left with a complete, easily understood answer from the subject.

Before starting the interview, coach the subject to answer questions by first repeating the question, advises the AP’s Garnier. “My name is Jesse Garnier,” not “Jesse Garnier,” in response to “What is your name?”

Be silent. Pause after each response. Often, people will fill in and add to their answer. A reporter for the Boston Phoenix once interviewed an alleged Mafia boss. When the cigar-chomping fellow finished his response to a question, the reporter sat still and waited. And waited. The nervous subject filled in the pauses by adding more and more revealing facts—answers to questions the reporter never would have dared ask.

“People nearly always answer questions in three parts,” NBC News Correspondent Bob Dotson told attendees at the NPPA Video Workshop in Norman, Oklahoma. “First, they tell you what they think you have asked. Then, they explain in more detail. If you do not jump right in with another question, if you let the silence between you build, they figure you do not yet understand, and they make an extra effort to explain their thoughts more concisely. Often they make their point more passionately and precisely the third time.”

## **GUIDELINES FOR THE INTERVIEWER**

First, study the questions so that you are not reading from the page, and feel free to ad lib. Being able to sustain eye contact assists the interviewee in relaxing and responding in a natural way.

Second, allow the interviewee to complete thoughts. Unlike a radio or TV interviewer that is concerned with "dead air" in the conversation, give the respondent all the time desired to think through and restate something that is a bit difficult to articulate. Interruptions can cause people to lose their train of thought or become self-aware and steer away from important, but perhaps emotionally difficult, information. Let the respondent tell you when he or she is finished a question before moving on to the next.

Third, when appropriate, use your own intuition to probe further to get a more specific response. Often a person's initial thought about the question only retrieves the broadest outline of memory. Feel free to request specifics or details that would clarify or expand upon a general response.

Fourth, if the story is about information that is specifically painful or traumatic in the person's life, assess carefully how far you allow the respondent to delve into these memories. In many situations where the interviewer is not a spouse or close loved one, you may cross into territory that is much better approached in the context of a purposely therapeutic environment with experienced guides or professionally trained advisors. Don't feel you need to hunt for emotionally charged material to make the interview effective. If it comes naturally and comfortably, so be it.

Finally, along with ensuring privacy in the interview, make sure both interviewer and interviewee are comfortable; comfortable chairs, water at hand, and the microphone positioned so not to disrupt ease of movement. (A lavalier microphone, is the best)