

TEN (NOT-SO-SECRET) TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE INTERVIEWING

~ Jacqui Banaszynski, Missouri School of Journalism ~

1. Know and state your purpose
2. Interview subjects in their native habitat
3. Envision the ideal interview
4. Establish guidelines and negotiate terms early
5. Use props and contrivances as story prompts
6. Turn subjects into storyteller (place them in scenes)
7. Peel the onion (for every question, at least five more)
8. Ask the obvious question, and the feared question
9. Be human, keep shut up and *listen* (with all your senses)
10. Always do a second (and third, and fourth...) interview

EFFECTIVE INTERVIEWING: THE BONUS EDITION

1. Find a pocket guide/guru/broker
2. Separate the reporting process from the publishing process
3. Don't hide your notebook (use it as a tool)
4. Always have an audio recorder
5. Interview around obstacles
6. Use your emotions as a reporting prompt
7. Use fact-checking as another interview
8. Call back after publication
9. Build a Golden Rolodex
10. Be curious about **EVERYTHING**

“INTERVIEWING: ACCELERATED INTIMACY”

~ Isabel Wilkerson <http://isabelwilkerson.com/>

Transcribed and published in “Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers Guide”
<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/NiemanFoundation/ProgramsAndPublications/NarrativeJournalism/NarrativeAnthology/TellingTrueStories.aspx>
<http://www.amazon.com/Telling-True-Stories-Nonfiction-Foundation/dp/0452287553>

*“In journalism school, no one called the interactions between journalists and sources **relationships**, but that’s what they are.” (Wilkerson)*

I was on a panel about interviewing with Pulitzer-Prize winning reporter and book author Isabel Wilkerson at a Nieman Narrative Conference when she gave this talk. It stunned me away. Finally someone put into smart words what I had long tried to do by instinct. Interviews as “accelerated intimacy.” *Yes!*

Wilkerson approaches interviews as “guided conversations,” in which the dynamic of the relationship is more important than any individual question. She also thinks of it as peeling an onion, layer by layer, to get to the pure, pungent center. Finally, she outlines interviewing as a process – an arc – that takes reporter and source through seven essential steps.

The boldface labels are Isabel’s. The brief descriptions are my interpretation.

Phase 1: Introduction. Making the approach or cold call.

Phase 2: Adjustment. Reporter and source start tentatively, sussing each other out but not yet committed.

Phase 3: Moment of Connection. Something clicks so both parties know they’ll go forward with the interview.

Phase 4: Settling in. What it sounds like.

Phase 5: Revelation. Enough trust is built so the source says more than expected.

Phase 6: Deceleration. Things are winding down. Notebooks close. Thanks are exchanged.

Phase 7: Reinvigoration. The best stuff that happens when you aren’t trying to make it happen. This is what I call a “second interview” within an interview. It’s magic. A similar thing can happen if you “keep shut up.” In other words, during interviews, let silence (yours) work for you. Give the other person a chance to think/talk. Your job is to guide and listen.

It is essential you read the rest of Wilkerson’s talk. She discusses

- the power dynamic between reporter and source
- how important it is NOT to “lead” the source
- how crucial it is to be honest and open and ethical and ... empathetic.

~ *Jacqui Banaszynski* ~

Knight Chair Professor ~ Missouri School of Journalism

Faculty Fellow ~ The Poynter Institute

1988 Pulitzer Prize in feature writing

1986 Pulitzer Prize finalist in international reporting

SMART QUESTION STRATEGIES

~ Borrowed from and inspired by the work of JOHN SAWATSKY

Sawatsky is a Canadian journalist, author and university professor educator who has made a lifelong study of interviewing. He now works as the interviewing coach for ESPN.

For a deeper dive into the Sawatsky Method, including his DOs and DON'Ts:

<http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=676>

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5625218>

Keep questions neutral.

- Avoid hyperbole, loaded or “trigger” words.
- Keep your own commentary or opinion out of questions.
- Probe for information and evidence, but don’t presume or judge.

(Don’t give sources a reason to challenge your question, fairness or competence rather than answer thoughtful, sincere questions. You can ask about tough, sensitive issues without “sounding” tough or combative.)

Keep questions open-ended.

- Avoid closed (yes/no) questions.
- *What? How?* and *Why?* questions tend to be most effective.

(There is an exception: If you are seeking verification of core information, sometimes a yes/no question is the most efficient. At the same time, questions that are too open-ended “*How did it feel to win the lottery?*” can leave sources fumbling for an answer.)

Keep questions short, clear and focused on a singular subject.

- Avoid double-barreled questions, or rambling, “overloaded” unfocused questions.

(Multiple or unfocused questions leave sources confused or allow them to avoid the real question by coming back with their own spin or agenda.)

Listen to answers and build new questions from there.

- Don’t cut off the possibility of a story or deeper information by jumping too quickly to your next question. Instead, pick up on a comment or assertion or emotion and follow-up.
- Ask open-ended questions seeking more depth, information, explanation. Seek specific examples.

(The more you demonstrate that you are truly listening, the more you will establish trust. And by listening and asking for more elaboration, description or examples, the more you will help the source remember and articulate.)

Establish agreement and seek evidence.

- Don’t try to argue with source to get them to accept your version of events; instead ask them to comment on information you know to be true.
- Always ask: How do you know?

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CREATIVE QUESTIONS by KEN METZLER (1929-2011)

<http://journalism.uoregon.edu/news/memori-am-professor-emeritus-ken-metzler>

University of Oregon journalism professor and author. Made a lifelong study of interviewing techniques and wrote what I consider the best text on the subject:

“Creative Interviewing: The Writers’ Guide to Gathering Information by Asking Questions”

http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/760947.Creative_Interviewing

For a great tip sheet outlining his core interviewing philosophy:

<http://pages.uoregon.edu/sponder/j641/Interview.htm>

Here are high points of Metzler’s wisdom:

- Directive interviews
 - Gather and confirm information
 - Best for breaking news, events
 - Pepper of questions with short answers
- Non-directive interviews
 - Get subject to talk more expansively
 - Seek anecdote and story
- QUESTION TYPES:
 - Opening questions
 - Icebreakers and first moves
 - Four attributes:
 - Easy to answer
 - Reinforce subject’s comfort and expertise
 - Demonstrate preparation and respect
 - Follow logically from purpose of interview
 - Closed vs open (both work)
 - Filter (establish source role or expertise)
 - Factual (information, verification, confirmation)
 - Number (analogies and comparisons)
 - Reflective (comments that seek a response)
 - Creative (take the source somewhere new)
 - Probe or follow-up (expand and deepen)
 - Passive and/or responsive
 - Mirroring (repeat it back)
 - Silent
 - Developing (“*Tell me more.*” “*Give me an example.*”)
 - Clarifying
 - Diverging (introduce conflict or other perspective)
 - Changing (interrupting or moving on)

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