

Crafting great interviews

Tips and tricks for getting the most out of your sources — and your stories.

About me

- National correspondent for USA Today.
- More than two decades as a published writer.
- Studied interviewing in graduate school.
- Written breaking news and in-depth features in newspapers and magazines.
- **Great stories require gleaning information from people in all sorts of contexts.**



What we'll cover

- How to prepare.
- How to manage the setting.
- How to sharpen your questions.
- How to coax the most out of your sources and use them (but in a good way 😁).
- Dissect a recent interview.

A few basics

- “On the record” = Your normal working state.
- “Not for attribution” = You can use the info, but you will not ID the source of it.
- “Off the record” = info cannot be used in a story, even if the source is not ID’d.
- Useful recording apps: TapeACall & Otter.

Better preparation = better interviews

- ***“Show your guest the basic dignity of a Google search.”*** - Mike Donkers, radio host
- Prepping: minutes vs. hours
- What direction(s) might the story take?
- Where do you want the interview to go?
- What is this person likely to say, and how will you follow up?

Three promising lives cut short by Uber crash



jsonline.com/story/news/crime/2016/10/28/three-promising-lives-cut-short-uber-crash/92901704

Erin Richards and John Diedrich, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Published 6:12 p.m. CT Oct. 28, 2016 | Updated 10:13 p.m. CT Oct. 28, 2016

(Photo: Family submitted)

It was supposed to be a quick trip to Milwaukee, a change of nightlife scenery from Chicago, a girls' night out capped by a stay at a hip new hotel.

Sunday morning might have started late, with re-tellings of the previous night and giggles over coffee, and probably brunch.

Instead it was a morning of phone calls and in-person notifications, the kind parents pray they'll never have to receive.

Six lives intersected early Sunday morning at S. 2nd and W. Clybourn streets in downtown Milwaukee, but three of them were unfairly cut short: 30-year-old Ashley Sawatzke of Menomonee Falls, and 32-year-old Amy Taylor and 35-year-old Lindsey Cohen, whose families live in separate cities in Ohio.



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SPARKS Is The Shining Light For Cleveland Bays

By: Erin Richards

Feb 24, 2005 - 10:00 PM

 Print

Nestled within the rolling hills of south central England, a pasture within Henry Edmunds' Cholderton Stud farm makes most Cleveland Bay owners gasp the first time they visit. Edmunds' family has been breeding Cleveland Bays for more than 100 years, and in one of the pastures, 13 purebreds stand together in what is nearly as breathtaking a sight as the ancient monuments just a few miles away at Stonehenge.

Right now, it's the only pasture in the world where you can see this many purebred Cleveland Bays together in one herd.

But supporters of the critically endangered equine are trumpeting a new breeding management tool that may have the power to make herds like Edmunds' less of an anomaly.

Known as SPARKS, or the Single Population Animal Records Keeping System, the new acronym circulating around Cleveland Bay circles right now is a computer database that works with a genetic analysis program called GENES to help breeders sustain and strengthen small populations of endangered



Managing the interview setting

In person vs. phone interviews

- Be there, if you can.
- In person: Body language is key.
- Note everything about your environment.
- On the phone: Start by explaining where you see the story going. Ask about the setting. Ask for examples.
- LISTEN.



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McDynamo Is Still Going Strong

By: Erin Richards

Feb 20, 2007 - 10:00 PM

 Print

Trainer Sanna Hendriks was worried; McDynamo still didn't look right.

He was coming off a disappointing start to the 2006 spring season, plagued by a pull-up at Keeneland (Ky.), a fever at Iroquois (Tenn.) and a bad abscess. Although Far Hills (N.J.) had always been the gelding's favorite venue, Hendriks knew he faced more obstacles than usual at this year's \$250,000 Breeders' Cup Steeplechase.

The big, bay Thoroughbred had come to the meet with a reputation to uphold—he'd already won an unprecedented three Breeders' Cups at Far Hills in 2003, '04 and '05. But with an off start to 2006 and tough competition that October day, Hendriks wasn't sure if the horse could do it again.

She didn't believe her star hurdler was indicating he was ready to retire—after all, he'd easily won at the Meadowlands (N.J.), a warm-up race a few weeks earlier, with a 10-pound handicap, but at 10 years old and with seven years of racing behind him, she couldn't rule that thought out completely.

If the story ended there, McDynamo still would have had an admirable record. He had already reached—

Jockey interview:

Jody Petty noticed, too. The 5 1/2 foot, 35-year-old jockey who earned the ride on McDynamo halfway through 2005 wondered why the horse was just walking around the enclosure, instead of marching as he had done a few weeks ago at the Meadowlands. In the tack a few moments later, however, Petty felt the horse perk up. It was show time.

Jockey interview, cont.

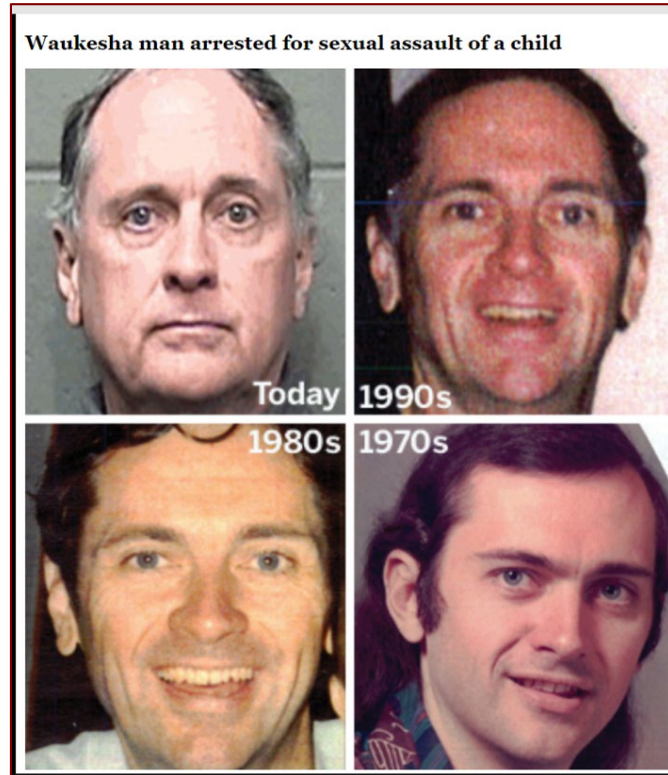
At the start, Mauritania took an early lead, and Petty sat McDynamo just behind the leader. He still marveled at how easily he could adjust the veteran. McDynamo took the hurdles along the 2 5/8-mile course with ease, and by the time he reached the three fences around the last turn, Petty cruised him around a flagging Mauritania.

Jockey quote:

“I came up to the last hill and turned around to look; there was nobody there!” Petty said.

“I had to break my neck to look behind me. In soft going, especially, you should never relax to the last fence, but he took that last hurdle like it was nothing. We were even a tiny bit long. I continuously patted him on the neck from the last fence to the finish line, and I took a lot of grief because I was smiling so much.”

That question you're afraid to ask?



That's the one you
have to ask.

“Did you do it?”

Open vs. closed questions

Exercise:

- You're writing a story about the controversy around cloning horses. The story subjects include a woman who has cloned her horse, a scientist and a breed association director.
- *Think about how to turn the following closed questions into open ones:*

Closed questions:

- When was this horse cloned?
- Have you cloned a horse before?
- Did the process go well?
- Do you approve of this practice?
- How much does this cost?
- What is the breed association's stance on cloning?

Some potential open questions

- How does cloning a horse actually work, from start to finish?
- Can you explain the risks?
- Why did you want to clone your horse?
- What was the process like?
- Why has the breed association adopted this stance?

Coaxing more out of your sources

- *“Often, people want to talk about the experiences that shaped them, even if they were painful.”* -Dan Moulthrop, journalist
- Deviate from your planned questions.
- Ask for other people you could talk to.
- Get a second interview.
- Check-in over time.

Let's listen in!



The interview.

<https://www.npr.org/2019/05/23/725704911/lizzo-on-feminism-self-love-and-bringing-hallelujah-moments-to-stage>

Transcript:

<https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=725704911>

Questions from Terry Gross

GROSS: ... What was your vision for the album? What did you want to say, lyrically and musically?

GROSS: Whose idea was it to pose nude on the cover? Was it yours or another person's suggestion?

GROSS: Sometimes when I see somebody who's nude or who's half-nude/ largely nude on their album cover or in a photo and it's a woman, sometimes it bothers me 'cause I think, like, are you making yourself into a sex object for men? When you're doing it on your album cover, I think it's a really bold statement. And - do you know what I mean? - because you are trying to break the mold of what beautiful is. And so you're making...

Responses from Lizzo

LIZZO: So I wanted to tell - and I wanted to show vulnerability and strength on this album - and even to the album cover. Like, you know, being completely naked, but also looking so comfortable with myself, I think, is a testament to this album showing vulnerability and strength.

LIZZO: So I think when we had to do a reshoot, we chose to go the opposite route and start with nothing and build back up. But the nothing shots were the greatest, so I think it just happened naturally.

LIZZO: Yeah, but are you only saying that because I'm fat? You know what I'm saying? - because I feel like if I were a thin woman, maybe that wouldn't be the case. I feel like women who are smaller aren't really given the opportunities to be body-positive or role models, either, because we've been conditioned to believe that women are using their bodies for the male gaze.

To recap:

- What do you need to get out of the interview?
- Think about where the story might go.
- Prepare, even if it's for just a few minutes.
- Go in person.
- By phone, ask for anecdotes, description. Use more hows/whys.
- Listen intently. Be silent occasionally.
- Keep in touch

More discussion?

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Firewood split by a town united

Residents chop fuel for those in need each year

By ERIN RICHARDS
and ANNYSJA JOHNSON
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Augusta — People aren't known to ask for help in this small west-central Wisconsin community.

So every winter, when there's a need, help arrives unsolicited in the form of an unusual fundraiser: a woodcutting bee that produces enough firewood fuel to heat the home of a neighbor.

"It's a favor that you try to keep returning," said Chase Warner, whose grandfather was the second recipient of the woodcutting bee in the 1980s. Every winter since then, between one and three cutting bees have been held at different places in Augusta.

The start of the 27th season this Saturday took place in a section of forest about a mile outside the town's main drag, behind a plywood sign spray-painted with the words: "Wood Cut." Usually a friend's health problem is to blame for the occasion, and the approximate \$2,500 worth of wood that friends chop, saw, toss and deliver to the needy person's house takes one more stress off the winter season.

"It's kind of embarrassing because I've always been a rough and tough guy and now I'm not," said Gary Lone, one of the recipients of this season's first woodcutting bee. Lone, who drove a truck for 22 years, was recently diagnosed with a heart condition that has the organ pumping at 20% capacity.

Lone can't work, was denied

Please see WOODCUTTING, 6B



MARK HOFFMAN/MHOFFMAN@JOURNALSSENTINEL.COM

A man uses a team of Percheron horses to pull logs from the woods on Saturday near Augusta. For nearly three decades, members of the Eau Claire County community have held woodcutting bees each winter. At the bees, firewood is cut, delivered and stacked for neighbors in need.



"Everyone loves to see those dump trucks come in their yard with a load of wood on it. It's a natural high to be doing something good for somebody."

Sam Pettis, a volunteer in the woodcutting bee that produces firewood fuel for needy neighbors

Gary Lone, who has a severe heart condition, talks about what it's like to be the main recipient of firewood Saturday near Augusta.