

Important the person
being interviewed
may go off



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Important people are often surprisingly tolerant of silly questioning, because they realise that unless the facts are given to the reporter, he will probably produce an ignorant and untrue interview.

Having briefed yourself on the background for an interview, plot the question you want to ask. You may not follow the script as the interview proceeds.

One line of questions may suggest another, and the person being interviewed may go off along lines of interest of his own. Do not try to curb an interviewee unless it is obvious that he is evading the questions.

After all, it is what he has to say that is interesting, and it may be more interesting than your questions. But before an interview ends, check with your original list of questions to see whether any vital area has been left unexplored the interviewee may deliberately be avoiding it. The tough questioning of some television interviewers gives some young journalists the impression that interviewing should be brusque and sharp.

Remember that the television interviewer plots his interview in advance, often with the person being interviewed. The television interviewer has a very time available on camera. Such techniques do not always work effectively in newspaper interviewing. Look at yourself.

Imagine what your reactions would be if someone came up to you, or came into your office, and started asking the questions you plan to ask. And rephrase your questions accordingly. Imagine what the people you are questioning were doing before you came along, and what they would probably be doing if you were not taking up their time.

Try always to get a sense of the time-factor in their lives, to assess whether you have to extract information fact, or have time to work up to the relevant questions. Early in the course of an interview the journalist must decide whether his questioning should be direct or indirect, easy or tough. Some people respond well to being asked tough direct questions. Others respond better if the interviewer leads up gently to the main point.

The journalist must work out within the first few minutes of meeting someone which approach is likely to be more fruitful. Always try to go to the man at the top. You may be (and in these days of public relations, often will be) diverted to the firm's public relations officer—but then you should ask to see the man at the top. Never be frightened to talk to the important and the influential.

Remember that they probably need good newspaper publicity as much as you need an interview with them, and if you are courteous and have good questions to ask, they will give good answers. If you are interviewing a particularly busy man, get clear at the beginning how much time he proposes to give you. Ask his secretary while you are waiting to go into his office.

If you are there at 3 p. m. and she knows he has meeting of the works committee at 3. 30 p.

m., she will tell you—and you will then know that you have got to get through the interview within half an hour, or have the tycoon tapping the desk and the secretary buzzing to remind him of his next appointment, when you are just about to ask the key question. Some reporters find that people
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talk more easily if the interviewer does not flourish a notebook and ball-point too ostentatiously under their noses. A small notebook is often preferable to a large one, and if you can safely balance it on your knee, it distracts the interviewee less.

Some reporters use tape recorders, but they too can be inhibiting to a free interview. If an interviewee produces detailed figures and statistics, take them down deliberately and slowly. If necessary, ask the interviewee to pause while you do and then read them over to him to make absolutely certain that you have got them correctly. No one minds the checking of vital facts: indeed, it adds to the mood of confidence the reporter must build up. If during an interview the subject makes some startling assertion or comment, it is as well to ask: ' May I quote you on that?' This makes absolutely certain that he knows that he is likely to be quoted, and can hardly complain afterwards that he said no such thing.

It is surprising how many people say things when questioned which they subsequently swear they have never uttered. It is for this reason that the reporter should always keep his notebook for at least three months after an interview, so that if a statement is challenged, he can produce the note made at the time. A reporter should always identify himself: ' I work for the Bugle, and my name is John—can you tell me, please, if...

' This should act as intimation to the person being questioned that what is said may be published in the paper. If you work out a set form of introduction and get into the habit of using it to preface every interview and telephone call, you are guarding against the possibility that you will forget to warn

someone that he may be quoted in print. If an interviewee says that he is talking ' off the record', then the reporter must preserve this confidence.

Sometimes people talk ' off the record' and then make statements that seem innocuous and quotable. In that case, ask whether such statements are still ' off the record', or whether you may quote the interviewee on those statements only. Sometimes statements are made to the presses that are ' non-attributable.' This means that they may be published, but the source may not be named—and that he may subsequently deny having said any such thing.

Such statements are published at the reporter's and the newspaper's risk. When a reporter has got his information, he then has to write it. This is often the point of greatest conflict between those who are interviewed, and those who interview. For this, reporter must write something that will be read. What is interesting to the person interviewed may not mean that the reporter must sensationalise, though some will: but it does mean that he will often pick out some statement or fact to lead his story, which the interviewee will not consider the most important statement or fact. Thus if an industrialist gives an interview to explain that the production of new dishwasher is to be transferred to another town, and that this will enable the company to double its production, he may add that unfortunately a thousand people in this town will have to be made redundant. He may, and probably does, regard the doubling of production of his dishwashers as the most important fact.

The local newspaper would certainly regard a thousand people being put out of work in the district as the most important fact, and lead the story with that fact. When a reporter has obtained as many facts as he can, he must assemble the story. He may do this either by returning to his office to write it, or by telephoning it back to his office. In either case, if there is news relevance he will first of all telephone his office for instructions. Always keep in touch with the office.

The opening sentence of news story must always be short, and should generally contain the main fact. This part of the news story is called intro. When beginning, it may be helpful to note down the most important facts in story, and then check to see that those facts are in the first few paragraphs. Always check when you have finished a story to see that you have got the facts right, that names are correctly spelt, that quotations are accurate, that technical terms are explained, and that no vital link is left out.