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# Interviewing techniques

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Here's that rare thing, a chapter on interviewing techniques that doesn't start with questions. That's because the main purpose of a print interview is to get the interviewee talking freely, and the best way to do that is to listen.

As American writer John Brady put it: 'No talking journalist ever held a good interview.' The description of an interview as 'a conversation with a purpose' is misleading, unless what's in mind is a cleverly guided, very one-sided conversation.

Interviewers need to master the non-questioning skills of eliciting information and quotes. These are:

- Listen and encourage.
- Use silence.
- Make statements requiring confirmation/denial.
- Summarise and move on.

There is good reason for this apparently perverse order, starting as it does with the 'mute' techniques. Listening and encouraging people to talk are not the simple skills they seem and should be learned and practised early. Worse, journalists raised on TV and radio interviews and who have received little or no specialist training may not even believe such techniques exist, and instead adopt the rapid-fire, ping-pong Q&A style that is quite wrong for print journalists.

The first injunction is to be flexible. The aim is to get your interviewee to drop their defences. This means you have to adapt your approach to suit them – calm the excitable, reassure the uncertain and steer the confident and knowledgeable.

Good interviewers are long-time people-watchers and eavesdroppers. They look, they listen. They ask themselves: what does that gesture mean; why did they look down then; why such a dramatic response to such a casual question; are those two squaring up for a row; why doesn't she interrupt him; who's the dominant person in that group; what do those three have in common?

If they can, they stick around to check if their answers are right. Fans of the movies score well here, as do actors-turned-writers, for obvious reasons. They listen, they watch, they analyse.

If there's one motto that interviewers should adopt it's this: *You get more flies with honey than vinegar*. Being nice works better than being nasty almost every time – and certainly to begin with.

## **Listen and encourage**

One of life's ironies is that, of the four great communicating skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – the one that is learnt first, listening, is taught least, while writing, which is learnt last, is taught most. Listening requires immense concentration and is exhausting. Anyone aiming for a face-to-face interview longer than an hour is advised to take a break, for their own sake as well as the interviewee's.

Listening also requires empathy, discipline, understanding and patience. If you're tense, indifferent, hostile, impatient or distracted, you won't listen well. The best listeners, rather like the best reportage photographers, are self-effacing. They concentrate on their interviewees so much that they almost become invisible. One sign of good interviewers is that, strangely, they're forgotten.

Listening is not the same as hearing. Good listening is hearing and understanding. In face-to-face interviews it means you are interested in what's being said and show it clearly – so you should look at your interviewee. Although it's possible to listen to someone with your back to them, they will hate it, and, being uncertain of your attention, will dry up. In phone interviews, the equivalent of showing that you're listening is to use lots of positive 'ums' and 'ahs' and 'yeses'.

Interviewees won't maintain steady eye contact with you, but they need to know when they check back – as they do at irregular intervals – that

you're concentrating on them. Lynda Lee-Potter said that, if you take your eyes off them for even a split second, you can hear their voices start to falter. Celebrities often have a greater need than most to be looked at because they're used to it and it reassures them. Some are said to storm out the minute they find the interviewer is not looking at them.

Once you have got people talking, you need to encourage them to continue – for example, by using reassuring body language: mirroring their posture in the first place, using nods, head tilts, leaning forward and smiling. Mirroring their posture is subliminal reassurance. Nods are much more noticeable, a sign that you hear and understand. Nods can come singly, in pairs or threes. More than that can be seen as overdoing it and can be interpreted as a signal that you wish to interrupt or are bored.

If you're not a natural nodder, watch others, practise and, before you add nodding to your interview techniques, check how comfortable you look in a mirror. Too many forced nods look ridiculous and inhibit rather than encourage your interviewee.

The vocalised version, the 'uh-huh' – often accompanied by an almost invisible nod – is another great encourager. It's very useful in face-to-face interviews and essential on the telephone. Used liberally, it helps answers to flow freely. The American version of the British 'uh-huh' is 'uh-ah', which rises on the last syllable and is much more upbeat than the grunt. Used repeatedly, as verbal encouragers tend to be during interviews, 'uh-huh' is definitely preferable to repeatedly spoken words or phrases such as 'right', 'yes', 'that so?', 'I see'. Singly, they work. Too many and they become a huge irritant.

Head tilts – putting your head on one side – come naturally to some. They're a way of saying 'Please carry on'. If you watch people listening to young children you'll see head tilts most of the time. The listener silently encourages the child to continue, sending out an 'I'm hearing you' message.

Leaning forward is another way of showing how engaged you are. Like mirroring the interviewee's body language, it broadcasts a subconscious approval message. Smiling adds further reassurance. The opposite of all of these – an impassive, non-responsive, stony-faced, bored-looking interviewer – sends out all the wrong messages, messages that are certain to be received at some level.

## Use silence

It's impossible to overemphasise the importance of silence. Not in the first few minutes of the interview, of course, when you're establishing your credentials, or if you have a nervous, over-talkative interviewee; but once they have taken your measure, relaxed and started to talk easily, then you must talk very little.

It's difficult to be silent – again nature for some journalists – but it's one of the most valuable techniques. So get into the habit of not jumping in with another question or comment as soon as the interviewee has finished speaking. Instead, count at least four seconds silently to yourself. You'll be amazed how often the interviewee carries on speaking, amplifying their last comment. Most of us discover this for the first time when we are stumped for what to ask next, and are astonished to find our interviewee doesn't seem to have realised but carries on speaking as though nothing has happened.

For those who are unsure how long four seconds lasts, it's about the time you can say to yourself 'One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, four Mississippi'. However ill at ease you feel, persevere. I opted for a four-second pause some years ago, mostly on a gut feel. It seemed the right amount of time to allow before continuing. It was gratifying to learn while researching this book that three seconds is the time it takes most people to frame replies. Don't overdo it and use really long silences, though. They're counter-productive, leading to short answers from puzzled, anxious or mystified interviewees.

If you need extra persuasion to keep silent, bear in mind that the more you interrupt, the less you listen and the less they will talk. What to listen for? Everything, really. First, the exact words the interviewee uses, then their eagerness or reluctance to answer particular questions, the tone or strength of voice, any pauses, omissions, where they become animated, where they sound reluctant . . .

Listening to precisely what is said is particularly important if the interviewee is well practised in dealing with journalists. In these days of sophisticated news management, many interviewees are trained in how to respond to unwelcome questions. They know that the truth and nothing but the truth is easy but that the whole truth is the killer. So given a choice between lying, fudging, evading or telling the truth, the adept

will opt for a limited amount of the truth, because it's easy to remember and a great protection. That's why listening to *exactly* what they say is essential.

A famous politician in his early days, eager to be adopted as a candidate for a safe constituency, is said to have included in his application details a list of all the articles he had written for the *Guardian*, neatly omitting the fact that none had actually been published.

Examples:

'The chairman studied archaeology at Cambridge.'

Don't presume he or she got a degree in archaeology: they may have studied it but failed finals.

And my particular favourite:

'Our budget? Well, it's under a million.'

from a producer replying to queries about his first film, which had a budget of £11,000.

A story is told about General de Gaulle, one-time president of France. After Britain had devalued the pound, there was heavy pressure on France to follow suit. Under questioning, de Gaulle said he would devalue the franc by somewhere between 0 per cent and 5 per cent. This answer bought him – and the franc – time, and pressure for action eased. He then did exactly what he had said he would do: he devalued the franc by 0 per cent.

One clue to the limited-truth reply is that the interviewee often rephrases the question in answering. Suppose the question is:

'When was the first time you heard he'd quit as manager?'

and the answer comes:

'I was gobsmacked to hear him talking about it on the radio on Monday morning.'

The reply may be true, but it doesn't answer the question. Politicians are great exponents of rephrasing when they answer, as it enables them to respond to a difficult question smoothly.

Listening attentively is an obvious compliment to the interviewee. It also allows you to collect the information you're after and ask intelligent

supplementary questions. The converse – not paying attention, not asking obvious follow-up questions but rather ones that are random and inconsequential – offends interviewees and is one of the prime reasons for interviews being cut short.

Particularly during long interviews, you should listen for changes in the strength of voice or speed of talking. Dropping or lowering tone and slowing down usually mean you've reached something significant about which the interviewee has reservations of some sort, usually emotional. Raising or increasing the volume generally signifies positive, tell-the-world content.

### **Make statements requiring confirmation, denial or amplification**

Questioning sits on a continuum that ranges from casual checking at one end to interrogation at the other. Considering the power of the press, it's easy to understand why many people are apprehensive about being interviewed.

One way to put them at their ease is not to ask questions but to seek confirmation or amplification. You can do this through statements.

'I'd just like to check how you spell your name.'

This is a much better opener than the brusque:

'How do you spell your name?'

Similarly:

'I see from the cuttings that you have a house in the south-west of France.'

Or:

'Friends tell me you have a house in the Charente, in the south-west.'

This approach works surprisingly well when dealing with sports people. At the end of the game or competition, remind them of an important moment – 'that second goal was astonishing' – then wait. You'll get a stream of valuable comments and analysis. Sports people can be more

articulate than it sometimes appears. The key is to remind, not ask. Maybe not being asked a question could be exactly the way to get them talking.

The same approach works when wanting amplification from reluctant boasters:

‘You must have worked very hard to complete the refurbishment ahead of schedule and under budget.’

‘Your customers say your sausages are the finest in Bawtry.’

‘I called your colleague Helen who tells me I must ask about your trip to the South Pole.’

‘I understand it was your idea to develop the annual office outing.’

Having information confirmed usually reassures interviewees that you’re getting your facts right, but if you are trying to get them to confirm something not to their advantage, then a question is often wiser. It is easier for them to avoid responding to a statement such as:

‘I understand there have been a lot of redundancies announced recently.’

than it would be to answer the question:

‘How many redundancies will there be?’

The guideline here is not to ask questions like this until well into the interview, when the interviewee is talking freely and senses that any avoidance or hesitation would send out a glaring signal of reluctance.

It’s also possible to discover information by making statements that require denial. This is much more problematic, because you don’t know what negative buttons you are pressing.

‘There’s no smoke without fire, so I take it the rumour that your latest model has hit safety problems is true.’

‘I understand you were once convicted of being drunk and incapable.’

Negative statements can often provoke a lively, vigorous denial, but be sure of your interviewee before you try this too often.

## Summarise and move on

One last and valuable type of statement is the summary. Use this when your interviewee is over-talkative or time is running short. Summarise what they have said, restate it, and then you can move on.

‘So what you’re saying is . . . Now I’d like to turn to . . .’

‘Let’s see if I’ve got this right . . . Perhaps we can now talk about . . .’

‘We’ve covered . . . so next . . .’

## Questions

Questions should be framed to achieve their purpose. Maybe this is to reassure the interviewee that you’ll spell the name of their company correctly. Maybe it’s to signal to them that you know more about their past than they suspect. Maybe it’s to encourage them to talk about their favourite subject. Maybe it’s to make sure they remember you.

The aim of the questions is vital; so is the way that you frame them and put them. Consider this approach by a journalist who’d just joined the *Liverpool Daily Post* and was sent to cover a fatal industrial accident.

I put down my pad as aggressively as I could and said: ‘Right, let’s get the details’ – and of course they wouldn’t give anything away. Then the chief reporter arrived . . . looking like Columbo with his old mac on. His approach to the manager was: ‘I suppose you won’t be saying anything about this? Quite, I quite understand.’

But then he had this wonderful way of asking questions without appearing to. Within two minutes he had already framed the first four or five paragraphs. ‘I suppose he wouldn’t have been here long . . .? Oh, it was his first day.’

I was just standing there gobsmacked . . . You learn a lot about not being demanding and aggressive, not looking as if you knew the answers.

The journalist was John Sergeant, who went on to become ITN’s political editor, and who remembered this important lesson years later when interviewed by the *Press Gazette*.



## Categories and categorising

You can categorise questions in a number of ways – by purpose, by content, by way of asking – but first let's examine the three recognised main categories: closed, open, and leading. All are valuable when used at the right time in the right way.

### *Closed*

These are commonly defined as questions that can be answered 'yes' or 'no', but a more sensible definition is that they are questions about fact or opinion that can be answered briefly. Closed questions are ideal for establishing essentials – names, job titles, locations – once the interview is under way.

'Did you see the accident?'

'No.'

'What's the group's full title?'

'The United Bellringers of Scourie.'

'How many boats can moor at the Marina?'

'120.'

'What's her middle name?'

'Arabella.'

'Where was the last AGM held?'

'Birmingham.'

Closed questions can be useful if you're very near your deadline, because they speed up replies, but using too many can damp down the interviewee's interest. They move into an answering, not talking, mode. The more closed questions are asked, the shorter the answers to any subsequent open questions will be.

The only people who seem to welcome closed questions are the inarticulate, the nervous and those with nothing to hide. Too many short answers do not a good interview make.

### *Open*

Open questions require more than a few words for a satisfactory answer:

'How did the man saw through the bars using just dental floss?'

'What made you decide to become a Salvation Army officer?'

‘Why do you think the pony survived being struck by lightning?’

‘Exactly what is the difference between Spanish and Moroccan green olives?’

Among variations of the open question is the *echo*, to be used when you sense that the interviewee might like to say more, but that direct probing might not draw it out. Use this sparingly, and practise first.

They say: ‘I went absolutely ballistic.’

You pause – then repeat: ‘You went absolutely ballistic?’

You pause again – and ideally they add more.

‘I fell in love with him there and then.’

You pause – then repeat: ‘You fell in love with him there and then?’

You pause – and ideally they add more.

## *Amplification*

Amplification questions are a sub-category of open questions, used to elicit extra details. The task here is to get the interviewee to supply those all-important vivid or visual examples – the ‘for instance’ hooks of communication.

‘Then I started work for . . . , a Third World charity.’

‘What exactly did the job involve?’

‘Visiting community development schemes in Zambia and Brazil, talking to the families involved and reporting back to the supporters. I’ve slept in mud huts in Zambia, helped dispense condoms at an AIDS clinic, and been inside two Brazilian brothels.’

‘As a result, the two of them had a dreadful row.’

‘Could you tell me more – for instance, were they shouting?’

‘Shouting? They were screaming at each other. Richard called Andrew an upper-class prat and Andrew said Richard couldn’t find his arse in the dark. Andrew walked out and hasn’t been seen since. Richard’s confiscated Andrew’s mobile and instructed security not to let him into the building.’

‘The company’s had several bright marketing ideas.’

‘Could you describe the three most successful to me?’

## *Clarification*

Clarification questions are another sub-category. The more you interview, the more you realise how important it is to check you've understood what you've been told.

'The outcome was so unfair I decided to leave there and then.'

'Is that when you went to work on the dictionary?'

'No, no, you misunderstand. I left work early that day. I didn't quit the job until later. I was headhunted by Mutel-Morange Ltd.'

'That was the same year?'

'No – it took a year before I moved.'

The approach here should be along the lines of:

'So what you're saying is . . .?'

'Would I be right that you think . . .?'

Because words mean different things to different people, it's wise to check.

'She's prevaricating.'

'Do you mean she's putting things off or that she's lying?'

'She's definitely stalling.'

'I'm determined to go on being celibate.'

'Do you mean you'll not have sex – or that you won't marry?'

'Give up sex, of course.'

(Incidentally, in those last two examples, the English language was the sufferer.)

Beginners must get into the habit of asking clarification questions. It is far too easy to misunderstand what is being said as a result of mishearings, wrong constructions, different ways of thinking, vocabulary being used differently by different age groups (e.g. 'It's wicked . . .').

Good open questions catch the interviewee's interest and unlock a wealth of information and opinion, encouraging them to talk freely because the interviewer appears interested in their views. The difficulty is that the interviewee may talk too much and swerve off on an unwelcome tangent, which is why for most interviews making it clear up front what you are after is so important.

## Leading

Because they can usually be answered shortly, leading questions could be categorised as a subsection of closed questions.

‘You’re a Lib Dem, aren’t you?’

‘How did you react? Were you furious?’

‘How much money went missing – more than £250,000?’

‘Did the accident happen just after they left the pub?’

Leading questions have a bad reputation, yet they’re much used in everyday conversation, and experience shows that if the interviewee likes the questioner, they have little effect on the answers unless the suggested answer is way off-beam.

Much more annoying can be the *assumptive* sub-category of leading questions, as in ‘When did you stop beating your wife?’.

‘Are you married or single?’

‘Neither, I’m divorced!’

‘Did you come by bus or train?’

‘I walked.’

But, as before, if the assumption is correct these questions work well because they demonstrate understanding and interest.

‘You love the sea.’

‘Yes – with a passion. What made you say that?’

‘That photo of the yacht on your bookcase.’

‘I’ve heard you love opera – I guess Verdi in particular.’

‘Yes – how did you know?’

‘Just a feeling.’

This last comment may be because everything said so far showed an interest in the workings of the human heart – perhaps it was in the cuttings.

Sometimes, during very tricky interviews, using an assumptive question is one way to provoke an answer.

‘When was the last time you smoked a joint?’

Asking an assumptive question that relates back to something said at an earlier stage of the interview can flatter the interviewee, reinforcing how interesting you find what they're telling you. Referring back and getting it wrong can lead to a complicated and useful correction, but don't try this too often or they may suspect you're not as shrewd as they first thought.

'So when you said earlier that the samples taken from the reservoir passed all the required tests, that means the water quality has been maintained at the same standard since the reservoir was built?'

'No, no – you can't assume that. The test standards were lowered some years back. Take, for example, the requirements for testing for *e. coli* . . .'

### *Indirect assumptive*

Indirect assumptive questions are useful when you need to overcome a barrier. Best known is the classic:

'How many raffle tickets would you like?'

. . . instead of:

'Would you like any raffle tickets?'

So:

'How many redundancies will there be?'

Not:

'Will there be any redundancies?'

Lastly, there's a *leading question* variation which demands a Yes/No reply – when either reply could land the interviewee in difficulties. This has been called a 'classic conflict' question and is used most viciously on politicians, who hate to be seen or heard squirming to avoid a straight answer. For an example, see page 121.

### *Directive, suggestive or loaded*

These questions are unattractive and manipulative, not recommended, but regularly used by unfortunate journalists who have to return with

quotes to fit a pre-set formula, slot into a known space or support a management opinion.

'You're happy to feed your child Frankenstein foods, not knowing what appalling deformities might result in years to come?'

'It's undeniable that 20mph zones save lives, so why should selfish, speeding motorists be listened to?'

'Mother Teresa [the Pope, the Prime Minister . . . ] said love was the most important thing in the universe. Don't you agree?'

'What sort of mother wouldn't support our campaign to have the names and addresses of local paedophiles published?'

## Short, simple, clear

Since the first interview requirement is to communicate, commonsense dictates that short questions are better than long ones, simple questions better than convoluted ones, clear questions better than abstruse ones. Commonsense may dictate this but, alas, commonsense is a rare commodity. This is where using a recorder and listening back to interviews is embarrassingly instructive.

When it comes to broad or narrow, objective or subjective questions, there can be no pat answer. The guideline is to make the question relevant to your requirements and to the personality of the interviewee.

Cautious, legalistic minds dislike broad questions.

'What did you think of Australia?'

'In what way? Do you want to know my reaction to the people, the scenery, the wine, what exactly?'

The more relaxed and less exact would have no such worries with the same question.

'Wonderful place. Loved it, especially crossing the Nullabor plain by train, fireworks in Sydney on New Year's Eve, kangaroos and parrots on the golf course. And the natives were friendly – especially when Australia were beating us at cricket.'

If you're after a lot of information, move carefully from broad-brush to detailed follow-ups, particularly if the interviewee is at all wary. Long,

complicated follow-up questions immediately after a broad general question signal that there's a lot of very detailed questioning to follow, and if time is short and you are less than endearing, the interview may end swiftly. Consider this scenario:

'Have you ever lived in Cambodia?'

'Yes. For six months, really loved it.'

There follows a long list of questions requiring detailed information about the standard of accommodation, food, transport, trains, weather, shops. All are answered patiently.

'Have you ever lived in Laos?'

'Yes. For two months . . .'

Same long list of questions follow. Interviewee is less patient.

'Have you lived in China?'

'No.'

'Or Thailand?'

'Never!'

The advice is to ask all your general questions first, then go back and obtain the details you want.

## Customise your questions

Make your questions suit your interviewee. People who are at home with facts and figures, people who are well defended or pompous or tentative or scared, usually resist hypothetical questions. The creative, by contrast, welcome the 'what would you do if . . .?' approach and will freewheel away into fantasy, which can make for good copy.

More than that, make your questions exact and precise. Enthusiasm makes for good quotes, so if your research shows that your interviewee has a passion for quattrocento (fifteenth-century Italian) art, frame an exact question.

'If you had to choose one picture that sums up all you love about quattrocento art, which would it be – and why?'

Or if your interviewee is a noted vegetarian celebrity:

'If you were planning a gourmet vegetarian meal, what would you cook and who would you invite?'

Hopping between objective and subjective questions – queries about observable facts or happenings and about personal opinions and views – can be very disturbing for interviewees, particularly those who think exactly, logically and slowly. Only the disorganised and/or creative can cope with fanciful queries.

## Avoid interrogation

There's a school of interviewing that recommends interviewers should adopt a variety of stances, from investigator and confessor to inquisitor and judge. But investigators often operate under cover, confessors behind a screen, inquisitors have recourse to torture, and judges require people to be on oath.

In other words, unless it's absolutely necessary, don't. Always try to interview person-to-person, adult-to-adult, eyeball-to-eyeball. Neither abase nor elevate yourself, unless your interviewee will not talk otherwise. In these egalitarian days, being condescended to is appalling and being venerated wearying.

Interviewers who see themselves as attorneys for the public, intimidating and cross-examining their interviewees into a state of gibbering incoherence, do nothing for journalism, according to Anthony Howard in *The Times*. Interviewers who soothe have much more success. 'A good bedside manner', says Howard, 'is still the best way to elicit a scoop.'

## Beguile not browbeat

Brilliant writer Clive James believes that the adversarial style is . . .

. . . pretty nearly useless even when you interview a real adversary. If I had asked Ronald Reagan 'Were you a stoolie for the FBI in Hollywood?' he would have told me nothing. I asked him 'How serious *was* the Communist threat in Hollywood?' and he told me everything, implicating himself up to the eyebrows.

One of the most beguiling interviewers I ever watched at work was on the staff of an obscure trade publication. Interviewees said that being interviewed by him was like being wrapped in a fur bedspread – soft, silky and strangely seductive. They felt compelled to answer his questions because they sensed it mattered so much to him.



If you're interviewing on a sensitive subject – money, sex, relationships, education (never forget that, to many people, their lack of qualifications is a very sensitive matter indeed) – do not be embarrassed or judgemental. That sends out all the wrong messages, and your interviewees will sense your attitude and in turn feel embarrassed or furious. Be straightforward, don't use euphemisms, avoid judgemental words. No questions involving 'unconventional tendencies', 'surprising impulses' or 'facing up to problems'. Be matter-of-fact.

Every journalist I've met who has done a sex interview began by thinking it would be difficult and discovered the only problem was shutting the interviewee up. You usually learn more than you expect, sometimes more than you wish. Interviewing the vulnerable is a very different matter, requiring a different approach (see pages 172–77).

## Telling trio

You need only three questions, it's said. The composer Brahms said they were: 'Whence? Wherefor? Whither?' A TV reporter said that for TV it was 'How bad is it? Is it getting worse? What can be done?'

A newspaper version is: 'When did this start? And then? What of the future?' These are all, in effect, questions to discover the beginning, the middle and the end of a story – the basis of so much journalism.

So when trying to find out the beginning, middle and end of the story, remember that what's needed is a mix of your keenness to listen to what they have to say and the quality and freshness of your questions.

For a charity promotion, journalists interviewed a man who planned to walk all round the British coast. When would he set off, they asked; what was his route; how long would it take; where would he stay; how much would he raise for charity – all routine stuff that he'd answered many times before. Then someone asked: 'What about your *feet*?' And at that point he perked up, the pack perked up, and the story took off.

## Useful questions

Here's a selection of questions that have worked for a variety of journalists. There are no such things as never-fail questions, because so much depends

on how they're asked and who asks them – but there are some reliables if used when appropriate. These include old faithfuls such as:

'What's the best/worst . . . ?'

'If you had two minutes on national TV . . . '

'Who's been the greatest influence on you?'

'Do you have a pet hate?'

Part of the function of a book such as this one is to offer examples of different questions for consideration, but please, when you interview, ask questions in your own words – otherwise you'll be like the unfortunate salespeople who have to work from a script: not happy, not convincing, and not very successful.

To an interviewee speaking in jargon:

'How would you explain that to a lay person?'

For any successful person:

'Have you any advice for youngsters just setting out?'

For business or political interviews where you've just heard a controversial opinion and/or inflated claim:

'What evidence do you have for that?'

If you meet someone on a factory visit, at a press conference, visiting a local organisation, and you can't remember their name:

'Remind me how you spell your name again.'

For a high-flying businessperson:

'How come you, of all the company's 10,000 [or however many] employees, made it to the top?'

For people still climbing the ladder:

'What drives/motivates you?'

There is a remarkable set of questions devised by Eric Berne, author of *Games People Play*, in his book *What Do You Say After You Say Hello?* They link in with the parent/adult/child approach of transactional analysis. Here's a selection:

'What will it say on the front of your tombstone?'

'If your family were put on the stage, what sort of play would it be?'

'What did your parents forbid you to do?'

'Do you ever lie awake at night planning revenge?'

'How far ahead do you begin to worry about things?'

'What will your last words be?'

A variation on that approach is to ask

'If you *had* to find a needle in a haystack, how would you do it?'

Answers to this last question are said to reveal the root of your being:

'Hire someone to do it for me,' said an economist.

'Burn it down and use a metal detector,' said a powerful businessman.

'Use a giant magnet,' said a playwright.

Here's a set of hypothetical questions to ask an articulate interviewee who's in rare form:

You meet a man at the end of the world and he asks you three questions which you have to answer spontaneously and immediately. The first is: 'Who are you?'

[Pause for answer]

The second question is: 'Apart from that who are you?'

[Pause for answer]

And the last is: 'Apart from *that* who are you?'

Suppose your interviewee shows signs of wanting to go and you're sure there's much more to come:

'Am I boring you?'

... said to guarantee another 20 extra minutes.

To an interviewee who refuses to give a direct answer to a pointed question and squirms around, fudging his or her replies:

'I'll take it that's a yes.'

Almost every newspaper or magazine Q&A feature has some questions that can be used for a general profile interview.

‘What books are on your bedside table?’

‘What really pisses you off?’

‘If you could make one change to the world/your company/your town/village/club – with money no object – what would it be?’

‘What’s your motto?’

‘Where do you expect to be in five years’ time?’

‘How do you handle disappointment?’

‘What makes you feel important?’

‘What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned in life?’

‘Who’s your hero?’

‘What three words would you use to describe yourself?’

‘If you were a biscuit, what sort would you be?’

‘If you knew you were going to die tomorrow, what would you do tonight?’

## Softly, softly

Skilful interviewers can ask almost anybody anything and get a reasonable response. Approach and style are what count. You can ask tough or rude questions if you ask them in the right way.

You need to be seen as sympathetic and understanding by the person you’re talking to. They must feel they can trust you. Robert McCrum, when literary editor of the *Observer*, was a ‘Desert Island Discs’ castaway and wrote a feature about it, which captures a central point about being interviewed. ‘I would happily’, he wrote, ‘have spent all day discussing the infinitely fascinating subject of Me.’

The really offensive questions are those that relate to what people can’t change – their height, the colour of their skin, physical abnormalities. But even those can be asked sympathetically once the interview is under

way. Lynda Lee-Potter, First Lady of Fleet Street, once waited 45 minutes before asking an interviewee if she took her artificial leg off at night. When Lee-Potter judged the time was right, she received a slightly puzzled answer: 'Yes, of course.'

## Start nice ...

If you want to ask important questions that you sense your interviewee will not wish to answer, approach gently and, if you meet refusal, anger or aggression, quickly veer away – apologising if that's your style – and return to the subject later.

If you want to ask questions that you *know* will cause trouble, common-sense may dictate that you leave them until the end when you have the bulk of the interview in the bank. Then, if thrown out, you can still write the story.

However, commonsense can be wrong. Much depends on how the interviewee is likely to react and whether it's *a* tough question or *the* tough question. (To see how talented journalists Lynn Barber, Emma Brockes, Andrew Duncan and Jan Masters face such problems relating to celebrities, go to pages 144–64.)

## Warn of a change of tack

With a few exceptions – for example, people you are trying to wrongfoot or trap – the best way to ask an unpleasant question is to give fair warning. You tell your interviewee you are going to ask a difficult/hard/rude/impertinent/offensive question and then you do. Because they are prepared, the sting goes out of the question and they feel more able – and more obliged – to answer. Try it.

'I know it's daft, but journalists always have to put the age in – so how old are you?'

'This may be really offensive, but why – when you work in such a sober business – do you wear such cheesy ties?'

'I know you're important and run a department with a budget of several millions, but why did you put your feet on the desk just now?'

'This may sound rude, but you're 45, a mother of four and working with people whose lives are wrecked – so why the *Star Trek* watch?'

'This may be too difficult to answer – but how come such a disorganised person as you managed to edit a dictionary?'

## Other approaches with difficult questions

First: make the question very simple. This is highly recommended for well-protected, skilled and tricky interviewees.

'Will you explain why you are not implementing your planned factory expansion?'

No criticism, no loaded words, no added details, no named sources for the interviewee to latch on to and attack. This approach makes it difficult for interviewees to dodge, divert or rubbish the question.

Second: lay the blame elsewhere.

'Your detractors say your company has a reputation for going in for cartels, tax avoidance – things people think multinationals shouldn't do. Do you think that's fair criticism?'

This allows you to ask a tough question but offers your interviewee the chance to see it as enabling them to counter hostile allegations.

Third: soften with schmooze – preface the attack with praise.

'Your latest movie has won five Oscar nominations and is doing great business at the box office – but isn't the bidet scene really tacky?'

Fourth: treat it lightly by implying the question is not so serious.

'I'd like to play devil's advocate here and look at what you did from a different angle. Then the question becomes – why did you put your name forward, considering your track record?'

Fifth: try separate apparently disconnected questions – a two-step approach.

'You've always been idealistic, haven't you? I know you support animal welfare charities and would never wear fur. I'm right there, aren't I?'

You already know the answer to these two questions, so you then follow them up with:

‘So why do you send your children to a fee-paying school when you believe in equality of opportunity?’

## **Good humour, humour and cheek**

Good humour in an interviewer is a great plus unless your interviewee is pompously self-important. A cheerful approach helps interviewees relax. It also can prevent and/or defuse anger, deflect aggression and lighten intense situations.

In most interviews, humour works wonders. No book can help you here; you’re on your own. But if you’ve got the ability to make people laugh, use it. Amid the serious business of information extraction, making a cheeky comment is the equivalent of a feint in judo. It changes the dynamics and gives you the initiative.

Another plus. If you make your interviewee laugh, you move out of the questioning slot. Two provisos: know your own deficiencies – not everyone can tell a joke or an anecdote successfully. Second, ensure your interviewee is laughing with you.

## **Flattery**

It’s deeply worrying how much flattery people can absorb. It rarely goes amiss, because it makes them feel valued, reassures them all is well and with luck gets them to drop their defences.

Sincere compliments are the best. Kind remarks are better than nothing. There’s usually something you can find to praise or at the least comment on positively.

‘Great book – particularly the part . . .’

If the interviewee has written a book, you must read it if you have time, or – if time is short – at least know something more about it than the title.

‘You always give me such lively, vivid quotes.’

Try this even if their quotes are not amazingly outstanding, because one of the great things about people is that performance regularly rises to meet expectations.

‘Someone who’s gone as far as you in such a short time is an inspiration.’

‘What a speech!’

Most people who work in the public gaze, from film stars and actors to novelists and celebrity chefs, crave reassurance. Publicity is important to them so they look for a warm reception. Silence sends out the wrong vibes. The advice is: if you can say something flattering, do; if you can’t, then keep quiet – but whatever you do, keep hostile thoughts to yourself. Barry Norman, who worked on the *Daily Mail* for many years, says that you start from the understanding that most stars are acutely conscious of the thrusting young talent in the wings, eager to displace them.

## **When you need more ...**

So far, we’ve been in that happy land where interviewees gladly respond. Their answers may be incomplete or unclear, but under extra questioning they give vivid instances and lively anecdotes and expand incomplete replies, providing in full the answers you seek. They’re neither monosyllabic nor gabby, neither evasive nor hostile.

Sadly, as everyone discovers, interviews aren’t always like that.

What if your approach has been faultless and your questions good, yet you’re disappointed with the quality or amount of information provided? We now shift up a gear to techniques to use on those who give less than you want, don’t give or are evasive or reluctant to answer. These ploys come in no order of efficacy – success depends on skilful use in the right hands with responsive interviewees.

Nor do the techniques come with a guarantee. News management is now so sophisticated that journalists must accept that, on occasion, they won’t win. That doesn’t mean you should capitulate – though it may mean you should appear to capitulate. You can choose any one of these strategies:



- Persist
- Keep them talking
- Suggest/guess
- Hint at dissatisfaction
- Wheedle and needle
- Threaten 'no comment'
- Float a rumour
- Play 'grandmother's footsteps'
- Get tough
- Tell a story
- Offer a confidence.

### Persist with questioning

If your interviewee doesn't want to answer, you may decide to move onto the next subject. That is tantamount to admitting defeat unless you do so deliberately, intending to return to the subject later. You're there to get the interview, so ask the question again, maybe in a softer or more oblique form, maybe more forcefully. Tell them this is a valuable opportunity to set the record straight, dispel rumours, put their side of the story. Try any ploy you feel comfortable with.

'So the question's too hard for you?' may not suit everyone, but if said jokingly it can ease the tension, which is sometimes all it takes. If they continue to refuse to answer, move on but return and ask it again later.

### Keep them talking

Keep your cool, keep your head, and keep them talking. The more they talk, the more noticeable refusals are.

I once interviewed a man who insisted on seeing the questions in advance. He was six months into a very difficult and newly created job, had attracted a lot of flak and had previously refused to talk. Reluctantly I sent over 20 questions, was given an hour, and was told by his secretary that he'd be all right if I could make him laugh.

After the preliminaries, I started on my questions. He refused point blank to answer the first six, all about sales and market share. An

inauspicious start. I changed tack and we started to talk in general terms. We both relaxed a little, and he did start to laugh. By the end of 45 minutes he was chatting away openly and volubly about what a success the company was, so I chanced it: 'C'mon, all's going well, you're surely not going to hide your successes. Just tell me . . .'

And he did. None of the figures was accurate, I am certain – he left not too long after – but, 'sourced', they made interesting reading. My belief is that he'd disclosed too much to withdraw at the critical point, realising how damaging it would look. I listened again to that tape a lot, and it's possible to hear his voice drop and change tone as he begins to give the highly suspect figures (see pages 80–1).

### Suggest/guess

This is the simplest and often the most effective way of coping with reluctance about statistics.

'We're spending more than a quarter of a million.'

'Would that be more than £300K or more than £400K?'

It depends how practised your interviewees are. If they say 'Yes', then another figure will be suggested.

'More than half a million?'

Suppose they reply:

'We'd rather not discuss the actual budget.'

Then a comeback could be:

'Would between . . . and . . . be a safe bet?'

Again, if they reply 'Yes', you can go on narrowing down until either you get to a printable answer or they pull out. After a second blunt refusal it is best to give up. You can always refer to the refusal to answer in your copy.

There are occasions when a grossly improbable guess may give you a clue about how near you are, as people tend to deny wild improbabilities more fervently than close-to-the-mark guesses. Watching body language can help gauge any response (see pages 71–77).

## Hint at dissatisfaction

One way to encourage your interviewee to give more is to get your disappointment across. First, the (slightly more) subtle approach. If you're using a notebook and pen, quietly put the cap back on the pen or close the notebook. I discovered this by chance when interviewing the manager of Pebble Beach Country Club, near to San Francisco:

We'd had a very good interview indeed. 'How much do you earn?' I asked at one point and he told me – a rare occurrence but always worth trying.

He was a lively talker with some great stories but in effect we'd descended to chitchat after lunch, so I closed my notebook and had noticed him watching me. A minute or two later he said something so quote-worthy I had to open the book again. The reasoning is simple. I'd been hanging on his words appreciatively – very good for his ego – then had noticeably switched off. He realised he could get more attention and applause, so started to give again.

The more cruel version is to switch off the recorder.

When time is short and you can't afford to close your notebook or turn off the recorder, then either blame the editor, the features editor, yourself or – last resort – them; but in a kindly way:

'This isn't working. I'm obviously asking the wrong questions. Can we start again?'

'The editor's setting great store by this interview. She'll give me hell if I don't get something meatier.'

'I'd hoped for something sexier. You've always been so quotable before.'

'I'd hoped you would give me something stronger.'

'I hate to say this, but I think the editor's going to say this is all a little predictable.'

'I'm back on writing wedding captions if I don't get some really powerful quotes – so *please!*'

## Wheedle and needle

Plead or prod. Not everyone can – or would want to – do this; but it's very effective when practised by a skilled interviewer.

'Oh, come on, you can tell me . . .'

'Why won't you say? Oh, please . . .'

'You're not too afraid to tell, surely?'

'Question too hard, I guess.'

## Threaten 'no comment'

If your interviewee refuses to answer a particular question, one approach is to point out how bad that will look in print. A lot depends on the reputation of your publication. The higher it's rated, the worse an omission looks. This ploy works better on the inexperienced interviewee. Always worth a try.

## Float a rumour

This is an insider variation on the 'suggest-an-answer' tactic, requiring the ground to be prepared carefully beforehand. It goes this way. A journalist wants to find out how the fashion chain's business is going after a mammoth expansion, but no one will say. They ask the chief executive:

'What's this I hear about the downturn in takings in your West Midlands operation?'

'What? Where did you hear this?'

'On the grapevine.'

If on one or two previous occasions the journalist has presented a real tip this way, the chief executive should have developed a healthy respect for their sources and – the hope is – should either spill the beans or deny everything on the record. It does work, I can vouch for that. However, if you overdo it – like so much in journalism – you'll be sussed.

## Play ‘grandmother’s footsteps’

This requires great delicacy. Having established what your interviewee does not want to talk about, you creep up on the subject again and again from all angles, veering away at the last minute. They’ve already signalled that they’re unhappy to talk about it and, if you’re a skilled practitioner, you can really rattle them so that in the end – the theory goes – they’re relieved to be able to discuss it. This requires confidence and skill (see Andrew Duncan on pages 150–5).

## Get tough

The ground rules of interviewing are to be sceptical, not adversarial, and never to antagonise interviewees. Break these rules at your peril. However, with a particularly frustrating interviewee who has resisted every gambit you know and who you can afford to antagonise, you might consider a hostile question. But ask it with a smile and never lose your temper. If all else fails, insult them – but only if you never need to talk to them again.

## Tell a story

A good anecdote will tell readers more about a person than any amount of description. To encourage the interviewee to provide one, remind them of a previous anecdote you found in the cuttings. They may be delighted to retell it with advantage, or – even better – come out with a lively new one.

## Offer a confidence

This isn’t as creepy as it sounds when done unintentionally. Done deliberately, it can appear tacky, but it can work – though not always.

For example, take this instance. Interviewer and interviewee (a novelist) are getting along well, and common ground had been established – they’ve discovered they have both just ended a long-term relationship, and they’re both addicted to chocolate.

The novel in question contains vivid sex scenes, and is strong on anxiety about what can be transmitted. The interviewer can't resist saying:

'I got thrush once and had to visit an STD [Sexually Transmitted Diseases] clinic. At first I was terrified but ended up quite fancying the consultant.'

'That's astonishing,' replies the novelist. 'It happened to me, too.'

There's a pause. The novelist is asking herself which person's embarrassing experience is likely to end up in print.

### **Questions *not* to ask**

- Don't ask what you should already know from research.
- Don't ask the first question that leaps to your mind. It will have leapt to every other mind, too.
- Don't prove how stupid you are by asking smart-arse, clever-clever questions. They infuriate interviewees (a) because they break the important 'they're-the-star' guideline, and (b) because you're showing off rather than trying to gather information.
- Don't badger or hector. It's counter-productive.
- Above all, don't – OK, very, very rarely – ask: 'How do you feel?'

'Your mother's been eaten by a crocodile, your father's been electrocuted, and your husband's gone missing in Borneo. How do you feel?'

People who want to tell you how they feel won't need this question to prompt them, and people who can't put their feelings into words won't need it either. One way of putting it that has been known to work is to ask: 'What did that do to you?'

### **Ploys *not* to fall for**

Beware if you're asked for your opinion. This is an experienced interviewee's way of flattering you, getting you on their side and so stopping probing assessments. The interviewee is turning the tables: using a successful interviewing ploy on you (see page 171).

### *'Tell me about you ...'*

Shrewd, manipulative or very nice interviewees may ask you questions about yourself. Deflect these immediately. Lynn Barber recounts how at one point the actress Julie Andrews asked her if she had any children. She has two daughters, but said she had none, because she knew that being a pleasant woman, Andrews would ask about them and she didn't want to divert or break up the flow of the interview.

## **CASE STUDY 3 – DON'T DESPAIR**

What do you do when all your efforts to gather good copy have come to nothing? Here's how a talented feature writer remembers one of her early jobs.

The dulllest newspaper I ever worked for was dead keen on accuracy and getting the facts right, which was good training, but it was rather uninterested in anything vaguely stylistic. If you didn't start with 'A local woman/man/boy aged something or other ...', the subs put it up front anyhow.

The paper covered everything – including listing all the people (with names and addresses checked on the electoral registers, telephone book, etc.) who had been prosecuted for not having a television licence or parking on the wrong side of the road.

One of the regular chores was interviewing anybody who had enough years of service with the railway or the local car manufacturer. The effort needed to make each one just a little different was immense. One day I went with a photographer on such a job and found my interviewee very heavy weather indeed. I despaired of getting a single spark to lighten up this routine news item and had got up to go when I noticed on the wall a photograph of a ship.

'Oh, were you a sailor?' I asked. 'Yes,' he said. 'I was shipwrecked three times.'

I nearly missed the best retirement story I ever covered.

## What if they're reluctant?

This is something that happened a long time ago, but it embodies a truth as valuable now as it was then.

Diana Menuhin, the wife of the violinist Yehudi, who was giving recitals throughout Australasia, reluctantly agreed to spare *Auckland Star* reporter Ann Elder about 10 minutes.

Ann arrived with a photographer. For a start, Mrs Menuhin refused to have her picture taken – yet a few minutes later she was being photographed in the street, smiling, wearing her new Pierre Cardin trouser-suit and carrying a brown paper bag full of health food. The subsequent interview was meant to last for just 10 minutes. Two hours later Ann and Diana were still talking.

Why the change? Because of the practised persuasion of Harold Paton, one of New Zealand's top photographers, and the determination of a reporter not to let the interview slip through her fingers.

Mrs Menuhin had started by saying to the photographer: 'No photo . . . when you've had looks and lost them . . .', but he was genuinely complimentary and obviously very keen to photograph her. Such subtle flattery is hard to resist.

She later talked at length to Ann in the hotel room while doing the ironing. Why? Because Ann knew a great deal about ballet, and remembered that in her youth Diana Menuhin had danced with a very famous company – and that connection opened the floodgates of memory.

The message to us all is: 'Never take no for an answer.' Photographers are particularly persuasive because their opportunity is limited; if they don't get the pic there and then, the opportunity will probably have passed for good. Phones and emails make it easier for writers.