

substitute for genuine interest and enthusiasm. There are not too many people who do not enjoy telling their story, particularly to a good listener. Make sure it is obvious right from the start that you want to hear their story.

TIPS

- Do your homework.
- Choose something from your research, but not an area critical to the actual interview.
- Good on-the-spot icebreakers can involve remarks about books, the garden, trophies, paintings, pets or photographs.
- Keep up to date with current affairs as a way of breaking the ice.
- Know cultural 'dos' and 'don'ts'.
- Don't be too personal; an interesting watch or piece of jewellery should be reasonably safe.
- The last resort—comment on the weather!

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THE QUESTIONS



First-time interviewer Beth Harvey of The Cairns Post believes in being prepared.

First-time interviewer Beth Harvey admitted to 'blinding excitement' when she found out she was to interview Chaske Spencer (Sam Uley) and Tinsel Korey (Emily Young) of *New Moon* (the second of the *Twilight Saga* vampire films) fame: 'I loved the book so much I called up everyone. But I didn't expect to do someone high profile for my first interview' (personal interview with Beth Harvey). Beth admits it was a bit 'overwhelming and intimidating', but she

researched and planned every aspect to 'control my nerves. I was so organised that even if I blanked I could just go to my questions.' Beth was also determined to ask some questions that would be new to the stars. During her extensive research she discovered that Tinsel had got in touch and spent time with people from the Quileute and Makah nations depicted in the *Twilight Saga*—so this in turn became one of Beth's questions.

'Q6: Not many people realise that the Quileute Nation is a real community with real people. What did you do to get in touch with the Quileute community? How do they respond to the phenomenon?' Beth said she also ensured with her research that she knew the answers to every question that she asked (personal interview with Beth Harvey).

A cadet journalist recalling one of her very first interviews with an overwhelming businessman said she hadn't prepared very well and was too afraid to ask any questions. After waiting a few minutes while she fumbled around trying to get started, the businessman asked, 'Do you take shorthand?' to which the journalist replied, 'Yes.'

'Well, take this down then,' he said, and then proceeded to dictate a story to the journalist, including quotes and full punctuation—right down to the very last full stop. It was a hard lesson, but the journalist said she always comes completely prepared now, and she always asks questions no matter how daunting the interviewee.

Remain professional at *all* times, no matter what. Follow the basics but always finish off any and every single interview—whether it's an in-depth feature or a quick, short pic story—with: 'Is there anything else you would like to add?' Sometimes this last question ends up with information that turns into the lead paragraph or the focus of the entire story! (personal email interview with Jodie Munro O'Brien).

Though it can be difficult sometimes, you must always ask questions, otherwise you could be treated as a secretary taking down a prepared speech. Your preparation time should include your background research, as well as thinking through your questions and writing them down. Australian political journalist Kerry O'Brien believes that you should always write down your questions because:

Questions help you to focus your attention on the essence of the story or interview. They also help you to order your thoughts in a logical flow, and in framing the question you are also endeavouring to think through what kind of answer the person will give. And that then becomes part of the flow into the next question (personal interview with Kerry O'Brien).

However, Kerry warns:

Many interviewers before me have talked about the trap of sticking to your questions regardless of the answers. And even though you've got your questions prepared, and even though a part of you (whether you like it or not) will be thinking about what you're going to ask next, you've also got to be listening to the answers, and you've got to be processing the answers as you go. You've got to be prepared to throw your questions to one side, or even move from Question 2 to Question 6, because of something that the interviewee has said that demands logically that you go to Question 6. Then you might have to retrace back to Question 4 rather than Question 3, or you might be jettisoning Question 3 altogether (personal interview with Kerry O'Brien).

Kerry O'Brien believes the 'old fundamentals' (the five Ws and one H) will almost always get you through. 'If you come

back from any assignment and haven't answered those—to some degree at least—then I hope it's because people have refused to give it to you, not because you have failed to ask (personal interview with Kerry O'Brien). He also feels it's important to understand the difference between what people want to say and what you, on behalf of your audience, should be getting from them.

I think it's valid enough for many people to be seeking to use various media outlets as a forum for their ideas, but equally they should expect and understand that it's your job as a journalist to be there on behalf of the audience, not to help them. So if they've got interesting, important things to say without too much prodding on your part—fine. If you can vouch for the veracity of it, the essential truth of it, fine. But in many instances you've got to be there as the check and balance of what's being said. You're not a cipher, you're not somebody's platform, you're not just there for someone to stand on and cast their message out unchecked. I think the bulk of people will want you to show some respect, they'll want you to show common courtesies, but they also want you to be their representative asking the tough questions and keeping people honest.

You're there as the vehicle for the flow of information—but not an unquestioning vehicle (personal interview with Kerry O'Brien).

Whether you are reporting for a news brief or a cover story, you should always be interested in your interviewee—and show it. This should be clear in both your verbal and non-verbal techniques. The simple technique of asking informed questions, then listening to the answers for cues for the next question, is the best way to display interest. Questioning techniques can be divided into three main areas:

1. questions to use
2. questions to try
3. questions to avoid.

CASE STUDY: To explore these various techniques we will use the example of an interview with a bank official conducting a tour of small country branches.

DO ASK the 'who cares' question

One of the essential news values is *consequence*—in other words, a story must be significant or affect people to be newsworthy. Generally the more people who are affected by a story, the larger the story and the closer it will appear to the top of the bulletin or to page 1 of the newspaper. News editors will apply the 'who cares' principle when deciding where your story will be placed and how long it will be, so you should have the answer when you return from the interview. With the bank story it would be essential to determine not only how many branches would be involved in the tour, but also the extent of the region (including population) that would be affected if any changes were made as a result of the visit.

Examples

- Q: You're visiting 30 branches. How many people are employed in total?
- Q: What are the major regions serviced?
- Q: How many customers are involved?

DO USE closed questions but not too often

These are the questions that require only a very limited response—usually a 'yes' or 'no'.

Examples

Q: Have you conducted a tour like this before?

Q: Have you been to these areas before?

If your subject is not particularly forthcoming and is inclined towards giving short answers, using closed questions will not help. Generally journalists are discouraged from using closed questions, but they can come in handy if you want a definitive answer. During the interview with the bank official visiting the branches, it would be useful to ask: 'Are you going to close any branches as a result of your tour?' If the answer is 'no', it should be kept on record in case there is a change of heart in the future. If the answer is 'yes', you have a front-page story.

DO USE open questions for more information

Closed questions are easily converted into open questions—the sort of questions that require more than a yes or no answer. By the simple addition of one of the six essential questions (Five Ws and one H), the question is opened up and should ensure longer answers.

Example

The closed question:

Q: Do you hope to visit a number of branches during your tour?

(which would probably only elicit a yes or no answer) is easily converted into six open questions that ask for longer and more interesting responses.

Q: *Who* will you meet during the tour?

Q: *What* do you hope to achieve?

Q: *When* will you be touring?

Q: *Where* will your tour take you?

Q: *How* will this benefit the public?

Q: *Why* have you chosen this region?

The 'how' and the 'why' questions will generally elicit the most in-depth information and are usually saved for more investigative pieces or longer current affairs stories.

DO USE short precise questions that are easy to answer

American journalist and author of *Interviews that Work* (1986) Shirley Biagi says questions that are longer than three lines are too long. Unless some background explanation is required, three lines is a maximum—particularly for broadcast interviews. In fact, the shorter the better. A sage piece of advice given to a print journalist moving into radio was that the audience has tuned in to hear the person being interviewed—not the journalist. This is also the case with print interviews—the interviewee should not have to interrupt the interviewer to make a response. Some broadcast journalists have been known to ask questions of more than forty-five seconds—sometimes up to one minute. This is far too long.

Example

Instead of asking:

Q: This bank tour is said to be far more extensive than others that have been conducted in the past, which

have not resulted in any significant changes and have just been fact-finding missions with no outcomes. What results do you expect from this tour?

why not ask:

Q: What results do you expect this time?

DO USE the 'bigger, brighter, better' question

A lot of interviews should present 'must ask' questions for the journalist. These are the sort of questions the public would want to ask if they were conducting the interview themselves. For instance, an interview with a police detective about a drug raid invites the 'bigger, brighter, better' question. The curious journalist should be wondering: what makes this raid different, special, unusual or worthy of coverage? What gives it that newsworthy angle? If these questions are forgotten a good angle is lost.

Example

Q: Is this the biggest drug raid in this area/state/country?

A 'Yes' answer to this question could easily result in a front-page story.

DO USE the challenge or investigative question

Many answers, particularly those given by people used to dealing with the media, should not go unchallenged. However, if you do want to investigate an answer it is advisable to do your research first.

Example

For instance, let's say the bank official answered your closed question—Are you going to close any branches as a result of your tour?—with a definite 'no'. However, your research found that a similar tour five years earlier resulted in the closure of four branches and the loss of fifteen jobs. Knowing this you *must* ask:

Q: When you toured five years ago you also promised no closures or job losses. Four branches were closed and fifteen people retrenched. What makes this time different?

The official will either explain the difference, if there is one, or ask for the evidence that backs up your 'statement question'. You must be able to provide this. Without proof, a statement like this could get you into a lot of trouble or leave you looking foolish.

DO USE a summary for more information

This technique requires the interviewee to agree or disagree with information you have summarised. As a device to clarify and sometimes to extract a definitive answer, the summary can be a very efficient tool. Instead of getting a 'yes' or 'no' to just one closed question, the summary contains much more information with which the interviewee either agrees or disagrees. Australian journalist Jana Wendt used this technique very effectively in an interview with media owner Rupert Murdoch on the first edition of Channel 7's former current affairs program *Witness*. She used summarisation to clarify the current position of business dealings being conducted between Murdoch and rival media tycoon Kerry Packer.

At the height of the Super League battle (caused by Rupert Murdoch's proposal of a 'super' league that split the existing league, then merged with the ARL to form the NRL) Packer had agreed to help make the peace within rugby league in Australia in return for some broadcast rights and access to Murdoch's Fox movies for his Nine Network.

JW: Let me talk then about this arrangement, this deal that you had with Mr Packer, or thought you had. Did you shake hands on this deal?

RM: Of course.

...

JW: But if I can just summarise your view of it, since Mr Packer did not deliver on his side of the bargain, presumably you don't want to deliver on your side?

RM: I think that would be a fair summarisation, yes (Channel 7 1996).

DO USE questions that ask for summaries, rankings or choices

An excellent way to obtain more definitive answers is to ask the interviewee to provide their own summary, to rank information they have been given, or to make a choice. Not only does this provide more detail but it also gives their order of priority or importance.

Examples

For instance, the bank official could be asked for a summary:

Q: Could you summarise the main reasons for this tour?

then to rank the summary:

Q: Could you put those four reasons in order of importance for your company?

and then to make a choice:

Q: What do you believe is the most important reason for looking at these country branches?

DO USE requests for clarification by repeating the answer

The best interviews are the ones in which journalists are listening intently, then using the interviewee's answers to lead into the next question. Taking this point even further, the actual words of the answer can be used to formulate the next question. This is a useful technique for ensuring that you have heard correctly, and for stressing the importance of the answer.

Example

In the interview with the bank official visiting the country branches try:

Q: What changes do you expect to result from your report?

A: I expect there could be changes in staffing levels and the services provided.

Q: Staffing levels could be changed. How?

DO USE

- The 'who cares' question
- Closed questions (but not too often)
- Open questions for more information
- Short precise questions that are easy to answer
- The 'bigger, brighter, better' question
- The challenge or investigative question
- A summary for more information
- Questions that ask for summaries, rankings or choices
- Requests for clarification by repeating the answer

DO TRY repeating or rephrasing questions

Repeating or rewording questions might work with the interviewee who doesn't deal with the media very often, but politicians and business leaders pick up on this technique very quickly. They are just as likely to point out that it doesn't matter how many times you repeat the question or rephrase it, they are not going to answer.

Examples

- Q: You said staffing levels could change as a result of the study. How?
- A: I really can't answer that until it has been conducted.
- Q: Are you trying to say that staff may be put off?
- A: No, I'm not saying that at all. I can't say what will happen until we look at the branches.
- Q: Do you have any indication that the branches in this region are overstaffed?
- A: Again, no, not until we do the research.

Kerry O'Brien believes that, if you're confident of your topic, which generally comes from preparation, repeating questions is a valid technique.

Whether it's the prime minister, the opposition leader or the treasurer, they are, in the end, also only people. They have their own insecurities, and their own doubts, as well as their own confidence. Yes, they come armed with media skills that have been well honed over years, and yes, they have the capacity to sidetrack, and to spin-doctor, and all of these other things.

But if you have listened carefully to the answers, and it is clear to you that they have not answered your questions, then even though you feel that you're a junior journalist and they're a heavyweight, you can, in a reasonable tone, point out that they haven't answered the question. You can say 'Could I just remind you of what the question was?' without being aggressive (personal interview with Kerry O'Brien).

If your interviewee does not understand your question, they might ask you to reword it or to clarify what you want. This could mean your questions are too wordy. Remember: the interview is not a contest, it is a means of obtaining information from a source for publication. Don't make it too difficult, either for the interviewee or your audience, by using complex words, jargon or overly long statements or questions.

DO TRY posing a hypothetical question

Most interviewees would have difficulty answering the hypothetical question, and many will refuse to tackle a problem that might never arise. Those who have attended 'managing the media' sessions are trained to refuse to answer these questions.

Example

For instance, with our bank official, you might try:

Q: What will you do if bank staff around the country go on strike as a result of your recommendations?

but the official is likely to answer:

A: I think this is a highly unlikely scenario, which I'd prefer not to discuss.

DO TRY playing the devil's advocate

While you may agree with the interviewee, it is a useful technique to challenge them and their answers. This provides the opportunity for a more balanced coverage of the issue. Quite often you can state quite clearly what you are doing.

Example

Q: If I could just play the devil's advocate here . . . Don't you think the criteria you are using to judge the viability of the branches is unfair?

Kerry O'Brien believes playing devil's advocate is a good approach to an interview.

You don't have to be aggressive about it. If it's a politician or an advocate for any cause, I think it's important for an audience to feel that these people's claims have been tested. That's part of what you're there for. And obviously you can't really test a person unless you've got some understanding of what they're talking about—which goes back to your research and preparation (personal interview with Kerry O'Brien).

DO TRY the tough question

Asking the tough question—or dropping the bomb—is not for the first-time interviewer or the faint-hearted. It is difficult asking the hard question, but most journalists feel it is only fair to give the interviewee the opportunity to give their side of the story or to answer criticism.

The late Paul Lyneham, an award-winning television journalist, believed it could be very difficult asking the hard question, but essential when you feel an injustice has been done or that the interviewee has a case to answer. In the following anecdote, he recalled one instance of how he coped with asking the difficult question.

*Paul Lyneham, courtesy of the
Nine Network.*



My most famous recollection of that dilemma was a story I was doing for *Four Corners* and we spent three days filming at a notoriously Dickensian cheese factory for a story about migrant women workers. We talked our way in there on the basis of doing a story about the factory. Of course in that situation you delay the real interview until the very last minute, so you go around the factory, get all the shots of the women working standing up when they could have been sitting down, and carrying big boxes of cheese over slimy floors.

The man who owned the factory thought this was the best thing that had ever happened to him because he was going to get all this publicity on national television. And he took us out to lunch, and gave us the five-star treatment, you know, and thought I was his brother, and there was going to come the inevitable moment of deep and thorough-going betrayal—from his point of view anyway.

From my point of view, I thought he had a really substantive case to answer in terms of the way he was treating his workforce, but I also had to be prepared for the fact that he'd bolt when he realised what was happening and there was no way apart from having a firm response ready.

So I said to him—and this was a real dry-throat breathless sort of anxiety thing because I was looking him right in the eye—I mean if you're going to stab anybody, you know, it takes extra guts to do it right in the front.

And I said, 'Tell me what section of what award entitles you to get these women to clean your Rolls-Royce at lunch time.'

Which I thought set the tone of the interview fairly clearly, and he tried to get out of the chair and I mean that would have had a certain dramatic appeal, except we hadn't really got the interview going. And what could I do about it? Nothing. Except to wag my finger at him and say very sternly, 'Why don't you just sit there and answer the questions?' Which is something I've never done ever before or since, and it worked. And he sat there . . . like a little boy, and in the end, on the first cut of the documentary I didn't run terribly much of him because I thought he almost looked like a figure of the underdog, but then others thought I was being a bit too sensitive.

But that's the great occasion when I've really choked, and had to say to myself, come on, let's get real, let's get on with it (personal interview with Paul Lyneham).

DO TRY the 'how does it feel' question—sparingly

This question is overdone by the media, appears to be asking the obvious, and is the one question the public complains that it hears far too often. The journalist who asks the champion swimmer, 'How does it feel to have

made the Olympic team?' does not expect them to say, 'It feels terrible.' Put more thought into this question if you want to use it. You could ask the swimmer: 'What was the best feeling—knowing you had made the Olympic team, or that you had broken the world record?'

Despite its overuse, the 'How does it feel?' question will almost always work in a positive situation, as with the swimmer. However, caution must be used if you decide to ask this question in less happy circumstances. For instance, the television journalist who asks recently bereaved parents: 'How does it feel to know you will never see your child again?' cannot expect them to be very forthcoming.

This sort of question can also be used as an aggressive device, but you must be prepared to hold your ground if the interviewee becomes defensive.

Example

For instance, with the bank official you could try:

Q: How does it feel to have the fate of the staff in this region in your hands?

However, don't be surprised if the official becomes less than helpful after you ask this.

DO TRY projection

To soften the difficult question, or to reduce hostility in the interview, journalists often project accusations to a third party—'some people might say' or 'your critics might ask'. The most famous example of using this technique—and seeing it go wrong—is the much-repeated 1981 interview between British Prime Minister

Margaret Thatcher and George Negus (who was a journalist for Channel 9's *60 Minutes* at the time).

GN: Why do people stop us in the street almost and tell us that Margaret Thatcher isn't just inflexible, she's not just single-minded, on occasions she's just plain pig headed and won't be told by anyone?

MT: Would you tell me who has stopped you in the street and said that?

GN: Ordinary Britons.

MT: Where?

GN: In conversation, in pubs ...

MT (Interrupting): I thought you'd just come from Belize.

GN: Oh, it's not the first time we've been here.

MT: Will you tell me who and where and when?

GN: Ordinary Britons in restaurants and cabs.

MT: How many?

GN: I would say at least one in two.

MT: I'm sorry, it's an expression that I've never heard ... tell me who has said it to you, when and where? (Little 1994: 23–4).

Of course, Negus couldn't. While this exchange was described as 'good television', it should serve as a warning if you plan to make use of the projection technique.

DO TRY the 'dumb' or innocent question

Asking the innocent or 'dumb' question such as 'I don't really understand this. Could you explain it to me?' can work very well, particularly in getting the interviewee to explain something in simpler terms more suited for

the publication or broadcast. It is also a useful device to get the interviewee to reveal more information.

Example

With the bank official, you could ask:

Q: I'm sorry, I don't quite understand. Could you explain how you decide whether a branch is viable?

However, the journalist at an international press conference following a major basketball tournament took this technique a little bit too far when he asked: 'Could you tell me please why you get two points when you score a goal?'

DO TRY the leading question

This technique is used as a way of getting the interviewee to use your words in their answer. It might work if the interviewee agrees with what you are saying, but otherwise it is rare that your lead will be used.

Example

For instance, it is unlikely the interviewee will use any of the words from the following question, as they would not want to repeat any negative ideas.

Q: Could this tour be seen as just another way of penalising people for living outside metropolitan centres?

However, if you asked:

Q: Is this tour one way of ensuring customers have the services they require?

The interviewee may well answer:

A: Yes, this is the major way we ensure regional customers have the services they require.

DO TRY the trick question

Sometimes a question can be worded in such a way that the interviewee will be trapped if they attempt to answer it. This technique is generally used with those who are trained in dealing with the media and either is left unanswered, or the answer could be that they have recognised the trick. It might work, but it is rare when it does.

Example

Q: Don't you feel it is unfair to look at reducing services in this region?

Whichever way the bank official answers—yes or no—it will be a confirmation that services are being reduced, so a savvy interviewee would deflect this question.

DO TRY

- Repeating or rephrasing questions
- Posing a hypothetical question
- Playing the devil's advocate
- The tough question

DO TRY

- The 'how does it feel' question—sparingly
- Projection
- The 'dumb' or innocent question
- The leading question
- The trick question

DON'T ASK double- or triple-barrelled questions

Questions that are 'two in one' or even 'three in one' are confusing for even the best and most practised interviewees. If a journalist asks a long triple-barrelled question, the interviewee would be likely to choose either the easiest question of the three or the last question. Some interviewees are so proficient at interviews that they will answer all three, but this sort of ability is rare.

Example

Don't ask the bank official:

Q: Do you plan to close bank branches as a result of this tour, and will this be the first time you have conducted a tour such as this?

It would be an unusually rare and forthcoming interviewee who would answer the first question when given the option.

DON'T ASK the 'tell me all about yourself' question—unless specific

This is an incredibly lazy question and everyone knows it, even someone who is rarely interviewed. One journal-

ist asked this exact question at the start of an interview with a university professor. The professor handed him a CV and told him to come back when he had some 'real' questions to ask.

Another example involved a press conference with actor Robert Carlyle and a group of international journalists.

He seemed to be warming up and ready to talk about his recent big life shock—a newspaper tracking down the mother he hadn't seen for thirty years since she walked out on him when he was a small boy—when a German journalist took the floor. 'Robert,' he said, 'please, I have never heard of you before. Tell me about what other things you have done' (Williams 1997: 14).

Sometimes the 'tell me about yourself' question is used in feature interviews, but usually in reference to a more specific timeframe or situation such as, 'Tell me what it was like when you heard about your father's death', or 'Tell me all about yourself when you decided to travel to India'.

DON'T ASK

- Double- or triple-barrelled questions
- The 'tell me all about yourself' question—unless in relation to a specific event or time

DO KEEP in focus and in control

One of the most important elements of an interview, and often the most difficult, is maintaining control. Some

journalists will rise to the bait and start verbal sparring with the interviewee. All this does is get the interviewee off the hook, while the journalist loses control, their cool and—in the case of broadcast journalists—the respect of the audience.

In her interview with media tycoon Rupert Murdoch, Jana Wendt admirably maintained her cool after some very personal barbs were sent her way. She kept the focus and continued with the interview despite several attempts of provocation. The interview was primarily about Murdoch's attempts to set up a Super League. In the following segment Murdoch appears to be trying to take control of the interview by posing a question to Wendt, and then attempts to bait her about 'astronomical salaries'. Wendt continues with her line of questioning, and eventually Murdoch, who had been denying the large offers of money, agrees with Wendt's original statement.

RM: Why were they so loyal to us?

JW: Money?

RM: No. They get money—they were offered other money.

JW: They were offered astronomical amounts of money by you.

RM: Well, not by your standards. (smiles)

JW: Astronomical amounts of money by any standards. Multiples of their salaries previously.

RM: No, I don't know about that. It depends who and what the bidding was, and so on. Some, sure, I mean some were going to be paid properly (Channel 7 1996).

Above all—try to avoid the obvious. For instance, the journalist who asked the two members of the popular singing group *sister2sister* 'How did you meet?' should probably go back to the drawing board.

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