

Shooting Great Interviews II: Make It A Story

Interview Techniques for Directors & Producers

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If you're doing an on-air interview (live-to-tape, etc) as host or otherwise will be seen and heard, then formulating succinct, well-written questions is imperative. You need to consider how you will look and sound. However, for most producers and directors doing an interview is only about eliciting interesting answers that will be later edited to some degree. Nevertheless, most interviews will benefit from utilizing the following suggestions.

Structure your interview. Everyone loves a good story. By virtue of their selection to be interviewed, **your guest/subject must have a great story** behind the information he/she wants to tell (or you want them to tell.) The trick is to get the information out in the form of a compelling and interesting story. This is less critical for interviews you know will be edited than say, for a live-to-tape talk show. First, remember that **every story has a beginning, a middle and an end.** YOU MUST FIND THEM. Don't rely on the guest to structure the story (your interview). The beginning and ending are most important.

A good story does not have to start at the beginning! But it does have to **start with something that grabs attention!** Movies and books open with a murder, car chase or other exciting action. Find the 'grabber' with which to open and then figure how to work in the necessary 'back-story.' The middle should build to an exciting climax.

Be sure about why you are interviewing this person, what part they play in your overall production and what you want them to say. Make sure your expectations are reasonable. At trial, a good lawyer never asks a question he doesn't already know the answer to. That's good advice for any interviewer.

Don't ask questions that can be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no.' Ask 'how,' 'why' and 'what' questions—and use verbs/phrases such as, "explain how..." and, "tell me..."

Keep questions pointed. Questions don't have to be simple or even necessarily short—but **do not put multiple questions together.** People will only answer one of them anyway--and you'll be giving *them* the option of which one to answer. Or worse: they'll ignore all the questions and give only a general answer.

In a live interview, Charlie Rose, Tim Russert and others may **give background or history as a set-up to a question.** If you feel this is necessary, think of the overall question as syllogism: give a series of facts leading to your question. Avoid making it a series of questions.

Listen to the guest's answers and use follow-up questions. This makes it a conversation (not an interrogation) and is much more interesting for your guest. It will also get you more interesting detail and depth.

Avoid rambling or searching for a question out loud. Better to pause silently as you formulate your question. The corollary to this is, don't try to buy time to figure out your next question with comments such as "very good," or "interesting," or even "thank you." Such rejoinders never seem sincere, become repetitive and stop the flow of the conversation. The worst is verbal stalling with, "errr...aaaah..." etc.

Give visual feedback to your guest. You may not want to say anything for fear of contaminating the audio but you can encourage the guest to continue with a nod or an inquisitive look—or discourage them by *looking* like you want to interrupt. If you're a journalist, be careful not to hint at agreement or condonement.

Don't be too quick to jump in with the next question if you think the guest has more to talk about on the last question. **If they stop without giving you a satisfactory answer --just stare at them.** 90% of your guests will be insecure enough to feel they are expected to continue with more detail—and they will! Well-trained politicians and well-rehearsed entertainers are the exception.

The Reverse technique is also important: When a guest is going too far off track—particularly changing the subject—**don't be afraid to interrupt and politely bring them back on subject.** Of course, if you let them go, generally people will prattle on, *saying the same thing three different ways* before they finish. This can be very useful if you know all you need is good soundbites. Of course, if they are engaged in giving a pertinent example, that's a good thing—not a diversion.

Don't try to 'telegraph' the answer you want to hear by making it part of the question. Most people will not understand what you are trying to do. Since you just told them they will assume you know it and there's no need for them to repeat it! Instead, be straightforward in asking them to tell you what you want.

Ask your guest to repeat something important. In a live interview the interviewer can repeat the point for emphasis—while not a formal question, it will generally elicit a response with more detail. In an interview for post try, "Could you say that again in a different way?" If looking for a specific quote, I'm never afraid to put words in their mouth: "Could you say it just like this...?" However, doing this can make some guests feel uncomfortable. They may feel they're being asked to say something they don't believe or feel they're not doing a good job. I prefer to save these for the very end.

Generally you want your guest's opinion and that's what most subjects will expect. **If you want a declarative exposition of the facts you may have to ask for it specifically.** Cops are the exception. You'll have to pointedly ask them for opinions, analysis or speculation.

If you touch on a topic your guest is not qualified to talk about or one with which they are uncomfortable, you may ask if there's anything they do feel comfortable saying, then it's generally best to move on. Investigative journalism is the exception.

The story's 'Ending' is not the end. The exciting finale of the story should be followed up with some (short) discussion of aftermath, perspective or results; known in literary circles as the *dénouement*. **End a 'live' interview with a conclusion,** a moral or even what's next...Of course that's not a bad way to end any interview. For interviews that will be edited, such as a documentary, I often make my "last" question something like: "We've covered a lot of detail but I don't want to lose perspective --**Over all, what do you think is the most important thing** we should know (remember) about this?" And then, before concluding always ask if there is **anything they want to add** /or anything that was not covered / anything else they think the viewers should know...