

Quick Guide to Interviewing

Adapted from "Go Tell It" by Jim Killam and Lincoln Brunner, 2014, Moody Publishers

1. Prepare. Before the interview, learn as much as you can about the person and topic. Write down at least five good questions beforehand. But don't over-rely on that list during the interview. Listen to the person's responses and be ready to deviate from your list.
2. Start with friendly small talk. Get the person comfortable talking before you are taking notes or recording.
3. Ask open-ended questions – questions that can't be answered with "yes" or no."

Wrong: *Is it rewarding for you to serve in this orphanage?*

Right: *Can you talk about what it means for you to serve here?*

4. Ask "how" and "why" questions to elicit more interesting responses. If the person tends to speak in the abstract, ask: "Can you give me an example of that?"
5. Don't be afraid to ask the same question in a different way to get a better, more complete answer.
6. Dig for anecdotes and details. Ask the person to tell you exactly what happened, moment by moment: *What time did the storm wake you? Was it dark outside? What did you grab as you ran to shelter? Who was with you? What was her name?*
7. Use silence. Listen intently. Let the person think about their answer. Don't feel like you have to finish their sentence if they are struggling for a word.
8. Get the basic details right. Ask the interviewee to spell their first and last names and to give you their title. Let them spell the name aloud to you, or have them write it in your notebook.
9. Clarify. If there's a detail or sequence of events you're not clear about, ask for clarification – if not now, then in a follow-up conversation.
10. As you finish, ask if there's anything you should have asked but did not. This can yield a surprising amount of useful information.

Interviewing: Voice recorder or notebook?

Unless you know shorthand, you cannot write notes as quickly as your interviewee is talking. To ensure accuracy, use a digital voice recorder. That can be your smart phone with a reliable recorder app, or a stand-alone recorder.

The upside:

- More natural conversation with your subject, because you can maintain eye contact and not be madly scribbling the whole time.
- Ability to concentrate on the nuances of what your source is saying, and to ask more perceptive questions
- Helps in analyzing your interviewing style and improve (maybe you talk too much)
- A completely accurate record of what the person said.

The downside:

- Transcribing interviews is the most tedious part of reporting. It takes far more time than simply writing from your notebook.
- Possibility of mechanical failure. Carry extra batteries and memory cards. Put the recorder where you can see it running during the interview. Always test your recorder before an interview.
- The recorder could intimidate an interviewee who's already nervous. Set it to one side, so it's not directly between you and the person. This keeps the person from staring at it.

The legal side:

Always ask permission to record. Not only is it polite, it's also wise. In many countries, the law requires consent of both parties before a conversation may be recorded.