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Getting The Most From Your Interviews

Teaser:

A guide for improving interviewing skills.

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Source:

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Body:

Preparation **Rapport** Questions **Listening Follow-up Preparation**

1. **Select the right person to interview.** Early in your research on a story, you might need to talk to someone who can give you general background. Later, you might seek someone with a particular experience or viewpoint to fill your last hole or two. Use all the resources you can to find and connect with the right characters: Directories, colleagues, your own library, other sources, the Internet, Profnet. In particularly sensitive stories, a mutually trusted third party might help you connect with someone.
2. **Research before you interview.** Learn as much as you can about the character and the topic before your interview. Be honest about what you don't know. You're talking to this person because you don't know everything. If you fake knowledge, you probably won't fool your character, and you will deprive yourself of a chance to learn from him.
3. **Plan your questions.** An actual scripted list of questions is stilted. But you might benefit from rehearsing some questions in your head or even aloud in the car on your way to the interview. Consider in advance what follow-up questions you might ask, depending on how the character answers a question. It's a good idea to have a checklist of topics you want to ask about. Don't be a slave to the list during the interview, but glance at it toward the end, to see if you've overlooked something important. Use the elements of story as a checklist in planning your questions: What questions will help me understand the conflict? The character's motivation?
4. **Write what you can before the interview.** If you write as you report, you will generate important, specific questions for later interviews. Your stronger sense of where your story is going will give a strong focus to subsequent interviews.

[top] Rapport Help the subject relax by addressing various elements of comfort:

1. **Setting.** If possible, do the interview in the subject's environment: home, workplace, school, church, place of leisure or recreation. Allow plenty of time and choose a time, if you can, that's convenient for the subject. A lunch or dinner interview works sometimes, but also has disadvantages: interruptions for food and service, subject talks so much she has little time to eat, it's more difficult to take notes. When you can, a moving interview is effective: Start out in the workplace, go out to eat, ride home in the character's vehicle, ask her to show you the house and the yard.
2. **Honesty.** Tell the subject up front, when you arrange the interview and again when the interview starts, what you are working on. This doesn't mean you ask the tough questions first. But you tell the subject honestly what the story is about and what you will be asking about, so the tough questions don't feel like an ambush.
3. **Complaints.** The person may have some gripes about how you personally, your paper or the media in general have covered something in the past. Listen to the complaints. Don't feel an obligation to respond specifically. If you do, don't respond defensively or argumentatively. Don't apologize if you're not sorry or if you were not responsible. The best way to handle most complaints is simply to listen and acknowledge, with brief explanations offered sparingly where appropriate.
4. **Personal connection.** Seek ways to establish a personal connection with the character. Do you have a child the same age as one in the picture on the desk? Ask about his children and commiserate briefly about car seats or car pools or car insurance, whatever stage the children are. Is the diploma on the wall from your school? Chat briefly about professors you might have shared or how bad the football team is now or whatever interests you might share. Don't fake a connection or stretch for one, but be alert for genuine ways to make a connection. If you have little in common with the person, connect by showing genuine interest in the character beyond the narrow focus of your story.
5. **Control.** Unless your character is used to being interviewed, she probably feels uncomfortable facing you and your notebook. Early in the interview and again toward the end, give her some control. Sure, you're asking the questions, but answer her questions if she asks any. Listen politely as she wanders off the subject occasionally. People don't talk like we write. They might bury the lede (well, maybe they do talk like we write). Give her time to get around to it. Before you wrap up the interview, ask if there's anything else she'd like to add. In between, you will control the interview with some direct, tough questions. But if you share the control, your subject might feel comfortable enough to give you better answers.

[top] Questions

1. Start with broad open-ended questions or simply invitations to talk. "Tell me about that." "What was that like?" "Fill me in on . . ." These questions invite the character to tell you his story. They also give him a chance to tell you something you might not know enough to ask about specifically. And the general nature of the question gives the character a feeling of control as he answers.
2. Move the interview along with responsive questions and statements that basically tell the character to keep talking: "Uh-huh." "Really?" "What happened next?" "How did you react?"
3. Ask specific, direct questions to elicit the information you need that the open-ended questions don't produce. "How much did that cost?" "Why did you do that?"
4. Ask brief questions.
5. Save your toughest questions until near the end. This gives you a chance to develop some rapport before the tough questions. It lets you be sure of gathering the easy information if the tough questions prompt the character to cut off the interview.
6. Remember the elements of story. Observe, take notes and ask questions about the setting. A photograph or award or piece of art may lead the subject to an interesting anecdote or revelation. Ask the character to demonstrate how she did something or show you where something happened or recall specific dialogue for you.
7. Ask for documentation. Be careful not to ask in a challenging way (unless you are indeed challenging). Just ask in a curious way. Letters or a journal may reveal some deeper emotion than your interview brought out at a more detached date. Legal or financial documents may provide exact dates or amounts where the character was estimating in the interview. A police report may provide detail that a crime victim may not want to talk about. A resume may provide details that a modest character might not disclose without prompting.
8. Close with another open-ended question or a few: "Is there anything else you'd like to add?" "Whom would you suggest that I talk to?" "Are there any other stories you think my paper should look into?"

[top] Listening

1. Listening is an essential element of building rapport, and more important to the success of your interview than the questions. You're not getting any information when you're talking. You should talk only to build rapport and to steer the interview where you need it to go. Impress the character with your listening, rather than with your talking.
2. Don't feel the need to fill the long, awkward pause. It's a natural urge, and the subject is feeling the same thing. The pause may draw out the answer your question didn't. You want thoughtful answers, so give the character time to think. This is not a stubborn staredown. You casually take a few moments to catch up on your notes, to take a few notes about the setting or your subject's appearance and mannerisms. Just shut up and listen.
3. Listen for the surprise in the interview: the offhand remark that contradicts what you (or your editors) thought you knew; the iceberg tip that's an invitation for you to extract a Poe-like confession; the hint at a much better story; the secondary interest that might lead you to a completely unrelated story.

[top] Follow-Up

1. Re-interview when possible, with a follow-up phone call, a second face-to-face interview or just an e-mail. You'll think of a few more questions, but your character may also have thought of a few more answers. Sometimes you get the better interview the second time around because your questions the first time provoked a few days of thinking, bringing back some old memories and sending someone to the telephone or the scrapbook for answers you didn't get the first time. Or maybe you ask better questions the second time, because you've been thinking or learning since the first interview.
2. Write as soon as possible after the interview. It's best to write the story itself right away, even though you may be far from finished with the reporting. If you know the interview will provide only a few paragraphs for the final story, write those paragraphs. At least go through your notes and write, in paragraph form, what you might use in the story, including your notes on mannerisms, setting, emotions.
3. Seek documentation from police, courts, Internet, etc. to support, contradict or expand on what the character told you. The documentation may provide

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