

Interviewing for story

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As reporting proceeds, you immerse yourself in your character’s world, taking it all in and thinking hard about what it all means. The notebook of a good feature writer ... should be filled with visual details, anecdotes, action sequences, smells, and the like.” – Jack Hart, author of Story Craft.

How to conduct an interview: You smile, nod, act confident and ask a lot of questions. *Finish n klaar!* Got it?

That in a nutshell covers the art of interviewing. What more can I say?

. . . *You listen!*

That said, some interviews yield better results than others. How so, and why so? Well, the results largely depend on how an interview is conducted.

Here are a few Roving Reporters tips on how to get the best results from an interview.

For a news story, the interview is cut-and-dried, simple and straight to the point. It focuses on the 5 Ws and the H of a story: who, what, where, when, why and how – pretty much asked in the manner a policeman would on arriving at a crime scene.

The same applies to basic fact gathering or interviews for an informational report, where you simply need facts and figures to back up the story you are writing. This can often best be done via email, or even via WhatsApp if you are only requiring a short comment and one or two salient facts. The same generally applies to specific queries to authorities or leading representatives of companies and organisations.

Interviewing for character-driven stories

Interviewing for feature stories, especially character driven stories, is another ball game altogether, and should always start with breaking the ice. If you are nervous or

agitated, you are not going to do very well on that score. So chill, relax, smile and above all be polite and friendly even if you consider the person who you are interviewing a total fiend or scumbag. I repeat: Be polite and friendly even if you don't like the person you are *talking* to.

I accentuated *talking* because essentially that is what interviewing for story is all about – having a good chat. Except it's not indulging in idle chit chat. Shooting the breeze serves no purpose. And it shouldn't be you who does all the talking! You are there to listen and ask *engaging* questions.

So where do you start? How do you get the person you are interviewing to begin talking openly and freely about things you have come to find out from him or her?

As said, you break the ice.

Breaking the ice

The Cambridge dictionary defines breaking the ice as follows: *to make people who have not met before feel more relaxed with each other.*

The Collins dictionary goes further to state: *If you break the ice at a meeting, or in a new situation, you say or do something to make people feel relaxed and comfortable.*

It also provides the following synonyms: *kick off, lead the way, take the plunge, make a start.*

The Macmillan dictionary states that it is to make someone feel less shy or nervous in a **social situation**. I emphasize social situation because, unless it is a formal interview with the president of a country or the executive director of Shell Oil, you do want to create a relaxed ambience as soon as you can. So, the setting where you chose to conduct your interview is also important.

The last definition I use comes from The Free Dictionary which states that it is to **prepare the way**; to overcome initial stiffness or reserve in a social setting.

I like that: **prepare the way**, because your interview is about preparing the way to write a good story. This usually starts by developing a good rapport with a key story source, which, I would imagine, is the reason you are there to conduct the interview in the first place.

Choose an appropriate setting

So how do you get the person you are about to interview to feel relaxed and comfortable? Start by choosing the setting for the interview carefully and dressing for the occasion. Consider who you're interviewing and how you're presenting yourself. If you are a woman, for example, and you are about to interview an Imam or Zulu traditional leader, think twice about what you're wearing and maybe don't opt

for the daring cut-out dress or flimsy see-through top. And even if the dude you are about to interview is a trendy, hip hop kinda guy, don't start by saying: "Hey bra, excuse while I light my spliff! Ha! Ha! I'm only joking." Even if the guy was a Rastafarian, this is not the time or place to be sharing a zol. Remember, there are limits to the kind of relaxed ambience you want to create for your interview.

Ask yourself what surroundings will help you recreate scenes relevant to your characters' lifestyle. If the character is a scientist or a deep-sea diver, working on board a research vessel, surely the boat will be best place to conduct the interviews. Likewise, if the person is a laboratory scientist, would it not make sense to meet in the lab? And if your source is an environmentally conscious surfer campaigning against plastic litter, meeting in a swanky five-star hotel dressed in your best finery would probably not be the best decision!

So back to the question: How best to break the ice?

Get the formalities over first - and quickly

Very briefly explain why you are there, and what you are looking to get out of the interview, which would be (1) to tap into the person's insights into the topic you have been assigned to write about, or (2) if it is for a profile piece, to find out more about the person. Presumably, the reason for the interview will have been covered in setting up the face-to-face meeting, but there's no harm in recapping something along these lines *Hi Henry, good to meet you 😊. I've read a bit about your work on ABC, and must say I am really impressed and looking forward to learning more about Y and Z. My assignment brief is to XY and Z.* Then pause, and let the person respond instead of gushing on about the great story you are working on and how it will change the world.

Also remember that the person you are about to interview might well still feel a little nervous. I know I certainly would if I were about to be interviewed by a journalist, especially one I had never met - and even by many that I have met. My first concern would be about being misquoted or having things I say misinterpreted or taken out of context. This would be more so if I was about to be interviewed by a rookie reporter or a young environmental scientist who has had limited or no previous reporting experience.

So, how do you address those concerns?

Hah! Easy! You tell them that you are being mentored by Roving Reporters which goes to great lengths to ensure that stories are factually correct. This process includes double-checking that sources have been accurately quoted, and in some

instances letting story sources read a final version of story - or relevant extracts of it – before it is submitted for publication. This is not to let a story source dictate or interfere editorially, but to simply verify that the person’s comments and quotes are correct and used in the proper context.

So, once you have assured your story source that he/she can trust you to be an ethical reporter, this would be a good time to turn on your voice recorder, which you do *not* try to hide under the table to surreptitiously record your conversation.

You can simply ask, “Do you mind?” before you turn it on and place it down. Most folk will say, “No, that’s fine,” but if it looks like the person has frozen at the idea of being recorded, you can quickly add: “This is just to ensure that I quote you correctly, but if there is any part of our conversation you do not want recorded, I will turn it off.” If he/she wants it off, don’t argue. Just bring out your notebook and pen. In all likelihood, though, the person will not object and will soon forget about the recorder altogether.

All the above has probably taken not much more than a minute, and the person is still bound to be a bit stiff and uneasy. So, it’s time for your first ice-breaking question.

Personal details

I often start like this. *“Before we get into the nitty gritty of this story, tell me little about yourself. Where did you grow up? How did you come to be involved in this line of work?”*

If the person looks old enough to be a proud parent, you could also start with: *“You married? Got kids?”*

Of if she is snazzy dresser, *“Mmmm, I like those shoes! Where did you get them?”*

Get my drift? These *seemingly random* questions are geared to getting the person talking about himself/herself. The important thing is that you listen keenly and respond spontaneously. Don’t twiddle your thumbs, stare at passers-by or a picture on the wall, or fidget with a piece of paper with a long list of questions you have prepared. Keep eye contact, nod, smile – and listen.

Once a person has begun to open up about themselves, it’s time for what I consider to be an ace card, ice-breaking prompt: *“Tell me one of your earliest childhood memories.”*

Besides the fact that people do like to talk about themselves, the rationale behind such a question is the fact that childhood memories often give insight into who we are today, and what drives us and motivates us in our chosen fields of work.

So, for stories, especially profiles, where developing a sense of character is a central objective, these kinds of questions not only break the ice, but serve a key purpose. They help us become familiar with a person's background – right the way back to early childhood- giving insight into a person's character and personal true-life circumstances.

Two-time Pulitzer prize-winning feature writer, Jon Franklin recognised this in interviewing central characters of his stories.

"He starts by asking about childhood memories, looking for the genetic and behavioural roots of motive. Then he works his way through the protagonist's life, targeting key decisions and the elements that went into them." - Jack Hart, Story Craft, Page 159.

Anecdotes

Childhood memory questions gave rise to engaging introductions for these two profile stories. both first published by Daily Maverick last year as part of Roving Reporters series of stories on the broader context of illegal wildlife trade in the greater Kruger area.

Blazing saddles: On the trail with a community conservation champion

As a herd boy, caring for his grandad's cattle in Zanghoma, a village near Tzaneen, Vusi Tshabalala seldom gave hunger or thirst a second thought. He was too busy having fun in the veld. "It was only when we entered back into the gates of our yard that I would remember, 'Actually I haven't eaten today; I'm quite hungry'," says Tshabalala.

Two decades on, Tshabalala is still sustained by a boundless flow of energy. He channels it into sharing with others a love of South Africa's open spaces and an appreciation for its wildlife.

But he has deep concerns, rooted in his exposure to wildlife trafficking.

More rhinos are being killed for their horns — and it's not just the poachers who are to blame

Ian Glenn remembers childhood visits to Kruger with more than a little nostalgic fondness, even if the game was sometimes hard to see from the squashed backseat of the family sedan.

A lifetime later, the writer and scholar's affections for what he calls "the most significant national park in Africa" remain undimmed. His views on its critics and those who take potshots at the country's approach to conservation and wildlife crime are, however, another matter.

Physical appearance

Given the dictum that character drives story, the same point can be said of what, at first glance, could be considered an irrelevant throw away question about a snazzy dresser's shoes, necklace, stylish dress or a hipster's raggedy jeans. A Management Study Guide states: *An individual's dressing sense speaks volumes of his character and personality. It is rightly said that "a man is known by his dress and address". Your dressing sense reflects your personality, character, mood, style and what actually you are as an individual.*

So, an opening ice-breaker question on a striking piece of attire can also serve a double purpose, helping you build sense of character into your story.

Jack Hart takes this point further: *"During a standard interview, an old reporter's trick is to ask a question you don't really care about so that you can jot down details of physical appearance, clothing, and surroundings while the source drones on."*

It's possible that your icebreaker might lead to your story source beginning to drone, depending on her or his character. If it happens, that's not a problem. Use the time to make mental notes and observations that might become useful in the final story writing process.

The trick to breaking the ice is to:

1. let the person open up, and ease into a personable frame of mind;
2. seek ways to establish a personal connection with the character, before you begin to address your more direct questions – the real purpose of your interview.

Preparedness

While it is a good idea to have prepared a few key questions in advance (presumably you will have done some preliminary research), do not, under any circumstances, start rattling off the questions as if running through a shopping list. Also, don't keep referring back to your list of questions (advisably not more than ten). Rather follow the flow of conversation and steer it back on course when you have to, in line with the ultimate interview goal. On this score, IOWA State University writing coach, Mark Witherspoon, recommends using what he calls the GOSS formula:

- **G**oal Revealing questions, such as "What are you trying to accomplish?" or "What's the real purpose of the project / your organisation?"
- **O**bstacle Revealing Questions, such as "What problems did you face?"
- **S**olution Revealing Questions, such as "How did you handle the problem?" or "What plans do you have for resolving the conflict?"
- **S**tart Revealing Questions, such as "When did the program have its beginning?" or "Whose idea was it?"

And if you are going to be tackling any specific thorny, contentious issues, save your toughest questions for last. By then, you will have hopefully earned your source's trust to the extent that she is even amenable to disclose particularly sensitive information that has not been told to any other journalist. This is when **basic rules of the game** kick in covering what might be said **Off the Record** (information you cannot use unless you get it **on record from another source** and publish it with full uncloaked, attribution. We will discuss this later in more detail on this discussion board).

For now, our focus is how best to get great content for character-driven stories. And as Jack Hart states, you cannot tell a real story if you lack the raw material you need to build character, create scenes, describe action or develop themes. So, during the process of the interview closely observe and note emotions and other internal reactions that occur, as well as the general setting.

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RECAP

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2. Some interviews yield better results than others. The results largely depend on how an interview is conducted.
3. For a news story, the interview is cut-and-dried, simple and straight to the point. It focuses on the 5 W's and the H of a story: who, what, where, when, why and how – pretty much asked in the manner a policeman would on arriving at a crime scene.
4. Interviewing for feature stories is more conversational and should always start with breaking the ice, preparing the way for an enlightening engagement.
5. If you are nervous or agitated you are not going to do very well.
6. Be polite and friendly even if you consider the person you are *talking* to a total fiend or scumbag.
7. Choose the setting for the interview carefully and dress for the occasion.
8. Get the formalities over first. Very briefly explain why you are there, what you are looking to get out of the interview, and agree on the basic ground rules, and assure your story source that you can be trusted to be an ethical reporter working under Roving Reporters expert guidance.
9. Make sure the source is agreeable to the interview being recorded for the sake of accuracy, and if not, turn it off, and broach the subject again later when she says something you really do want to have a verbatim record of.
10. Kick off with broad conversational starters, like childhood memories, schooling, and seek ways to establish a personal connection with the character before getting into the nitty gritty of your interview.
11. Follow the flow of conversation and steer it back on course when you have to in line with the ultimate interview goal. Use the GOSS formula if appropriate:
 - **G**oal Revealing questions
 - **O**bstacle Revealing Questions
 - **S**olution Revealing Questions
 - **S**tart Revealing Questions
12. Save your toughest questions for last, by when you will have hopefully earned your source's trust, perhaps resulting in you getting what we commonly call a scoop!