

## INTERVIEWING

### BEFORE:

1. Be really nice to secretaries or others who are making arrangements. They can help you or hurt you.
2. Before there are questions, there is thinking.
  - a. What do I think my story is about? What do I need to know to write that story? What can this person tell me or show me or help me understand?
  - b. If I expand my idea of the story a little, what else would I ask?
3. Make a list of key questions – a starting point and a checklist. But don't go from one to the next. Have a (focused) conversation. Follow up. Change direction or follow a tangent.
  - a. Be particularly prepared with “confrontation” interviews, where you need answers to hard questions or at least need a response to accusatory information. Draft your key question or two precisely. Think about how you'll ask it?
4. Be prepared. Collect available info in advance. Know what this person has said before. Know the subject's biography.
5. Be early, and look around. Capture the environment in your notebook. Photographs, décor, formality, view out the window
6. Act in a way that cultivates trust and respect. Dress appropriately. Show up on time. Be organized in asking questions. Courtesy. “Be a good guest.”
7. LISTEN, don't talk much.
8. Take a tape recorder (are the batteries fresh?) and at least two pens/pencils. Take notes as if the tape isn't working.

### DURING:

1. Turn on the tape recorder as you sit down, put it on the table, and say, “I'd like to tape this to help me get your comments accurately. Is that all right?” This gets permission on the record. (If the subject turns on a tape recorder too, that's fine. Just be careful.)
2. Start with some warm-up questions, perhaps based on arriving early, to help the person get talkative. “I saw the photo of you with the President. What was that occasion?” Use the warm-up to get some basics out of the way (quickly). Communicate your level of knowledge: “I'd like to find out more about Experience X that was in your bio.”
3. Ask “green light” questions, not “red light” questions. Questions that require a narrative response, not yes-no questions (unless you really need to pin somebody down). “Tell me . . .” “How did . . .” “What . . .”
4. You are not the prosecutor, you are the fact-finder. Listen to how TV talk-show hosts ask questions. They are very different in style – Chris Matthews, Larry King – but they invite people to respond to criticism and don't become the critic themselves. “How do you respond to people who have said . . .” Or, “here's where I'm having trouble with your position, so help me understand.”

5. You have to do several things at once:
  - a. Maintain adequate eye contact and “relationship” with the subject
  - b. Take good notes, including dialog/context, not just quotes
  - c. Analyze the response so you understand it and can follow up
  - d. Formulate your next question
6. Don't worry about brief silences. Take the time to get something important down in your notes adequately. The subject will appreciate the moment to think as well and will appreciate that you want to get it accurately. Often a moment's silence will impel the subject to keep talking.
7. Ask for a repetition of a key point, fact or comment: “That's an interesting way to put it. Say that again so I get it down exactly.” (Don't do this often, you'll unnerve the subject.) Confirm things that seem surprising, even implausible. (“Did I understand you to say that you NEVER . . .”)
8. Don't interrupt an answer, unless it is really going astray and a clock is running.
9. Jot down atmospherics – smiles, phone rings, person comes and goes, slumping in a chair. Remember you're also annotating your tape.
10. Manage your time, and use your checklist. When time is almost up, pause to check your list and focus on the most important remaining question or two.
11. Before you leave, create an opening for follow-up
  - a. Is there someone else you think I should talk to about this?
  - b. Could I call you if I have a follow-up question or if something new comes up in my reporting? (Sometimes they'll give you a cell phone number. Keep it somewhere.)
  - c. If you think of something I should know, please call me. Here's my card/phone number.
12. Keep your notebook out and the tape recorder running while you walk to the door.
13. Re-confirm logistics of any follow-up, such as documents the subject is going to provide.
14. Say thank you.
15. Thank the person who set up the arrangements.

**AFTER :**

1. Go back through notes as soon as you can, annotate them (name of subject, date, time), and identify key items.
2. Add any other observations you think important that didn't get properly noted before. Description, an idea for the story, a reference, items to follow up.
3. If much time will pass, type up a summary in more coherent form, so you don't forget “connective tissue” or context in the comments.