

Advice for Doing Personal Interviews

by Julia Barton

1. Advice from Jay Allison, award-winning producer, Massachusetts, USA

Before the interview:

Become comfortable with your equipment. If you are, everyone else will be. Check, clean and test all your equipment before you go out. Put in fresh batteries. Make test recordings. Be over-prepared. Have everything set up before you walk in. Sit in the car (or the subway station, or the bushes) to load and label your first tape, prepare your next tapes for fast changes, set your levels, etc.

During the interview:

Remember eye contact. Don't let the microphone be the focus -- occupying the space between you and the person you're talking to so you have to stare through it. I usually begin by holding the microphone casually, as though it's unimportant. Sometimes I'll rest it against my cheek to show it has no evil powers. I might start off with an innocuous question ("Such strange weather we're having") then slowly move the microphone, from below, into position at the side of the person's mouth, but not blocking eye contact. You'll find your own way of being natural with the microphone, but it is important.

Don't be afraid to ask the same thing in different ways until you get an answer you're satisfied with. Remember you can edit the beginning and ending of two answers together, but be sure to get the ingredients. If a noise interferes with a good moment, try to get it again.

I often like to move around during interviews. Get people up and walking-- "Show me". This can relax people and take their minds off the recording. Have the person describe where you are and what you're doing. Refer to objects and sights around you. But try to keep the microphone close to them. All this will reinforce a sense of place, action and immediacy for the listener.

If you interrupt or overlap your voice with your interviewee's, you won't be able to edit yourself out. This will eliminate that sense of the interviewee communicating directly with the listener; instead the listener will be an eavesdropper on your conversation. It commits you to a production decision. If you want to leave your production options open, don't laugh out loud, or stick in "uh-huh" or other vocal affirmations. You must let your subjects know you're listening, but use head nods, eye contact and smiles.

2. Advice from Neal Conan, host, "Talk of the Nation," National Public Radio

Keep your questions short. Do not lard your questions ahead of time with facts. Sometimes the best questions are: "Really?" "Go on!" "You're kidding!" These are not exactly the models of articulate Socratic dialogue, but they keep the conversation moving. And that is what we're trying to do in interviews.

Another good question is: "Give me a concrete example." These help listeners understand an abstract idea in reality.

Ask only one question at a time. If I say, "Why did you do it, and what do you think is going to happen next?" that gives the interviewee the option of answering either question or neither. Often you and the interviewee will forget the first part of the question.

Chronological order is the most fundamental human storytelling form. The fundamental question of the story is, "And then?" It's our job to find out, always, what happened next, so listeners can hear a story with a beginning, middle, and end.

If someone has an emotional story, make sure they don't spill it out before the interview. The story won't sound the same the second time. You want the audience to hear it, so make sure you get the fresh story on tape.

The best fall-back question, when you suddenly can't think of anything to ask, is this: "That's fascinating. Tell me more." That will never fail to get a response.

3. Advice from Tony Kahn, host, "The World," BBC and public radio on the value of silence during interviews

A long time ago, I was interviewing someone about a very painful period in her marriage, something I knew she had talked about before. She described the sadness, but I wasn't feeling it. I was at a loss for what to ask her that I hadn't already asked that might get us to the next level. So, pretty much by default, I ended up saying -- nothing. She finished her account then stopped and looked at me for my next question. I looked back at her, I hope with respect, certainly without any further demands of her, and just let the silence continue. The tension that started to build was the first genuine emotion I think either of us had felt so far and, a few seconds later, she started to talk, partly, no doubt, to cover the embarrassing silence, but from a much deeper place. Her story came to life, memorably, with emotions experienced, it felt to me, as if for the first time.

When you think of it, silence doesn't really exist, does it? If it did, you couldn't hear it. There's always something going on in what we call silence, whether it's the sound of the air, distant effects from the street, or our own thoughts clustering to be heard or spoken.

When you're nervous, you may think nothing's going on in the "silence," but there is. Besides, when you're nervous, your sense of time becomes unreliable; it speeds up and the passage of two or three seconds can feel like ten or twenty. I think it's good to keep in mind that when things seem to be going nowhere in an interview (assuming you aren't on the air, live, of course) it's better to slow down and trust the silence rather than rush in or rush off someplace else.