

THE WRITERS COMPLETE GUIDE TO

CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS

M I C H A E L
S C H U M A C H E R

With a good framework, you'll be prepared to improvise in your interview.

BLOCKING OUT THE INTERVIEW: AN ORGANIZATIONAL OPTION

If time allows, many interviewers like to "block out" their interviews before they prepare the actual questions they want to ask. After deciding upon the framework for the interview, they outline the topics to be discussed in the interview, along with the probable sequence in which the various headings are likely to be addressed. (See sample on page 224.)

Blocking out the interview helps you organize. If you have been thorough in your research, you already have a number of topics and question areas in your head, but by putting them on paper you're making the preparation of questions easier and more organized—much more so than if you were to sit down and simply begin to write down the questions that come immediately to mind.

USING OPEN-ENDED AND CLOSED QUESTIONS

The way you word a question is as important as the question itself. The difference between a thoughtful, properly worded question and a sloppy, poorly worded question is the difference between a clear, complete answer and a vague or incomplete answer. An interview should be neither a cross-examination nor an elusive, pointless encounter; instead, it should be a conversation consciously designed to elicit general *and* specific responses. As the person responsible for keeping an interview within a given framework, you should know when and how to ask questions that allow your interviewee to speak freely, as well as when and how to ask questions that clarify points or bring you specific information. To do this, you will be using a mixture of open-ended and closed questions. Each type of question has characteristics that invite very different types of responses.

Open-ended questions encourage lengthy answers, such as overviews, descriptions, opinions, and anecdotes. These questions often start with the words "how" or "why," and in asking open-ended questions, you're encouraging your interviewees to explain. People reveal much about themselves when they're answering open-ended questions and, if you're listening well, you will be given more clues for follow-up, and for more specific questions. However, asking

too many open-ended questions can be hazardous to the interview. You may want your interviewee to talk, but you don't want him or her to ramble or meander all over the map. Too many open-ended questions can lead to that effect; they can also be intimidating to people who are accustomed to dealing with the precise, or to people who are shy or untalkative.

Closed questions seek brief, specific answers. If you're trying to gather facts for a news story or magazine article, closed questions will help you gain much of the information you need. ("Who was there?" "How long did the meeting last?" "What color was her coat?") These are examples of closed questions.) Asking too many closed questions can make an interviewee feel as if he or she were being interrogated and it may be irritating, such as this exchange I overheard at a local fast food restaurant:

Customer. I'd like a cup of coffee.

Q. *Large or small?*

Customer. Large

Q. *Caffeinated or de-caf?*

Customer. Caffeinated.

Q. *Cream or sugar?*

Customer. Black.

Q. *To stay or to go?*

Customer. To go.

Q. *Anything else?*

In this case, each question was necessary for the counter worker to determine what the customer wanted, but this particular worker fired the series of closed questions at the customer in such a rapid-fire sequence that the customer was beginning to show irritation by the time the brief encounter had ended. The necessary questions were sounding too much like a cold interrogation. The same impression can be given by interviewers who string too many closed questions together.

Ideally, you should mix your open-ended and closed questions in accordance to the framework of your interview. If, for example, you are working within an inverted funnel framework, you would begin with a few select closed questions and use the answers to direct you to open-ended questions that expand upon the facts you've been given. With a funnel interview framework, you would do the opposite.

Control of the interview itself can be determined by your mixture of open-ended and closed questions. By eliciting lengthy responses, open-ended questions give the interviewee more control of the interview, while closed questions put you, the interviewer, at the proverbial helm. Bearing this in mind will help you guide the direction and pace that your conversation is taking.

PREPARING QUESTIONS

Open-ended and closed questions can be worded in a large variety of ways, and while the wording of these questions will depend largely upon the person you're interviewing, time-tested, trial-and-error interviewing has proven some types of questions to be much more effective than others.

Some questions, for example, are surefire giveaways of an interviewer's preconceptions and therefore should be used with extreme caution, if at all. Others are vague or confusing to the interviewees and thus produce inadequate responses. There are even questions that discourage any response at all.

Among the problem questions:

- *Leading questions.* There is a subtle but very real distinction between the leading *question* and the leading *comment*. The leading question ("Aren't you angry about the way the critics have treated your latest play?") compromises your sense of objectivity and might invite a hostile response, while a leading comment ("You must have been very pleased to win such a prestigious award"), if worded with sensitivity and used sparingly, can gently prod an interviewee into clarifying an answer or expanding upon a response. If nothing else, these leading comments can keep a conversation going. But *both* forms are manipulative and risk the scorn of the interviewee who resents the notion of being patronized or being pulled through the conversation. In fact, some interviewees resent this so much that they wind up responding more to a perceived attitude than to a

question. You might even find yourself being “put on” by your interviewee’s response; an obvious or half-serious leading question may be greeted with an obvious, half-serious, or put-on, answer.

■ *Obvious questions.* Obvious questions (queries to which the answer is either known or can be assumed) get obvious answers—if they’re answered at all. Interviewers who ask this kind of question are usually biding time or are unprepared. “How did you feel?” questions, with few exceptions, fall into this category. (“How did you feel when you won the Nobel Peace Prize?” What is the interviewee to say, that he or she felt lousy?) For every situation there is an obvious question, and it should be avoided. By all means, get that person’s reaction to winning the Nobel Peace Prize, but do so in a way that doesn’t insult your interviewee’s—and your readership’s—intelligence. In many cases, just encouraging the person to continue talking will lead to a reflection of that person’s feelings, or to an opening you can use to inquire about them. Let the conversation lead you into questions of this nature, rather than leading the conversation into them yourself.

■ *Multiple choice questions.* By offering your interviewee a choice of answers (“When did you decide to join the priesthood? When you were a boy? As a teenager? A young adult?”), you are again asking a person to tailor an answer to one of your preconceptions. It may be that one of your preconceptions is correct, but you should ask the question in a manner that entices your interviewee to volunteer his own answer. In the first case, you’re placing words or ideas into your interviewee’s mind before he has had the opportunity to consider the question and, by doing so, you risk getting a less than complete, truthful, or thoughtful response—much less than you might have received if you’d simply let the interviewee answer.

■ *Stupid questions.* Contrary to the idea that there is no such thing as a stupid question, there are a number of questions that are ill-advised, inappropriate, or just plain stupid. It would be inappropriate to ask private citizens questions about private affairs that have no bearing upon the article you’re writing, just as it would be a bad idea to ask an actress to list the titles of her films; in the former, you’re delving into areas that are none of your business, while in the latter you’re admitting that you didn’t care enough about a person’s public business to research it prior to the interview.

Hypothetical questions (“If you could be any kind of rodent, what would it be?”) can be stupid, although some carefully worded “if” or “what if” questions can produce interesting, telling responses. Most interviewers have horror stories about the stupid questions they’ve asked—it happens to the best of interviewers—but these questions usually surface in the heat of the battle and are not planned before the interview. Avoid hypothetical questions when you’re planning your interview, as well as questions that have little or nothing to do with the article you’re writing. Doing so will decrease the risk of your asking a stupid question.

■ *Comment questions.* During the course of any interview, you are likely to ask a few questions that are not questions at all but, instead, are statements or comments. (“And after the election, you drove directly to Washington D.C.”) These comments can be very useful in their ability to move a conversation along and show that you are familiar with the interviewee’s story, but an abundance of such comments undermines the interview. An interviewee may wonder why you are bothering with an interview if you know so much already. He may assume that you know more than you do and therefore not volunteer useful or complete responses to your other questions. Some comment questions, designed by interviewers as probes or icebreakers (“It’s good to see your book at the top of the best-seller list”) produce no quotable responses at all (“Right. I’m happy about it”). Keep your questions in the interrogative structure, and word them so they command a response, rather than another comment.

■ *Dualistic questions.* Like multiple choice questions, dualistic questions—questions that give a person two opposites to consider for answers—can bring a multitude of problems. “Whether or not” questions fall into this category; “Do you know whether or not you’ll be healthy enough to run in the Boston Marathon next month?” (If the person says “yes,” you still don’t know exactly what he means.) Either/or questions have the same pitfalls. There are almost always more than two choices to any answer, and by offering only two choices to an interviewee, you might find yourself receiving a response that’s vague or not exactly true.

■ *Apologetic questions.* Interviewers will sometimes use an apology as a prefix to a tough question (“I hate to ask, but . . .” “I know it sounds stupid, but . . .”). These apologetic prefixes are

intended to take an edge off the question itself—to hint to the interviewee that you're on his side—but they can produce a boomerang effect. An interviewee may agree with you (“Yes, it is a stupid question”) or he may worry about what you intend to do with his response (“If he hates asking the question, why is he asking it?”). In using an apology as a lead-in to your question, you are tipping off your interviewee. You're telling him that what follows your apology is going to be a question that will be difficult to answer; furthermore, you're saying that the tough question must be important because you're proceeding with it, even though you hate asking it.

Red flags should be going up in your mind every time you find yourself drawing up a question that falls into one of the above-mentioned categories. These questions can block the flow of good conversation. They can cause your interviewee to pause and wonder why you're asking some of your questions. They may even irritate or anger the person.

While you're working on the wording of your questions, you should also be aware of three other types of questions that may stymie a conversation. These questions may not have the adverse effect on the interviewee that the earlier-mentioned types may have, nevertheless they do invite inadequate or incomplete responses. Be very cautious about asking:

- *Questions that are too long.* Don't spend too long in framing or introducing a question—certainly no longer than two or three sentences. The longer you talk, the less clear the point of your question will be to your interviewee. If you have a major question that needs framing, set it up through a series of shorter questions that lead logically to the main inquiry.

- *Questions with several parts.* In press conferences, interviewers will often ask two-part questions (a main question, with a follow-up), but two-part or multipart questions can be confusing in one-on-one conversations, resulting in your interviewee's addressing only one of the questions in his or her response. Keep your questions simple. Break down your multipart questions into a logical sequence of shorter questions. Doing so will give you better, more complete answers.

- *Questions that can be answered with “yes” or “no” or with other one-word responses.* These kinds of questions may be asked

if you're looking for a definitive response or a lead-in to another question, but by themselves, they can put the brakes on a smooth-running conversation, especially if you ask a couple of these questions in succession. If you're looking for quotable material, a simple “yes” or “no” won't do.

THE BEST QUESTIONS

Unlike the types of problem questions just cited, the most effective questions you can ask will either solicit specific information or encourage your interviewee to give you examples, anecdotes, details, or opinion. They are posed in such a way as to make you look inquisitive yet objective, firm but fair. They compel an exchange of ideas.

When you are preparing your interview questions try to work in as many questions that fit into the following categories as possible.

- *Questions that begin with “how” or “why.”* Some questions serve two purposes. First, they call for examples, anecdotes, and, generally, more detailed answers; second, by answering the questions, your interviewees are engaging in a type of self-analysis that will beef up your interview or article. These questions work nicely for interviewers because there is a built-in sense of objectivity in the way the questions are worded. You're asking an interviewee to tell his or her side of the story; you're stepping aside for the voice that matters. In an indirect sense, you're deferring to your interviewee.

- *Questions that call for specific answers.* There's still much that can be said for “who, what, where, and when,” as well as “how” and “why” questions. Facts, figures, dates, and locations are important. They form clear pictures in readers' minds. Readers want specific information, and you should ask plenty of questions that call for that information. “I ask a lot of questions that seem trivial to the people I'm asking,” says Gary Provost. “I might ask what kind of cigarettes a person was smoking or what kind of car he was driving, and while those questions may seem trivial or out of context to people, they don't realize that I'm trying to create a picture for the reader. I may have just finished a scene and I've got everything I need except the color of the car. That's why I have that question.”

- *Questions that expand upon what's already known.* When

you're conducting an interview, the last thing you want to hear is an answer you've already seen or heard elsewhere. People who are interviewed often tend to repeat themselves. They answer the same questions over and over, and after a while they have slick, stock responses to the questions they are asked most often. However, this does not mean that you cannot go over familiar territory—indeed, some editors will demand it and interviewees will expect it. When you're designing your interview questions, go over your notes and research. Ask yourself how you can expand upon what you already know. Then design a question that poses that angle to your interviewee.

- *Questions that clarify.* Not only will you want to expand upon existing information, but you'll also want to clarify any past statements that may not be clear. You'll also want to get clarification of any vague answers an interviewee may give you during the interview. Experienced interviewers can almost predict when they're going to receive vague answers, and they're always prepared to ask "What, exactly, do you mean by that?" "In what way?" or similar questions that call for explanation. Prepare ahead of time to ask for examples for clarification.

- *Questions that probe.* Like questions that expand or clarify, probing questions are designed to dig deeper into a topic of discussion. Some probes are aimed at reaction ("What do you think of the President's decision to send more troops to Central America?"), while others are designed for further explanation ("I'm not sure I understand what you meant when you told *The Boston Globe* that you'd be happy to support gun control legislation. In the past you've always opposed it.") Probes, like "how" and "why" questions, produce responses that tell you something about your interviewee's character, and they're especially useful tools for writers working on profiles or Q/A-style interviews.

- *Questions that display your objectivity.* When you're preparing tough questions, try to find a way of wording them that isolates you from any negative criticism your interviewee may have heard. You're usually safe by putting the blame for such criticism on someone else ("Your critics say that . . ." or "It's been said that . . ."), but be prepared to cite your sources if your interviewee challenges you with a "Who said that?" response. Careful phrasing of challenging questions makes you look objective, rather than aggressive,

and it will encourage a better response than an intentionally pointed question. (We'll address this issue further in Chapter Five, when the topic of asking tough questions during the interview is discussed.)

- *Questions that present location or sequence of action.* Before each of my interviews, I try to prepare an accurate chronology of the events that put the person I'm interviewing in the public light. If I'm writing a profile, I put together a thumbnail sketch of important events, complete with dates; if I'm talking to someone who's a newsmaker or who has been reluctantly thrust into public events, I try to reconstruct the news event in as strong a chronology as I can piece together. Invariably I will find "holes" in my chronology—areas that have been ignored or are unaccounted for. I will also find that some events have been skimmed over. These are areas I'll want to explore in an interview. I'll take what I know and build off of it, designing questions that sequence events with the appropriate locations, dates, and times.

Naturally, many other questions will occur to you while you're conducting your interview. An interviewee may surprise you with a disclosure that leads you into an entirely new area of discussion, or he may disappoint you by having very little to say about a topic you were certain would be important to him, but it's always best to enter an interview with as many prepared questions as possible. Know what you want to ask and how you want to ask it. The ideal situation is to enter the interview with more questions than you could possibly ask, but be reasonable; you can overprepare questions as easily as you can conduct too much research. Establish priorities based on what you need for your article or interview, prepare questions in those areas, and be prepared to let the interviewee dictate any of the "bonuses" you may receive.

PUTTING YOUR QUESTIONS ON PAPER

Taking a list of written questions to an interview session can have a mixed effect on the conversation. For the interviewer, having written questions can be reassuring, yet paying too much attention to those written questions can stymie the flow of conversation. For interviewees, the notion that the interviewer has taken time to draw up and type out questions may be encouraging, a sign that the interviewer has given the conversation plenty of prior thought;

that very effect, however, can backfire if the interviewee grows apprehensive about what might be on that list. (Interview subjects have demanded to see these lists of questions and have rejected questions they don't want to answer.)

When practical or possible, it's always best to prepare a list of written questions to take to the interview—the more questions, the better. Written questions act as insurance against things going wrong during the interview. You may spend many hours preparing for an interview, only to find after the interview that you forgot an important question or two in the heat of the conversation. Or you may find yourself running out of questions if the ones you have in your head are quickly answered. Written questions insure you against both of these situations.

One way to avoid the minor pitfalls of the written list of questions is to type up a complete list and then memorize the first half-dozen or so questions that you intend to ask. (Some interviewers like to memorize more questions than this, but the danger here is that you'll concentrate on the memorized questions at the cost of the interview's spontaneity.) By memorizing the first questions on your list, you can make the opening of the interview look more spontaneous and free-flowing than it actually is, and this can put your interviewee at ease. Once the conversation is rolling along, you can steal occasional glances at your written questions and replenish the questions you're holding in your mind.

SEQUENCING PREPARED QUESTIONS

If you've blocked out your question areas before you prepared your questions, you'll have a good idea of the sequence in which you'd like to pose your questions. The key to sequencing prepared questions is your anticipation of an interviewee's responses, as well as your set of priorities regarding what you want to bring out of your interview. If you have been thorough in your research, you probably can make an educated guess on how your interviewee will answer some of your questions, but you have to be careful in doing so. If you rely too much on preconception or anticipated answers you might find yourself knocked back on your heels by a surprising response or, worse yet, you may not hear or recognize the person's response and make the mistake of carrying on with your line of questioning in total disregard for what was said.

Still, preparing a logical sequence of some of the questions

you'll be asking offers you another sense of organization that can be useful during the interview, especially if it promises to be a long one, or if you're conducting an interview that you intend to eventually present in the Q/A format. In both of these instances, you want the interview—during the conversation itself and in print—to seem natural, logical, and complete, and by having a preset sequence of questions, even if only for a few of the subject areas you intend to pursue, you can guide yourself along this path.

THE IDEAL AND THE PRAGMATIC

The various aspects of research and preparation presented in this chapter are the ideals. Every reporter would like to have unlimited time to research a story. Any freelance writer would love to work on question preparation until the perfect interview could be constructed.

In the real world, however, reporters are sent to the location of breaking news stories and are expected to conduct thoughtful or provocative interviews on the spur of the moment. Deadlines can be measured in minutes. Research materials on a person or subject may not be readily available. An important interview may pop up without warning, and the writer would have to conduct a "seat of the pants" interview and hope for the best.

Experience is the interviewer's greatest teacher. You learn the best methods of phrasing questions through trial and error, by asking every kind of question imaginable and learning which types bring you the best responses. You learn how to mix your open and closed questions by interviewing people, looking at the results of the interviews, and gauging your successes and failures. Sometimes the only way to learn the value of preparation is to enter an interview ill-prepared and suffer the consequences. (It's an experience any interviewer can tell you about.) You learn how to work under the gun.

Good research and preparation, when possible, will spare you from the worst scenarios. In fact, solid research and preparation will give you the ultimate reward: when you conduct your interview, you'll look and sound knowledgeable, and the conversation will appear to be extemporaneous, even if it's been planned to its finest details.