

The most important question : “What do you make of that?”

Based on research done at the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, the most important question for a journalist to ask is one that is seldom ever posed.

Because interviewing a parent is different than interviewing a president, the questions a reporter asks a parent or common citizen should be different, too.

People in a community have a certain knowledge of issues and events. But they usually won't express it in a sound bite the way politicians might. For journalists, understanding this can mean the difference between getting a good quote or getting a good story.

There are certain kinds of questions reporters can ask to better grasp the reasoning behind the quotes they write down. That's important because people don't always say what they think or, more likely, are not used to putting their thoughts into quotes.

Knowing the thinking behind a quote enables reporters to write with more accuracy. Stories "ring truer" because issues and events are explained in the same terms readers and viewers use.

The first question a journalists asks, of course, can be the most important because of the tone and boundaries it sets. However, research shows that reporters need to be more patient in interviews, to give people time to "try on" different answers before asking which one "fits." They need to allow people to talk at their own speed instead of forcing them into rapid-fire responses that journalists so often demand.

Research shows that one of the best interviewing techniques is to simply lay out the situation or topic and then ask, “what do you make of that?” Then, after asking the question, shut-up and listen. You will get further information on the topic by also asking, “Explain what you mean by that?”

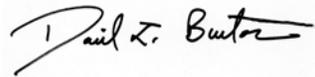
Advice from other reporters

“I'm finding very often that when I say, ‘Tell me more about that?’ or ‘What do you mean by that?’ that they didn't mean what I thought at all. And I'm wondering how many times I changed people's minds by the way I asked the question? When you're not clear about what they're saying, don't ask them: ‘Do you mean this?’ Ask them: ‘What do you mean?’ And sometimes you have to ask them the question three or four times. So you have to be very disciplined. And you have to keep coaxing them in. The reward is that you learn what it is that they mean. Not what you think they mean.”

- **Kimberly Kimby, Orange County Register**

“What are the issues that are concerning you about your neighborhood or profession, whatever it may be? It doesn't have to be a neighborhood. Especially when you're immersing yourself in a new area, that's invaluable because you're going to get five or six story ideas from each person, as opposed to starting out with an agenda and telling them what you're writing about.”

— **Ken Koehn, Tampa Tribune**



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Interviewing techniques



News writing tips for the non-journalist.

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Interviewing techniques 101

Preparing for the interview

Don't go to an interview unprepared. Check files and library for information on your subject or topic.

Have your questions ready. Don't expect your news source to tell you voluntarily what you want to know. Your questions help organize your thoughts and remind you to get the answers you want.

Make an appointment. You can't go into a busy office and get 30 minutes unless you first set up an appointment. Then make sure you arrive on time.

Take three things with you on every assignment: a pencil, a piece of paper, and a grain of salt. Be a bit skeptical, don't believe everything you're told.

Conducting the interview

- Introduce yourself and your publication.
- Look your subject in the eye. Don't be so busy taking notes that all the source sees is your flying fingers and the top of your head.
- Double-check dates and spelling of names. Even a name like Smith can be spelled differently.
- Begin with easy, sociable questions to relax the person you're interviewing. Avoid questions that appear to have predetermined answers.
- Ask open-ended questions that invite a lengthy answer and can bring out opinions: "How did you react?" or "Why do you think that happened?" or "What do you make of that?"
- Don't ask questions that allow one-word answers.
- Don't ask negative questions like, "No news, yet?" Don't make it easy to say "no."
- Let the interviewee know you know something about him or her and their business.
- Avoid promising to print remarks a certain way.

Taking notes

- Some kind of shorthand is a must. Most reporters use a form of shortened writing, such as "w/o" for without or "inc" for incomplete.
- Set apart direct quotes in some way. Taking notes on one side of the paper makes their rearrangement to fit story structure easier.
- Ask for the spellings on all names and titles. It is better to ask now than to have to call back to get them. Or worse, to get them wrong in the story.
- Get direct quotations, especially on main points. It is unnecessary to write complete sentences unless you want a direct quote in its entirety.
- Concentrate on what you are *seeing and hearing*. Immediately after an interview, review and supplement your notes.
- Write down specific information you cannot trust to memory: ages, names, addresses, statistics, sums of money.
- Do not be afraid to double-check unclear information even if you must make a follow-up call.
- If you use a tape recorder, don't depend on it. Batteries run down and tape recorders can malfunction. Take notes, even if you're using a recorder.

Finding anecdotes

An anecdote is a small story. Often, an anecdote will illustrate something about the interviewee such as his or her loyalty, bravery, persistence or a quality which a "title story" can illustrate.

Exciting writing is built on exciting anecdotes, so the interviewer is always listening for them. A really sharp interviewer also listens for clues to experiences that could make lively anecdotes. Then the interviewer directs the subject to "give me an example" or "tell me about a time when that happened."

Watch your subject

Observe non-verbals -- body gestures, facial expressions, paralanguage (the way something is said), artifacts (what the person is wearing), movement -- of the interviewee. About 70 percent of total communication is non-verbal. Thus, if you are to tell the complete story, you must provide the reader with the complete story.

Study the environment

Bulletin boards, desk tops, pictures on the wall, etc. and how does this relate to the interviewee? Avoid using description just for the sake of description.

Post-interview interview

Some interviewees are masters at "pulling the wool" over reporters' eyes. So, be ready to check statements or figures with other sources. You should not take everything at face value.

Civic Leader Interviews

Civic leaders are the easiest group in the community to interview because they will typically identify other civic leaders for you to contact. Here are sample questions to use with civic leaders. Think of these as a gateway for engaging people.

1. When you think of this (area or topic), how would you describe it? How has it changed over the years?
2. Who do you turn to when you want to learn about how people think and feel about this (area or topic)? Where do you go to talk with these folks?
3. What do you hear people talking about when it comes to this (area or topic)? What seem to be their main concerns, challenges and issues?
4. What can journalists learn from the people and places you've mentioned? What do you think about how the news organization covers this (area or topic)? How could we improve coverage?