

Some thoughts about interviewing...

*This is an excerpt (part of a chapter) from my coming book, **Interviewing**. I talk about tools and means used to interview:*

Interviewing is mostly you asking questions to a person or, rarely, a group, and receiving an intelligible response in return. When you record what you asked and what they replied, that is the thinnest skeleton of a completed interview.

That's a bit simplistic but most of the rest just adds bulk and hope to the process.

A huge percentage of my interviews have involved direct communication with my target person. **More than half were done eye to eye (really mouth to ear)**, and most of those were done when I was learning how, usually on the road last century gathering travel material. I asked and they responded, and I translated and wrote what they said into a notepad, in a kind of shorthand that spontaneously evolved (nouns mostly, other key words underlined.) It was give and take, staccato fashion, one question/a reply, segues... My goal was about five minutes, which was a long time for them and for me. It rarely lasted 30 minutes; an hour interview never happened.

Well, that sense of brevity may be somewhat misleading because many "interviews" became conversations, and ended when it was comfortable or necessary to do so. If the other person wanted to keep talking I was usually game to do so (unless I absolutely had to be somewhere else right then—sometimes we resumed the exchange later over lunch or coffee.) Other times they just wanted someone to talk to, or were lonely, or were proud of what they had done or seen and wanted to share more of it. That was fine. Often it gave me more, better information and a deeper interview.

Occasionally I was drawn to an interviewee. I wanted to know them better, and (hard to believe) that seemed mutual. They were interesting, often passionate about some cause, and they almost always bubbled or bristled with humor. What they said was worth sharing; it was fun; they were worth knowing. A few of those contacts became lifelong friends, particularly those still living.

But mostly interviewing is fast and focused. It's kind of a dancing duel: you extracting what you need (and hoping for more); them telling you what they want you (and your readers) to hear, hoping they didn't say too much.

In my mind, first interviews should be courteous, painless, and fairly fast, leaving open the possibility of a later follow-up. But I don't mention that before or during the first interview other than asking them how I might later contact them should I run into a fact or a phrase that needs clarification and asking for or verifying an address where I would send them a copy of the printed article. (If you offer, do send it.)

Most of my interviews not done eye-to-eye were done by **telephone**. Those weren't as satisfactory because you couldn't tell how much of what they were saying was true, a greased lie, or something in between. Nor did you ever know if the voice you were hearing belonged to the actual person you had called. (I don't think I ever interviewed a stiff or a stand-in, but surprisingly often they grilled me to make sure I was the journalist they were supposed to be talking to and that I was writing an article for such-and-such a publication. Everyday people took me at face (or voice) value, happy to be the one being interviewed. The higher ups were more likely to have their assistant or caretaker vet or check me out first).

Another telephone problem: the tenuous connection between you and the person you are interviewing—one wire—almost invites the other person to simply hang up or disconnect when they

have said what they think you should (or need to) hear. It's a true test of your interviewing (and inventive) magnetism to be able to keep the other person focused and actively responding. Some of that is created before starting the actual interview by getting the respondent's buy-in to the importance of the exchange so what they say can reach their target listeners' or readers' ears.

My restraint to interviewing by phone was personal—and, in my dotage, still is. I grew up weaving waggish humor and pun-riddled, antic wordplay into my everyday conversation. It drove my few friends crazy. But all of that tomfoolery had to be excised when phone interviewing strangers for print, particularly when they envisioned sparks or bolts of radiated global fame emanating from the article (or even book) they would be in. It was their big moment and they didn't expect mirth or frivolity—any humor at all—then, particularly over the telephone where smiles are never seen and barely heard. So half of what I normally might have said, or how I might have said it, was verboten and probably dumbfounding. However funny, they never, ever would have laughed. They were expecting to be asked to share gems of wisdom, poignant observation, Christian guidance, and household tips. Out the telephonic window flew my witty high jinks, which left the interviewer, me (or you), nearly speechless, jocularly disarmed.

Alas, nothing is incurable when regular eating is at steak. I immediately reverted to my telephone high school date-getting scheme of imploring (or interviewing) by script. My first 100 or so interviews (it may have been 500) were very, very tightly structured, almost every word written or typed. It looked something like this, although where you see ideas below I had complete sentences, short sentences to give them time to respond:

* wee introduction

* reminder of why I was calling and where their words would be

shown to the world

- * a question

- * a second question—these were the most important answers in case something else interrupted the call—it happens often—and there would be no chance to finish... [more on this later]

- * [if something relevant in their reply to my questions was said or hinted at I would ask more, prodding queries about it, to provoke more facts or brilliance]

- * a third question

- * [if they verbally wandered off and what they said would also interest my imaginary readers I let them wander. I only reherded them back into my imaginary readers' corral of interest when they wore out or I still had a final question to ask]

- * fourth question (or more) if needed. See above.

- * anything else, Mr./Ms. _____, that I should have asked but didn't?"

- * "is there a phone number I could use to reach you if I find something I need to verify later?"

- * "I'll gladly send you a copy of the printed article as soon as it appears—remember, printing can sometimes take months"

- * "is _____ the address where I should send the article, in your name?"

- * "thank you again, Mr./Mrs. _____, for the information and your time"

- * "it sounds like a very interesting article. I appreciate your kindness and your sharing"

- * (hang up softly, breathe deeply, wipe brow, hydrate rewardingly, and type out the whole interview then or before nightly repose)

Interviewing by **email**, or even by **social media**, is fast, sometimes too public too soon, and a whole lot less expansive. Combined with **Skype** or other computer-to-computer linking, it's fairly easy and much faster to talk with others now—if they agree to talk with you.

For example, ...

This is an unedited extraction of part of **an early chapter of a book called INTERVIEWING**. Check future blogs for more copy about the topic.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

How do you set up a magazine (or newspaper) interview?

Most of the articles you write should include at least one and often three interviews, plus of course facts, perhaps some anecdotal material, and probably some artwork (usually photos).

In fact, the most persuasive items selling the article are the interviews or quotes you promise the editor in your query letter. Like a piece about modern-day circus clowns where you say "I'll build the article around interviews with America's top three clowns." (You might mention their names, if that will help the sale, but you have more freedom getting the exchanges without the names in case one or the other won't cooperate or is unavailable. Instead, you might say "three top clowns..., including XXXX and XXXX.")

Must you have the interviews set up before the query? No. With whom you will speak will depend on which publication you are writing for, plus the slant your piece will take. You might talk to altogether different clowns for a senior magazine than

you would for one directed at kids 8-12 years old.

The working order, then, is to outline an interesting topic, see what magazines might use it, make a prioritized list of those markets, and start with the best "go-ahead" and work down. Once you have the theme and the readers, find the best people to approach. Figure 10-15 minutes per person maximum, sometimes just five minutes, so you must prepare about four questions that will yield enough interesting quotes to work into your written presentation.

I usually start with a fairly broad question, and as the person is answering that I segue (smoothly, I hope) into the second question, which is the most important one. By naturally blending that question in, the person is more likely to give you a more spontaneous answer than something "canned."

All that's left is getting the interview and creating a super article.

You need to know the phone number of the interviewee and some current and top historical information about your target. Using Google for those facts usually works best, or check the circus where the clown is now performing and ask for the P.R. person, who might also send you some .jpgs photos as email attachments. Then call the person directly (not too early and not close to performance hours) and say, "Hi, Mr. _____. I'm writing an article for _____ Magazine and I wonder if I we could speak for about 10 minutes, when it's most convenient for you. My article is about the three most famous clowns in America." Then let him answer, get the time, double-check the phone he would prefer to be called at, and confirm the date. "Looking forward to it. I'll talk to you then. Thank you." Call as promised! (Be ready if the person wants to do the interview right then. That happened the to me when I asked the "when" question to Governor Adlai Stevenson, who said, "Why not right now?")

Remember, you must know enough about the interviewee to sound intelligent and ask the most interesting questions. So be prepared! And remember to let the person talk—he doesn't want to know about you!

Do you need further permission to use this material in your articles? Nope; the permission is implied when they spoke with you. (But you can't change what they said.)

Finally, take the results of those interviews and weave them into super prose. And after this gem sees print, always snail mail a print copy to the clowns, with sincere thank you notes.

Are that thank you note and copy of the article important? You bet. Very often (maybe a third of the time) I will return to that person as part of another article. When I call them for another interview, they will be more gracious and eager to cooperate the second (and sometimes third) time around.

(I describe the writing/selling process in much greater detail in the [Travel Writer's Guide](#).)

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett