

# 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, ...

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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

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## Four ways to get magazine or newspaper interviews

Over the past 30-years, in my [“Writing Travel Articles That Sell”](#) seminar, I’d talk for about 20 minutes about **interviewing**. The entire process has almost completely changed during that time.

First, though, why bother to interview at all? Who really cares?

The editors who will hopefully buy your article (even book) care a lot. It’s one of the magic four components of printed writing: **facts**, **quotes**, **anecdotes**, and **artwork**, usually photos. The last two add a lot to the writing; the first two are far more important.

What editors want are first-hand observation, words from a direct participant, definitive facts from an authority or expert, or a related utterance from a celebrity. If there’s a pro-con debate you are covering, they want “live words” from at least one person on each side. In fact, if the person being

interviewed is famous enough, the subject of the piece hardly matters, i.e. capture every word that President Obama says to you.

There are **four kinds of interviewing**:

**In person.** Often these are the most fun because you get to meet and converse with interesting people. Sometimes, rarely, you just encounter the person and you set up an interview on the spot. But usually you must call (or email) them first to sell yourself “I’m Bobby Blue and I’m writing an article about pig wrestling for *The Piggers Journal*” and tell them what you want, “I wonder if I could interview you for a couple of minutes about your expertise, with tips for the beginner, either right now or when it’s more convenient for you?”

They might say “let’s do it right now.” That happened to me once when I called Governor Adlai Stevenson. Or they’ll say “What about tomorrow morning at 10? How long will it last?” Figure 15 minutes max, five is better. Or they will ask you more questions, and they may just say no. (One very common question: “Is this an assignment?” If you’ve queried and have a go-ahead, just say yes.) If you get a yes, then it’s face to face unless they suggest one of the next three.

**By telephone.** We’ve already seen what you say on the phone first, above. If the interviewee prefers a telephone interview, all that remains is you figuring out what you want to know from him or her, and perhaps writing down three or four questions if the exchange doesn’t suggest something even more relevant or exciting. You must be well informed about the person you are interviewing: how to spell and pronounce their name; who they work for and the position they currently hold; why they are important to your topic, and if the topic is controversial, what position they pursue or defend. If they have been in print recently, build on what they said there.

Of the two, telephone interviews are easier to get, you can

dress however you want, and the other person can't double over in disgust because you look like their monster ex or cousin. Cheaper too: no place to travel to, no parking, just the phone call.

**By email or snail mail.** Email may be the most common kind of interview now. The trick here is to be direct and brief, and limit yourself to about three questions. As you imagine, the email might go like this: I'm Betty Blue and I'm in the middle of writing an article for YYY. I wonder if I could interview you by email (or mail) because ...? Of course I'll send you a copy of the article when it's in print. With your permission, here's what I'd like to know: (1) (2) (3) ... (If you'd prefer to do this by phone, please email me your number and the best time for you.)

There may be several email exchanges before they answer the questions, and if you still need more clarification even then, email back. But try to get it done in one shot, cordially.

**Through a press release.** Sometimes the person has interview-related points in print to provide to the aggravatee. (That's you.) They will send you to a website or a link where you can download what is relevant. That's rare but it can work better than you imagine, particularly for academics or scientists. At that, you may still want to contact the person to ask for clarification or more recent thoughts about one of the points in the release. Then use one of the other approaches.

Sometimes (often) nothing works. You get a thank you but no thank you. You can't force them to talk so you must find somebody else.

Incidentally, you usually need three or four interviewees per article. Just read earlier articles in that publication to see the editor's preference.

Last, I'm usually asked if you need the interviewee's permission to use what they said. Tell them what you are doing

first, then whatever they say is fair game. (In fact, you don't have to tell them first. I once asked a key question to the new U.S. Ambassador to Brazil in the men's room at a reception in Salvador [Bahia], Brazil. He answered, my research was complete, and I could frolic away the night!)

I hope this helps.

Gordon Burgett

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## How to Interview a Famous Person...

You already know the answer: about the same way you interview a lesser (known) mortal, except as humble as that person is (it happens!) they still expect a bit of deference...

**The real question is, how do you get to interview a famous person?**

Let's assume you are doing this as the core of an article, or your talk with them is one of several interviews for an article. And you are proposing the article (with the interview) to the editor.

First, figure out what that interview is about, then list the best known people with something worthwhile to say. Send a lively, well crafted query letter to the editor, sell your idea, and suggest who you would like to interview for that piece. You can try many editors of different publications, but one at a time, best first.

Only when you have one clear "go-ahead" (a "let me see it") do you approach the famous person for a short (think 15-minute

maximum) interview, telling the name of the publication that gave you the go-ahead, what the article is about, and asking if/when the interview can/will be held. The conversation will probably be by phone, e-mail, or in person, and you can ask for the interview the same way (if the person has an agent, that's the best approach; by e-mail is the least advisable means).

Then all that remains is the actual doing, and since you are both on the same track and know the purpose of the verbal exchange, the rest is straightforward. Thank them first, start with a fairly broad but pertinent question. Make the most important question the second one, and if you can segue into it from what they've just said, all the better. (The less obvious the questions, the fresher the answers—usually!) If you have a talk-stopper to ask (“Did you really kill the butler?”), ask that last.

Don't talk about yourself (unless they ask, then quickly), keep the conversation friendly but professional, laugh if they say something funny (or meant to be funny), and consider ending the interview with “Is there anything I didn't ask that you would like me to include?” At the end, thank them again, and assure them that the moment the article is in print, you will send them a copy. (Get an address if you don't already have it.)

Remember, they are speaking with you because they somehow benefit from being in print. But their time is valuable and you will get only as much of it as you deserve. So be a journalist first, research the person fully before making contact, and stick to the topic. Only if they wonder off, let them go, take notes, and gently herd them back into the desired corral to get the information you need—unless what they are saying is even more important. Then follow them with notes wherever they go..

Have I actually interviewed famous people? Yep, five

Presidents (alas, all of South American countries), movie stars, sports figures, Adlai Stevenson four times, others. My conclusion: they are just like anybody else (but famouser) if you are courteous and acknowledge your gratitude. Sometimes they are even very funny, and they are almost always articulate (if they are sober). Which is why I almost always interview in the morning. (Not for me—I don't drink. They do!)

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

P.S. If receiving my [newsletter](#) (free monthly) interests you, great! You might also enjoy my book [The Travel Writer's Guide](#), where I write much more about this information gathering and article writing and selling.

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## How to get an interview for your article or book...

An attendee from one of my publishing seminars is writing a book and had a few interview-related questions that you may also have, so let me share a few thoughts here.

(Incidentally, I'm offering three different writing- and publishing-related seminars near Stanford and Santa Cruz, California, in mid-March: see [www.gordonburgett.com/seminars.htm](http://www.gordonburgett.com/seminars.htm).)

One, **how to arrange an interview?**

Decide first what you are writing about, and if an article, the primary target publication you will query. Then figure out whose words would make that article timely, accurate, and

valuable. (Know the question[s] you need answered by the interviewee.) Figure three people quoted per article is a good target, but you may need more. And of course get the email and/or phone numbers of those you wish to quote.

Most folks will talk to you if they know why and that it won't take much time, so I figure 15 minutes max, and hope for five!

Be ready to go when you dial the phone. I once called Governor Adlai Stevenson, figuring I'd get some aide. The Governor (he had just announced his Presidential candidacy) answered the phone himself, and after hearing my spiel said, "If you're ready, let's go!"

The spiel? "Good morning. I'm Gordon Burgett. I'd like to interview the Governor about \_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_ magazine. Two questions, at most five minutes, if possible." Then I let the person on the phone respond or ask me questions. They'd usually provide a call-back time (and the number). With Governor Stevenson, it was right then!

My batting average using this approach? Great for politicians and lesser luminaries, only fair for academics.

If I an't get the phone number, now I email. The go-ahead ratio is about the same by email (they can check your website or bio before responding), but they usually want to be interviewed by email too—and you're not always certain it is them responding on the other end.

Another question: do I need an OK from them to use their words? No, I told them it was an interview. Can I use it in other articles or a book. Yes. But you always have to be accurate, which is why a taped interview (even by phone) is best.

Last question. Can you use anything just said in conversation in an article or book? Actually yes, but it can be harder to prove later that it was said. A funny example. I needed just a

few words of affirmation from the U.S. Ambassador to Brazil. Very much by chance we were standing side by side at urinals during a break in a reception, and I asked him the question. He laughed and gave me the answer! We washed up, and five minutes later I formally met him in the reception line, to which he said, "It's good to meet you again, Mr. Burgett—in more salubrious circumstances!"

If this helps, great!

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett

P.S. I talk a lot more about publishing and writing in my free newsletter at [www.gordonburgett.com/nl.htm](http://www.gordonburgett.com/nl.htm).