



The Art of the Interview

Two reasons to conduct an interview:

1. As part of a story the person is involved in. You'll be getting information from someone who is an expert on the topic you're writing about, and good quotes to bring the reader into the story.

2. For a profile of the person. The story is about this person and should have a lot of quotes, but it will be written in third person and include more information than just what you learn in the interview.

Do your homework first! Know something about the person before you try to do the interview. Find out as many of the basics as you can: Birthplace, education, what else they've done. If it's an author, read the book. If it's an actor, watch a movie. If it's a tennis player, learn something about tennis.

An interview is a conversation: You talk, and you listen.

Go into the interview knowing what you need to find out. You can write questions, or you might just write down key words like a shopping list, but make sure you don't forget the things you needed to ask.

But then *listen* to the answers! If something is said that you don't understand, ask about it. If you hear something unexpected, feel free to talk about it. Don't just go on to the next question.

Should I record the interview, or take notes?

A recorder can be very helpful, but it doesn't replace taking notes. Written notes are more important, because you'll need them anyway. *You must always take written notes, even if you use a recorder.*

Digital recorders will help you get quotes exact. But, even with a recorder, you must still take good, accurate notes for two reasons:

1. To help find quotes. You can write most of your story from your written notes, then use them to help you find the part of the recorded interview in which there is a particular quote you wanted.

2. In case your recorder doesn't work. Nothing is worse than finding out that your recorder stopped working, or that other noise in the area made it impossible hear what is said. It happens to every writer. The lucky ones -- the smart ones -- also have written notes they can use when a recorder fails.

May I edit quotes? An exact quote is an exact quote, and shouldn't be changed. But you don't have to, um, you know, um, leave in every, uh, every ... um ... because people don't always talk the way they write. It's okay to edit out a few small things. But if you have to do major surgery on a quote, then it isn't a quote anymore and you can't use it. **When in doubt, email your editor and ask.**

Making hard choices

One of the hardest things about a good interview is that it won't all fit in your story. We don't use "Q&A" interviews, and, even in those, you have to make choices. It hurts, but you have to choose the most important, interesting parts and let the rest go.