

Top Ten Interview Hints

1. Obey the Boy Scout Motto: Be Prepared.

- ✓ Read background information carefully. Be sure you understand your subject.
- ✓ Type out a list of questions. Tape it inside on back or front cover of notebook where you can flip to it quickly and easily.

2. Shape your questions to draw out the most and the best info.

- ✓ Avoid "yes" or "no" questions. Go with open-ended questions: Tell me about so-and-so. How does so-and-so work? What does that mean? WHY?
- ✓ Start with the easy, softer questions. Save the hard or confrontational for last.
- ✓ Use, when appropriate, tactful phrasing. Don't ask the man with the VERY young woman, "Is this your daughter?" She could be his wife. Ask, with a smile, "Oh, are you two related?" or "Oh, how long have you known each other?"

3. Dress for success.

- ✓ Wear what will make the source comfortable. (Not a suit and tie to talk to farmers; not your cap on backwards to talk to a corporate executive.)
- ✓ Wear what's practical for the place and time. (Red at press conferences. Flat heels if you might have to chase down your source.)

4. Be clear on the ground rules.

✓ **Off the record.** Be extremely careful of accepting this. Usually, the source is trying to tie your hands and keep you from getting a grip on the story. Remember, it is a negotiation -- you have to agree to conversations being off the record. A politician who tosses out the phrase and then rattles on has NOT played by the rules. But you MUST stop the chatter there and clarify the ground rules. Try to get the source to talk on background. Let the source know if someone else gives you the information on the record that you will use it. A reporter always calls the original source back when this happens and tries to pursue the information -- but it also is a courtesy so the source knows you have not broken your word.

✓ **On background.** Clarify with the source exactly what he or she means by it. To reporters, it means that you will use the information but not the source's name. Usually, you negotiate with the source to give some kind of identification--"Democratic congressional staff member" or "Senior administration official familiar with policy on Iraq." You, as the reporter, want some identification that assures the reader you didn't make up the information and gives some information on what the source's biases might be. The source usually merely wants to be able to talk more freely and to avoid annoying her or his boss by getting publicity.

- ✓ Ask if you can use a tape recorder (Keep it close enough to you that you can note the time/place of good quotes/soundbites – so you don't have to listen to the whole tape as you do your story.)

5. Get it all.

Notice things in the room. Ask questions about them as an icebreaker. Use the details for color and life in the story.

6. LISTEN!!!

- ✓ Don't be a robot, going down your list of questions. Be open to new avenues, new themes. Ask for explanations. The source may hand you a better story than the one you were after.
- ✓ Pay attention to vague words. Is the source avoiding the question? Politicians are especially "skillful" at this.
- ✓ Be sure you heard what you THOUGHT you heard. Someone saying, as former Vice President Al Gore did in a fundraising scandal, "I made calls on a few occasions" is NOT saying he made a few *CAILS*. He may have made dozens on EACH occasion. Someone saying that you can't talk to the lawyer is NOT saying "no comment" for the lawyer.

7. WATCH!!!

- ✓ Keep eye contact with the person you're interviewing.
- ✓ Be attentive to the source's body language and your own. Watch the source for signs of nervousness, distress, anger. Read the facial expressions and body language. Is the source having a hard time talking? Then notice that. Take appropriate action-- something reassuring and comforting for grieving people, like touching the hand or at least saying how sorry you are to be putting them through this. Is the source tapping with her or his fingers nervously? *Glaring* at you? You can even ask what these things mean! *Am I upsetting you? Am I making you angry? Do these questions upset you?*
- ✓ For many interview situations, you want to appear as non-threatening as possible. Be careful of leaning forward suddenly and aggressively. You might hunch down so you appear smaller and less intimidating. Or you might sit up quite tall and imposingly -- if that's the effect you want to create.

8. Translate.

- ✓ Rephrase and repeat back to the source what you thought she or he said.
- ✓ You might preface this with, "I don't want to put words in your mouth but..." or "Let me see if I understand what you mean..." or "Here's what I heard you saying..."
- ✓ Often this gets the source to expand on the subject! Often the quotes/soundbites get better the more someone tells his or her tale. Don't be surprised if you're corrected on your interpretation. You WANT to be sure you're phrasing something correctly. So correction is a good thing.
- ✓ By rephrasing and repeating what the source has said, you also are test-driving phrases that you might actually use in your story.

9. Use styles and techniques appropriate to the source, the subject, the place, the atmosphere.

- ✓ Casual, conversational styles-- with the source doing most of the talking --work especially well with people not accustomed to being interviewed. You want to put these people at ease.
- ✓ Long silences make many people nervous. You can use that effectively to get some people to talk.
- ✓ Provocative questions can take people by surprise and get them to open up. **NOTE: Provocative is not the same as offensive.**
- ✓ Be polite, even when you're asking tough questions.
- ✓ Don't argue. Just rephrase your question. Ask it again. And again. And again.
- ✓ Stall. Use harmless questions or conversational "static" --"Oh, really?" Or "That's interesting." Or "I'm not sure I understood that." These give you time to catch up on your notes, check your questions, collect your thoughts.
- ✓ Speak clearly, professionally, intelligently. Um, like, you know, like without tossing in, like, the word "like" every few seconds. It makes you sound amateurish, childish and poorly educated. Like, you know.
- ✓ Leave your name and phone number. Ask if you may call back. This lets the source know you're interested and serious, that you will want to fill in blanks. It also opens the door for the source to get in touch with you--especially a source who was reluctant to talk. You might also say, "Is there is else I should ask you, anything you think I should know that I've forgotten to ask?"

10. THINK!!!

- ✓ You cannot do interviews on auto-pilot.
- ✓ You cannot tune out.
- ✓ You must think about what you're asking and about what the source is saying.