



Production Workshop

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What Makes a Good Interview

- Has a clear focus.
- Contains stories about real people because those are our programmers and listening audience.
- Has direct, conversational language, questions and answers.
- Has a tone that relates to the subject. Serious issues should be dealt with seriously.

What Makes a Good Interviewer

A Good Interviewer

- Knows the story.
- Is in control of the interview.
- Is confident without being aggressive.
- Is sensitive to language and tone.
- Does not set out to display how much he/she knows about the subject.

The structure of Interviews

- A beginning that sets up the story, introduces the guest and asks the first question.
- A middle that details all the necessary information.
- An end, that summarizes the story, what can be learned, if possible how action can be taken and where the listener can go for more information.

Type of Interviews

Live interviews



Live interviews have the advantage of being more conversational, spontaneous and real.

It's important to vet or pre-interview your guest before going live.

If your guest hasn't been on-air before make sure they are aware of broadcasting rules and regulations and proper mic technique beforehand.

If your guest seems shy and uncomfortable with doing a live interview you may want to re-think the interview entirely.

It's important to make your guest as comfortable as possible.

An uncomfortable guest makes for an uncomfortable interview.

Make sure you know your questions beforehand.

It's tougher to refer to scripted questions while intently listening to your interviewee in a live situation.

Having a list of one-word topic questions to refer to is easier than having a sheet of long written out questions.

This also insures that your attention is focused on the interviewee and not a sheet in front of you.

Phone interview



Phone interviews may have the advantage of having scripted questions in front of you but it may be harder to keep the interview conversational.

It's encouraged to call your guest before the interview to touch base, make sure they remember the interview and have given consent to being broadcast.

If you can make sure they can speak to you on a landline and not a cell-phone. Cell-phones can sometimes become distorted or drop out.

Pre-recorded



Pre-recorded interviews have the advantage of being edited for broadcast.

However, relying too much on post-production and continually making unprepared questions can turn off your interviewee. Make sure you are just as prepared as you would for a live interview.

You must always make sure when editing not to take your guests' responses out of context. It may constitute defamation.

There is always the possibility of technical errors causing you to lose your interview. Make sure you save as you edit and it's a good idea to save a backup copy just in case.

Make sure to inform your guest when the interview will be aired.

Checklist: The Basics of Interviewing

Ask questions on behalf of all listeners. Keep this in mind at all times. A meandering interview that goes off on tangents will just end up frustrating the listener.

Listen. This is perhaps the most difficult part of the interview. If you're not listening to your guest, chances are they won't give you the answers you're looking for. You must listen carefully to pick up on a point to ask follow up questions or segue into another line of questioning. If you feel your guest is being vague about any point that may confuse listeners be prepared to ask for clarification.

Be flexible. If you have a list of questions, rarely will you ever be asking them in order. You should be willing to follow your guest's answers and explore new lines of questioning. If there are certain questions that you need to ask, wait and listen for an appropriate segue during the interview. Make your questions lead logically from the last answer.

Be Challenging. Don't settle for an unjustified statement or unsubstantiated point of view. Don't be hostile but don't settle for an answer your listeners won't be satisfied with. Be the devil's advocate. Even if you might agree with your guest's opinions, it's more important to ask on behalf of those who don't agree or from a different point of view. If you make your guest explain their points in detail it will make for a better interview.

Know where you're going. Even if you're flexible, it's a good idea to keep an eye on the clock. Make sure you make time for the important questions.

Set the tone. Before you start an interview, make sure you know why you're doing it. Ask yourself what you want to accomplish from it. Decide on the tone you want to take. Depending on the issues involved, will the interview be serious or fun? Make sure your first question captures the tone in an instant. Make sure it stimulates the guest and brings the listener into the story.

Questions. Start with the basics: who, what, where, when, why and how. These are clear and open-ended and will give your guest a chance to answer at length. Don't ask closed ended questions. A yes or no answer isn't the response you or the listener is looking for. Avoid doubling up your questions. Ask one question and then follow it up during the course of the answer. Avoid making statements in your questions. Laying down a fact or two may inform the listener but it stops the interview dead cold. It's important to challenge your guest with facts contrary to their answers but always phrase it in the form of a question. For example, 'How do you explain the recent report that states contrary to your claims?'

Style. If the interview is long or between breaks in the program be sure to use the guests name and title more than once to bring new listeners into the conversation. Ask the guest to give examples using real people. When it comes to reporting on important issues, mainstream media operators prefer to give statistics rather than put face on the situation. Community media has the opportunity of breaking down that barrier and informing the listener with real stories involving real people. Use simple language. Academics and bureaucrats are notorious for using jargon and buzzwords so make sure they're explaining things in terms that everyone can understand. Verbal ticks like; yeah, uh-huh and hmm take away from any interview. Nodding instead works just as well. Don't be afraid to use silence. If there is an emotionally impacting answer it's better to let your guest, yourself and your listeners dwell on that thought before you ask another question. Avoid verbal stalling. Instead of struggling to phrase your next question, take your time and ask a simple follow-up.

Tips on Interviewing

Various tips for interviewing success¹

Beware of editorializing too much. Community radio welcomes strong opinions but interviews are meant to be interviews not debates. It's encouraged to ask tough questions but ranting at your guest will rarely evoke the response your audience is listening for. Remember, it's not your role to tell people what to believe; it's your role to provide them with the information so they can make up their own mind.

If your guest arrives with a public service announcement or event information, it's important to go through it beforehand. At times, some community groups, artists or bands will arrive with information that is difficult for listeners to understand or has changed from the original listing. Make sure to go through it with them beforehand to avoid any confusion.

In prelude to an interview, always ask your interviewee the correct pronunciation of their name or other words you may find difficult throughout the interview. Don't be embarrassed to ask these questions. It's better to ask them off-air beforehand than have them correct you during the interview. If time does not permit for that before the interview, it's okay to ask your guest to introduce him or herself on-air.

It's important to set up the mic and headphones for your interviewee. Some guests have never been on radio and don't know how to project into a microphone. Some guests will speak all over the place. It's important to direct them to speak into the mic.

Never give your guests the questions beforehand. You may provide an overview of the topics and issues you will be discussing beforehand but allowing your guest to rehearse their answers will result in an interview that won't sound natural and take your listener out of the driver's seat. Remember that you're in charge of the interview, not the guest. Try and avoid having your guests read from notes. Again, this won't sound natural and makes for bad radio. It's also important to tell your guest how long they should expect the interview to be. That way, they won't be frustrated when you wrap it up.

Remember the importance of listening to your guest and following their lead into other topics or questions. It's also important to have patience between questions. Cutting off your guest before they have a chance to answer may disrupt the interview. Ask one question at a time. Don't be afraid to ask the same question if they don't answer you the first time.