

## HAM420 GUIDE TO INTERVIEWING



### Before the Interview

1. Make sure you are clear in your own mind about why you are doing this particular interview, what you hope to achieve with it, and where exactly your interview fits in to the proposed 'story' or flow of information on convergent journalism. The topic is potentially a broad one so get a clear notion of what facet or facets of the subject can be discussed by this particular person.
2. Research a bit of background on the subject and on the person so that you can ask clear and intelligent questions. Sometimes a telephone call to the interviewee several days before the interview takes place can point you towards articles, books or others who can help you come to terms with the subject matter.
3. Work out a loose "plan" of possible points for questioning. Be prepared to amend these, or change their order, either during discussion with the interviewee just prior to the interview, or even during the actual interview. Try not to work from a list of actual questions in the form of correct, grammatical, complete, sentences. Having such a list often locks you into an inflexible conceptual framework during the interview, kills the spontaneity, and usually leads to a very stilted spoken delivery in the interview situation. It is far more useful to jot brief notes, 'catch-phrases', terms, key words and so on, and be familiar with what they mean to you.
4. Always chat to the person for a while before commencing the interview. Try to create a relaxed sense of rapport - show some enthusiasm and friendliness, but at the same time convey a feeling that you know what you want, you are in control, at ease with your equipment and so on. Try to suss out their personality if you can - are they shy/dominating? Are they going to be highly rhetorical or concrete and specific?

Establish the parameters of the interview. Indicate the areas you would like to cover in the interview, and always find out what they would like to cover. Often the interview becomes an interesting combination of both. Suss out any gaps in their knowledge of the area, and any areas of discussion which might be sensitive.

**NEVER** provide a list of questions, and don't go over any ground in detail (because this often means that the information or anecdotes won't be repeated minutes later in the interview).

While this chat is going on, you can set up and test the equipment. (The best test is when you finally do a 'Record Identification' and listen back to it). You should be capable of quietly connecting up your equipment setting levels and so on, while talking with the other person. Some (most?) people are a bit nervous about the microphone, and if you can treat it as some necessary but secondary aspect of the situation, and seem at ease with it, this can be very helpful to them. If you make a big production out of setting up you may find that this mere inanimate object begins to exert a 'mysterious' and disruptive pull on the conversation taking place!

### **During the Interview**

During the interview you and the interviewee should be seated in a way which is comfortable and easy to sustain. The equipment should be conveniently placed and preferably not dominating the situation. If either you or your equipment are uncomfortably placed, move! Remember the corner of a table is an excellent venue for an interview; it enables you to be close.....but not too close! and gives you something to lean your elbow on; 10 to 15 minutes is a long time to hold your arm in the air!

Set the levels prior to recording, then try not to worry about them. Use your aural judgement, microphone position, and gestures, to maintain levels. If you are working with another person you can rely on them worry about this.

Your influence on the progress of the interview is verbal when you are questioning, and non-verbal at all other times. Your influence should, in other words, be continuous and ever-present. You should use facial expression to show interest, enthusiasm, empathy, surprise etc. **DO NOT** murmur "yes", "mmm", "uh huh", under the words of the other person. This can be very irritating on playback, and is impossible to remove later on.

You might use gesture to indicate that you wish to interrupt the speaker, or to get them closer in or farther out from the microphone, or to ask them to speak louder or more softly, or to point out that time is running out, and so on.

When asking questions try to really put yourself into them - show your interest/ fascination/ concern etc. in your vocal delivery. There's nothing more dampening than dull, flat, neutral-sounding questions.

Throughout the interview, from the time you have set the levels and made the Record Identification, operate entirely through the "PAUSE" button in preference to the "stop" button.

Try to do the interview from beginning to end without having to stop, but if you do, use pause. Remember that once your interview is completed and on the minidisk/videotape, you will EDIT it, copying ONLY those sections of it you wish to use. This has important implications for what takes place in the interview. For example, if you mess up a question, simply say that you are going to ask it again, and do so. Later, only that version of the question will be copied. Similarly, let the interviewee know beforehand that if they make a bad slip they can simply pause and then produce a new version of their sentence (but also mention that it's nicer if you don't have too much editing to do later on!)

Although it's preferable not to have to stop during the interview it is sometimes unavoidable. Someone might hate their answer and have forgotten your exact question in any case. Quickly rewind to the beginning of your question. Play it to them, hit pause, then the record button, release pause and indicate to them when to proceed (ie. after say, a one second gap).

**ALWAYS** keep a check on the time, and remember the length of the interview you are aiming for. NEVER record 30 minutes of interview when you are only aiming to use 8; you will simply cause yourself an editing nightmare, not only because of the amount you need to get rid of, but also because the pace and feel will be inappropriate.

### Asking Questions

1. Whilst it's worth asking 1 or 2 'warm up' questions, get into the main substance of the topic quickly. Don't dither around the topic, and don't ask questions on minidisk/videotape just to get introductory information, unless it's important that it be said in the interview rather than in a written introduction later on.
2. Make questions succinct and clear. If a question gets badly out-of-hand and convoluted, simply stop, say "I'll start that one again", pause (yourself not the tape) and ask it more clearly.
3. Avoid double-barreled questions. (ie. Don't ask questions like..... Could you explain ... and then ... and finally .... ?") It's much better to ask several single questions in a row.
4. Concentrate very carefully on what is being said. Always listen to the answers attentively - a great deal of your skill as an interviewer rests in being able to respond on the spot to interesting new revelations or aspects of the topic. And it is through really listening and then responding that a strong sense of rapport comes through.
5. Don't let the interviewee get away with too much rhetoric or generalisation. Sometimes people with a wealth of detailed knowledge can give an interview so general that anyone could have produced the same level of information. So avoid very general or vague questions, and if the answers are too general, ask for more detail, and for concrete examples.

On a related note, don't repeat answers given in your own words, unless this is crucial for clarification.

6. Be alert to the use of any terms in the discussion which you and the interviewee might understand, but which an audience wouldn't. Ask: for explanation. Never let someone get away with using abbreviations or initials of groups, organisations or institutions, without at least defining them once at the beginning. And if they persist in using the abbreviation, you can help the audience by using the full name in all of your questions.
7. If the speaker gets off the topic and it's interesting and relevant, don't stop them. If it's not useful and probably going to be thrown out later, use non-verbal signs and if necessary verbal interruption to get the interview talk on the rails.
8. If an answer being given doesn't make sense to you, it probably won't make sense to the audience either, so ask for clarification.
9. If someone gives yes/no answers, it's often because you have asked long, detailed questions which simply require yes/no answers. You can pause-- look expectant, you can sometimes ask for elaboration - or you can decide to ask your question again, but differently. If it's a real and persisting problem, start asking questions which begin with **who, what, why, when or how?!**

10. It's important to recognise when you have covered the area you wished to cover and be ready to stop the machine at the right moment. You can usually engineer a satisfactory rounding-off by using a 'rounding off' tone for your last question.

### **Technical Considerations**

1. Always listen carefully for unwanted sound in the interview environment. Watch out for air-conditioning hum, loud background traffic noise, faulty fluorescent lights that buzz, squeaky chairs (this one's a classic), phones that might suddenly decide to make a contribution etc. Be confident about asking someone in an office to hold all telephone calls for an appropriate time, and to allow you to put a 'Do Not Disturb - Interview In Progress' note on their door.

2. During the interview do not shuffle or rattle paper, and listen for any nervous habits such as excess shuffling around, foot-tapping, pen-tapping, leg against table rubbing and so on. If these happen, hit "Pause" in a friendly way and sort the problem out.

3. Make sure you know the properties of the particular microphone you are using; - know how close to hold it for good sound, what closeness (or loudness) is likely to produce distortion and so on. For an interview in which the microphone is hand-held:

a. Always remember to loop the lead around your fingers and away from the barrel of the mic to prevent rattle.

b. Position yourself so that a minimal amount of mic movement is necessary.

c. Always use a wind guard when possible.

d. Remember to hold the microphone at mouth-height, and at about 45 degrees to the line of speech.

e. Throughout the interview use PAUSE for stopping and starting (rather than STOP).

4 Consider wearing a set of headphones to aid you in monitoring all these considerations!

**GOOD LUCK!**