

Sally Adams
with Wynford Hicks

interviewing for journalists



Interviewing for Journalists

Sally Adams

with an introduction and additional
material by Wynford Hicks



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Notes on authors

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Wynford Hicks is a freelance journalist and editorial trainer. He has worked as a reporter, sub-editor, feature writer, editor and editorial consultant for newspapers, books and magazines and as a teacher of journalism specialising in sub-editing, writing styles and the use of English. He is the author of *English for Journalists*, now in its second edition, and *Writing for Journalists*.

Contents

Notes on authors	vi
1 Introduction <i>Wynford Hicks</i>	1
2 Basics	5
3 Preparing and getting started	17
4 Interviewing techniques	32
5 Understanding interviewees and avoiding problems	58
6 Checking and editing quotes	75
7 Telephone interviewing	84
8 Note-taking and recording	90
9 Different interviewees: politicians	98
10 Different interviewees: celebrities	112
11 Different interviewees: special cases	131
12 Law and ethics <i>Wynford Hicks</i>	149
Glossary of terms used in journalism	167
Further reading	172
Appendix 1: Miles Kington on celebrity interviews	174
Appendix 2: Madonna interviewed as never before	176
Appendix 3: Bob Woodward interview request	178
Appendix 4: On the receiving end	180
Index	181

1

Introduction

Wynford Hicks

Interviewing is the central activity in modern journalism. It is now the main means by which reporters and feature writers gather their material.

According to Christopher Silvester,¹ the interview came to Britain from the United States towards the end of the 19th century. It was part of the 'new journalism' that turned the media world upside down. From a stuffy, pompous thing that could interest only a minority of the serious-minded, journalism became a lively means of informing and entertaining millions of people.

As 20th-century journalism developed, interviewing became increasingly important. The journalist as observer and recorder, attending a political meeting to report the leader's speech in detail or describing shell-by-shell daily life in a town under fire or joining the mourners at a gangster's funeral, does still exist. But the journalist as interviewer now produces far more copy.

Even in sport the match report is followed by the post-match interview – and that's once a week. On the other six days the interview – with the sports star, the star's manager, the star's partner or one-night stand, the star's hairdresser – dominates. And let's not forget the sport star's 'column', based on an interview by a journalist on the sports desk.

In every area of newspaper and magazine coverage the interview is a way of bringing human interest into stories. It helps satisfy that powerful curiosity about the lives of the famous. But, much more than that, it is the means by which the journalist goes about gathering material. Interviews with experts and prominent people add credibility and authority to copy. Interviews with those involved in a news event – an eye-witness to an accident or a surviving victim – take a story beyond the reporter's necessarily restricted view.

In the Anglo-American tradition, interviewing sources and attributing facts and opinions to them is an essential part of reporting. Indeed, in many newspapers, otherwise sound stories that cannot be 'stood up' by supporting quotes remain unpublished.

And interviews can make news. A person who has publishable information can use an interview to reveal it at a time of their own choosing, perhaps promising the journalist an exclusive to try to ensure the kind of exposure they want. Or an enterprising reporter can track down a person they know or suspect has important information. The resulting interview then becomes the story.

The interview can be defined as a prearranged face-to-face meeting of a journalist, who asks questions, and an interviewee, who answers them. The interviewee is often notable (or notorious) and the questions usually focus on them, their life and opinions. But in this book we also use the wider definition that applies to all journalists who write news or features. Here interviewing is asking people questions to gather material for publication, both information and quotes.

So an interview may consist of a quick phone call to check a fact or an afternoon spent taping someone's life story. But brief or elaborate, a phone call or a face-to-face meeting, the successful interview comes from a professional approach. And it is the purpose of this book to explain and illustrate that approach, giving practical advice.

The book is based on the author's experience gained in many years of interviewing for a variety of newspapers and magazines and on a series of interviews with other journalists conducted for the book. Some of these – Lynda Lee-Potter, say, and Andrew Duncan – are well known; others less so; others again have chosen not to be named.

One consequence of asking practitioners how they work (as opposed to pontificating from the outside) is that there are occasionally differences of emphasis in their replies. More noticeable, though, is how much agreement there is on the essentials of interviewing: prepare thoroughly, listen carefully, edit accurately, and so on.

Interviewing for Journalists concentrates on print. But even here it is impossible to ignore the influence of broadcasting. For example, everybody in Britain has heard John Humphrys and seen Jeremy Paxman in action, so they're familiar with the confrontational interview. On the positive side interviewees now expect tough questioning when this is appropriate. But on the negative side trainee print journalists may be tempted to copy the Humphrys–Paxman approach – and needlessly antagonise their interviewees.

It's worth stressing that the tough broadcast interview is not a good model for the print journalist, particularly the beginner. By contrast, other broadcasters, such as Sue Lawley of *Desert Island Discs* or Anthony Clare of *In the Psychiatrist's Chair*, show what can be achieved by the softly-softly approach.

Another powerful influence on the print interview is the tape recorder – nowadays almost everybody is prepared to be taped. Tape makes a verbatim record possible and also enables the interviewer to concentrate on what the interviewee is actually saying, keeping eye contact. But on the downside transcription takes a long time and the printed interview, if not well edited, can be wordy and repetitive.

It's a truism that this is a media-conscious age: academic media studies courses abound and there is some (though not enough) practical journalism training. And just as some journalism students and trainee journalists practise interviewing, their counterparts go on media-awareness courses and practise being interviewed.

Politicians and business people have been organising coaching for themselves for years but now everybody's at it. Even the 3,500 judges in England and Wales get a booklet (*The Media, a Guide for Judges*) telling them how to handle interviews without getting rattled and how to react if they're doorstepped by a posse of hacks.

If anything confirms the need for good, thorough journalism training, it's the inclusion of interview techniques and news management skills in corporate training schemes. As one ex-journalist who trains executives puts it in Chapter 5, 'There are whole chunks of journalism effectively run by PR companies.'

The core of this book is the prearranged set-piece interview, which we take you through in stages from research and planning to checking and editing quotes. (Writing as such is not covered in this book but in another in the series: *Writing for Journalists*.)

We start with a chapter on routine interviewing which provides some basic advice for trainees on, for example, how to follow up a press release or a reader's tip.

We cover telephone interviewing and note-taking and recording in separate chapters and also discuss approaches to different kinds of interviewees – politicians, celebrities and some special cases: reluctant and inexperienced interviewees; vulnerable people, children and the bereaved; the PR sitting in on the interview and interviewers doubling up.

This section does not claim to be 'comprehensive'. For example, although we refer to the investigative journalist at points during the book, we have not attempted to give advice on how to work undercover, how to lay traps for corrupt politicians, etc.

Nor have we covered the so-called questionnaire interview which consists of supplying a list of standard questions usually by fax, then editing the answers.

By all means do it if your editor asks you to (or as a fallback, second-best to a phone interview) but don't call it interviewing.

In the book various issues – ethical, legal, professional – raised by the practice of interviewing are discussed as they arise. These points are brought together in the final chapter. This chapter has been particularly hard to write. It is one thing to lay down general principles and draft codes of practice – especially for other people to follow. It is much harder to decide what to do in specific situations. So if there is a lack of certainty in some of the advice offered it is because, ultimately, you the journalist must find your own answers to the questions raised.

Note

- 1 C. Silvester, *The Penguin Book of Interviews: An Anthology from 1859 to the Present Day*, Viking, 1993.

2

Basics

Skilled journalists make interviewing look easy. They quickly get on their interviewee's wavelength and encourage them to talk freely. They ask questions that elicit lively replies, listen to what's said, note what they hear while thinking of the next question, at the same time checking what they've just heard against what they know from research.

They cajole answers from the reluctant, corral the waffly, reassure the nervous, recognise fudges, check ambiguities – and all within a set time with someone they've probably never met before. They make it look easy but it isn't. If journalism is a craft, interviewing is an art. There are a lot of unrelated skills to master and, like learning to drive a car, interviewing is daunting and difficult at first. But with practice, setting off smoothly, signalling, changing gear, steering and watching the instruments become second nature. So it is with interviewing.

The most useful characteristic for an all-round interviewer is to be likeable, the sort of person who can get on with almost anybody and is interested in everybody: a person who people are happy to talk to, who comes across as a human being first, a journalist second.

The most valuable attribute is probably curiosity, followed by charm, keen powers of observation, doggedness, flexibility and fairness. Then add the ability to think fast, analyse, keep a poker face when necessary, a broad general knowledge and plenty of scepticism . . .

It's a rare journalist who can master the complete range of styles interviewing demands. An interviewer who's a brilliant fact-extractor is unlikely to produce a good interview with an unhappy transsexual for *Marie Claire*, just as a sympathetic and understanding feature specialist probably wouldn't produce a good interview with the chancellor of the exchequer for *Investors Chronicle*. Each type of interview requires a different approach. Then, to add to the complications, there are the abrasions of personality to consider. This is why self-effacing interviewers can be so successful, like the 'invisible' photographer who people forget is there.

Interviewing is also a skill best mastered progressively. There's a certain order to it as there is in life. Just as children crawl before they walk, walk before they run and run before they play football – so it is with interviewing and, comfortingly, it's something you get better at with age.

If you want to become a good all-round interviewer – the equivalent of a skilled footballer – please start here with routine interviews. Skipping the basics is the equivalent of hitting the ground running with zero practice.

First, it's important to realise what the interviewer/interviewee relationship entails. You will use people and you will be used. You will find some people who divulge little, others who tell you more than you wish to know. You will be trusted with secrets, you will be lied to. You will be bombarded with what seem like irrelevancies and only later realise what a key piece one of them is in the information jigsaw. You will be rebuffed, you will be courted.

As a result of what you write, based on what you learn during an interview, people may lose their jobs, companies may close, lives may be ruined. Or you may be intrigued enough to try out a new sport, meet someone you later marry, win an award.

Some interviewees will later ask you to pretty up or sanitise their words. Some may beg you not to print what they said, some may threaten. These decisions usually rest with the editor but a time may come when you are the one who has to decide. Journalists who have been interviewed and regret what they have said, or fear they will be misrepresented, will understand. A former *Mirror* writer involved in a shares scandal (Anil Bhoyrul, City Slicker columnist) said after he'd been sacked, 'I've written some pretty nasty things about people but when it's done to you it's bloody awful.' For most journalists, the first time someone pleads with them to alter copy is when the real power of the press hits home.

Editorial policy

Let's assume, first, that you are working for a publication that has an editorial policy, i.e., knows what it is trying to achieve and why. This should describe realistically how the publication intends to reach its readers – for example, by amusing or informing them, by helping or persuading them. Editorial policies are important because if you don't know what you are trying to achieve, you're flailing round in a fog.

Second, let's assume that you work for a publication that knows a lot about its readers and understands how to interest them. And third, that it's a publication where they send you out to get stories face-to-face as well as on the telephone. Here we're talking about an ideal, of course. All too often in

newspaper and magazine offices the emphasis is on productivity and speed. Reporters now mostly interview over the phone and going out on a story can be seen as a luxury.

To learn the trade, trainee journalists need to get out of the office to meet people. Get it right face-to-face and you learn *all* the interviewing skills. Learn on the telephone and your repertoire will be incomplete.

Interviewing is the journalist's basic tool. You interview to get a story, quotes, background, opinion. You really can't do this until you have a good grasp of the six indispensable journalistic questions – *who?*, *what?*, *when?*, *where?*, *why?* and *how?* – and know why they are essential. You must also understand that there's not one single answer to each of them. *Who?* for a local paper may well be Sam Smith, 35, of Islip, Northants. *Who?* for a trade journal may well be J. Samuel Smith, managing director of Dragees International's London office. *Who?* for a magazine may well be Psychic Sam, the man who predicts your future.

Communication

One more necessity. We can't start until we have looked at the maze that is communication. When two people communicate, a lot can go wrong in a very short time. Say we call a (male) interviewer A and a (female) interviewee B. In a simple question and answer exchange you have to take into account the following:

- What A thinks he says.
- What A actually says.
- What B thinks she hears.
- What B actually hears.
- What B actually says in reply.
- What A thinks he hears B say.

A is interviewing B about arguments at work. B is talking about a row at a previous job.

- B ends by saying 'So I left.'
- B thinks she has said: 'I left work early that day.'
- A thinks he hears: 'So I quit my job.'
- A says: 'Did you regret the decision?'
- B thinks 'What a stupid question.'
- B says: 'No.'
- A thinks B is glad she left her previous job and is happy in her present one, which may or may not be true.

Or:

A is interviewing B about experiences as an adult education teacher and asks, 'How do you get on with the old?'

B hears real insensitivity, 'the old' not 'older people'. Starts to go off A immediately.

B replies: 'Older people are exceptionally rewarding to teach.'

A agrees enthusiastically: 'Yes, aren't they – the old have got so much to learn.' A thinks that sounds understanding.

B sees it as showing that A thinks older people are stupid.

This applies at all levels. Alan Greenspan, chairman of the US government's powerful Federal Reserve Bank, is on record as telling Wall Street economists: 'I know you believe you understand what you think I said but I am not sure you realise that what you heard is not what I meant.'

The best way to avoid misunderstanding is to use feedback: if at all uncertain, repeat back to your interviewee what you believe they said. This doesn't mean you paraphrase every word slowly and clearly, enunciating distinctly, but that you recognise accuracy is in both your interests and there are many factors which can cause mistakes. These include – for both of you – stress, prejudice, tiredness, distraction, a closed mind.

Basic interviewing

Reduced to its essentials, interviewing couldn't be simpler:

- Ask clear questions
- Listen to the answers
- Encourage the interviewee to keep talking

This is the recommended way to start and master the essential journalistic skills: working to a deadline, getting details right, approaching people confidently, recognising a good story when you see one, getting good quotes and writing a simple, uncluttered intro.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Before you interview anyone you must

- **Plan.** It's essential you know what you want to know, so go in with your questions or topics prepared.

It's also very important that you

- **Research.** Find out as much as you possibly can about your interviewee before you meet them. Sometimes this won't be possible but recognise

that being prepared is what gives you the edge and is essential in business and political interviews.

During the interview you should

- **Listen.** No talking journalist ever held a good interview – silence really is golden.
- **Empathise.** This doesn't mean you have to like your interviewee, but that you think yourself into their skin and work out the likely impact of your questions.

These four principles underpin all successful interviews. In addition you should:

- Always tell your interviewee who you are. Give your name and say who you're working for.
- Fit in. Dress in a way that suits your interviewee. Use language they feel comfortable with.
- Get all the basic details. For local papers the 'must-knows' are routinely name, age, occupation and address. Full and precise identification is essential. A father and son living at the same address may have the same name. Always check spellings, however obvious a name may appear. Ann with or without an e? Thompson with or without a p? Charlie or Charley? Ian or Iain?
- For specialist reporters and magazine writers, a person's age may be irrelevant so the 'must-knows' are different. For a business paper they probably include job title rather than occupation. For a slimming magazine a person's weight and height.
- Listen and record. Don't argue, judge, laugh or show embarrassment.
- Try to ask questions in a logical order. If your questions hop about in a weird way it confuses your interviewee.
- Recognise that quotes – and luck – count. Learn to ask good questions in a way that encourages good quotes. It's partly down to practice and partly luck. Some people are more quotable than others.
- Hold your ego in check.
- Think pix. Never forget the picture angle when you're working on a story.
- Be prepared to learn from your mistakes.

Always remember:

- The interviewee is the star.
- Be sceptical rather than adversarial.
- 'You get more flies with honey than vinegar.'

Calls

On a local paper doing the calls – phoning the police, fire and ambulance services regularly to check whether they have a story – is the simplest kind of interviewing. Your manner should be businesslike and courteous as you will have many calls to make. From most of these you'll get nothing worth passing on to the news editor, but every so often you'll learn of an incident that needs following up.

Vox pops

The term comes from the Latin *vox populi* meaning 'voice of the people'. Often an easy way to fill a page is with pix and short quotes from people interviewed on the street about current topics. Success depends on the topic chosen.

It may be valid to ask Manchester United fans their views about whether the manager should keep a player who wants to leave. But asking people on the street for their comments on decisions made by the General Medical Council, say, or the president of Russia in the face of a crisis, is unlikely to reveal much of value.

However, vox pops are a great way to practise basic interviewing skills on willing interviewees, who seem flattered to be asked – not always the reaction of people faced with beginners. Vox pops work because you learn to get basic details, precise answers and good quotes. Without ruining the story, you can discard any interviews that don't work either because the answers were uninteresting or because you got it wrong. You learn to ask the main question, listen to the answer and then seek extra value/mileage from supplementaries/follow-ups.

The way to approach a vox pop is, first, to ensure you have a relevant question likely to appeal to people in your area, then to walk up to people confidently, notebook in hand. Don't use a clipboard – that signals market research. Use the word 'journalist' as early as possible in your introduction. Smile, of course, and be positive.

If you are worried about approaching strangers, it's likely they'll refuse to talk to you. This is evidence of one of the great laws of interviewing, that of reciprocity: you get back what you send out.

Message: 'I'm nervous, have never done this before and am certain no one will talk to me.'

Response: 'Do I want to talk to this scared person? No, I don't.'

Message: 'You look interesting. I'd like to know what you think and so, I'm sure, would my readers.'

Response: 'Why not?'

The best way to find people likely to talk is to look for the journalistic equivalent of a captive audience: people who are already standing still, waiting for a bus, for instance, or in a queue to get into a club. Shopping centres and street markets can be productive areas. Use your common sense, though, and don't approach people with huge bags of shopping or, say, three small children who are playing up. Market traders who aren't serving people are usually good for a quote. The best prospects are those whose eye you catch, or you could select people you'd like to know better.

'Hi, I'm a journalist interviewing people about . . . and I'd just like a minute or two to discover what you think.'

'Hello, I'm a journalist and I'd be very grateful if you'd spare me some time to talk about . . .'

'Hello, I'm a journalist writing a feature on . . . It'll just take a minute . . .'

Give your name and the publication you're working for fairly early, but there's no need yet to take their name. Get them talking first. It's best to stand opposite your interviewee. This works because it actually impedes their movement, making any attempt to get away from you obvious.

Ring rounds

A variation on the vox pop can be done on the phone, but with a ring round you're calling specific people – e.g. retailers of Christmas trees – not approaching strangers at random. Again, if the odd one doesn't co-operate, you can drop them from your story.

To give the quotes authenticity it's important to preserve the words and speech patterns of the people interviewed – which means having good shorthand.

Press release follow-up

What divides worthwhile journalism from some of the less rewarding varieties being practised is often pointed up by attitudes to press releases. In worthwhile journalism, a press release is often the starting point for a story. What happens is that the journalist reads the release, then gets on the phone and starts asking questions.

At the very least, the journalist will want to angle the story to suit the readers and get some good quotes. But often what follows goes much further. Here's a press release.

RUN FOR THE TRUST IN THE LONDON MARATHON

Keen marathon runners are being invited to don their running shoes and run for The Prince's Trust in the Flora London Marathon taking place this year on Sunday, 13 April.

This year is a particularly special year for The Prince's Trust as it will be celebrating its 21st birthday. The Trust is therefore keen to encourage as many runners as possible to join their team to make it the biggest ever for the world's most popular marathon.

Anyone running for The Trust will receive a free running vest and the chance to win some excellent prizes including a Sony PlayStation. The team will also be invited to a post-Marathon celebratory reception yards from the finishing line, where they will be treated to well-earned food and refreshments; hot showers and massages will also be available.

The Trust welcomes runners who have already secured Marathon places but also has a number of places available for runners who have not been successful in the applications but wish to run and raise funds on The Trust's behalf.

If you're a reporter on the London *Evening Standard* what would you ask the Prince's Trust press officer? Here are a few ideas:

- There are no quotes in the press release. Would it be possible to speak to the Prince of Wales to get his personal comment on the idea? (Always aim for the top.)
- If not the Prince of Wales, is there anybody else who could speak on behalf of the Trust?
- Did the Prince's Trust do the same thing last year? If so, how many runners were there in the Trust's team? Anybody well-known, either as an athlete or a celebrity?
- How will this year's runners 'raise funds on the Trust's behalf'?
- Has anybody well-known agreed to take part so far?
- What's the target in terms of numbers of runners?
- What will the 'well-earned food and refreshments' be? Caviar and champagne or something less frivolous – organic wholemeal bread, raw carrot and fruit juice?
- What are Sony putting in besides a PlayStation and what are they getting out?

If there is a negative story to unearth – and in business there often is – some PRs believe they can hide it by boring journalists to death, so read the release carefully to find where the gaps are. A common spot to hide bad news is somewhere around pars six to eight.