

T H I R D E D I T I O N

Creative Interviewing

THE WRITER'S GUIDE TO
GATHERING INFORMATION
BY ASKING QUESTIONS

K E N M E T Z L E R



Third Edition

Creative Interviewing

**The Writer's Guide to
Gathering Information by
Asking Questions**

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Allyn and Bacon

Boston • London • Toronto • Sydney • Tokyo • Singapore

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A Viacom Company
Needham Heights, MA 02194

Internet: www.abacon.com
America Online: Keyword: College Online

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Metzler, Ken.

Creative interviewing / by Ken Metzler. — 3rd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-205-26258-9

1. Interviewing in journalism. I. Title.

PN4784.I6M4 1997

070.4'3—dc20

96-12079

CIP

Printed in the United States of America

For Betty Jane

"Look up there—a patch of blue. I do believe it's brightening up."



Preface

One word distinguishes this third edition of *Creative Interviewing* from the two previous editions: “truth.” Or “pursuit of truth,” if I’m allowed three. In the twenty-five years I have concentrated on journalistic interviewing as a topic of inquiry, I’ve become increasingly concerned about truth. What is it? How do you define it? How do you apply it to journalism? Most important, is it enhanced or impeded by the variety of interview practices common to journalism? What inspired this change? Mostly the fact that the public today sees much more of interviewers in action than ever before. Ever more broadcast shows employ questions and answers. These include acerbic talk shows—shouting matches oftentimes. Or you can watch clever people use the Q-A dialogue to match wits just for laughs. Occasionally you can even watch serious forums for discussion of public events. In all such examples, the public has come to recognize that the nature of the question often dictates the nature of the answer. Jocular questions beget jocular answers. Belligerent questions beget defensive answers. How does truth fare in that arena? How does truth fare under the long-standing premise that the work of the journalist is essentially adversarial? The premise suggests that reporters and sources are enemies and that the journalistic interview represents a grand chess game of thrust and counterthrust, advance and retreat, win or lose. We may want to re-think those tactics if our journalistic objective is to tell the truth without fear or favor.

I like to think of the changes in the third edition as a slight course correction, like a ship captain steering three or four degrees left or right. The changes might seem slight at first, but some of the scenery will be different. Among the changes is an increasing concern for the ethics of the journalistic interview. It’s a concern fueled by increasingly prevalent examples, primarily on television, of such shady tactics as the hidden camera sting, the ambush interview, and the *screaming meemies*, the term I use to cover television’s more boisterous talk shows. The new emphasis on pursuit of truth drew further inspiration from a

research project I undertook in 1990. I talked with frequently interviewed news sources, particularly those who had risen from obscurity to moments of fame. One “reward” of fame—*true* celebrityhood—is that tabloid journals will talk about you without bothering to interview you. Consider the ethics of that. And what does it mean when an interviewer tells a source, “Just between you and me—whisper the answer to me,” when the whispered answer is heard by millions? Interviewing behavior represents what one journalism professor, Lee Wilkins of Missouri, calls the “great black hole of journalism ethics” because it has received so little attention. So two new chapters deal with the ethics of the interview. Chapter 20 deals specifically with ethics; Chapter 21 adds some thoughts about truth: how some show business celebrities and others see it, and how interviewers can come closer to it.

Another change embraces new technology. The computer network known as the Internet has opened journalistic horizons in spectacular ways. And this has brought another new chapter to this book, *Electronic Aids to Interviewing* (Chapter 15), depicting not only a dramatic example of an E-mail interview with a scientist at the South Pole, but dealing with a new journalistic beat—the Internet. Talk about new journalistic horizons—it’s a whole new world out there.

Another innovation of this third edition comes as a result of my extensive interviews with news media sources. Quite a few case histories depict how interviews feel from the other side of the fence—the source’s side. I’m indebted to many erstwhile celebrities for their insights and their descriptions of interview experiences. One of them is a young woman named Melissa Rathbun Coleman, the U.S. Army’s first female enlisted prisoner of war who enjoyed neither her celebrity status nor the media attention. “I would rather be back in the Iraqi prison than be in the prison the media have created for me,” she once remarked. She flatly turned down more than 100 requests for interviews including Phil Donahue’s and Maury Povich’s, but granted a few interviews, including one with me. Her experience dramatizes the best and the worst practices in journalistic information-gathering methods. Her story appears in Chapter 20.

In this new edition you’ll find updated examples and references to new research, including three new studies that focus directly on the journalistic interview. Some examples have not changed since the first edition, however, because responses from readers suggest that they contain useful lessons. We are still talking about achieving greater candor among sources by spilling your coffee. This has become a symbol that suggests one journalistic truth—show a little of your own human vulnerability if you expect sources to show theirs.

The original idea for this book came from the discovery that college journalism students have a dread of talking with people in what they perceive as the “formal” interview situation. That is why the stories they wrote for the magazine writing classes I taught then came out so dull and flat, representing the barren snowfields of abstraction rather than the warm enclaves of human experience. I hope this book, and classroom experiences based on this book,

will persuade you to remove the “formal” from the interviewing experience. Interviewing is just people talking, sometimes barefooted people. I hope the experiences will introduce you to the wonderful world of—well, to the wonderful world, period. Journalism is the last “cool” profession. It’s fun. It encourages you to meet new people—people you’d never meet under ordinary circumstances, from kings on their thrones to prisoners in the lockup, as Mark Twain suggested.

SOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Information in this book comes from a wide variety of sources—so wide that I’m awed by the prospect of winnowing into manageable chapters the mountains of material derived from people ranging from ministers to child killers in addition to reporters, editors, and social science researchers. Sources of any nonfiction book have remained standard despite the new technology. You consult primary (unpublished) or secondary (published) documents. You talk to people—the right people, the ones who can introduce you to new horizons. You ask lots of questions. You immerse yourself in relevant experiences. You observe. You experiment, informally or systematically, and you record the results of the experimentation. You then synthesize the diverse bits of information to form a mosaic that represents the thrust of your message.

Immersion? For more than forty years of professional journalism I have gathered information by asking questions. I’ve been interviewed a good deal myself, both by student interviewers and by the media.

Experiments? I have constantly experimented in interviewing classes at the University of Oregon, even to the point of encouraging students to “fail” (and obtain good grades in the process) by trying special approaches to interviews such as asking questions in a loud, arrogant manner to see if kicking information out of sources works better than the softer, more permissive approaches recommended in this text. (It doesn’t.) Some experiments failed miserably. Several times I tried to arrange with newspaper reporters to recall their innermost thoughts while conducting interviews—in much the same way reporters ask athletes, “What were you thinking as you approached the finish line en route to a new American record in the 5,000-meter race?” Well, reporters like to ask those questions, but I guess they don’t like to answer them.

Talking to people? I talked to journalists who suddenly found themselves thrust into the media spotlight, and almost without exception they became quite nervous about being interviewed. Some confessed feelings bordering on terror. “A request for an interview is a red alert for me,” says Jon Franklin, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner. Such reactions offer new meaning to the word “irony.”

Observation? Easy. Watching TV—every night on television brings the best and worst of interviewing techniques. Viewing videotapes of interviews. Listening to print reporters’ tape-recorded sessions or reading transcripts

where available. Watching news conferences. Even noting the way ordinary citizens ask questions of one another (often poorly, with wretchedly biased assumptions).

Documentation? The bibliography continues to grow as the result of continued reports of interviewing experiences and experiments. Most of the research comes from fields other than journalism/mass communication, namely social science fields such as psychology and anthropology. However, some new research relates directly to journalism.

Synthesis? The new perspectives have merely confirmed principles that have remained largely the same throughout these three editions. Good preparation for interviews, sympathetic nonjudgmental listening, and responding with interest and questions to what is being said—those in a nutshell remain the appropriate patterns.

Every author owes a debt of gratitude to others who have generously assisted in the preparation of his or her material. The list could reach thousands, especially if you consider the students and professional journalists who have participated in interviewing seminars and workshops over the past twenty-five years. I've conducted many—from New York to New Zealand—and have learned from every one.

And I've read widely. Books and documents consulted for this work are listed in the bibliography.

I calculate that I've interviewed about 300 news sources over a course of twenty-five years on the topic of relationships with the media. About 200 of them were interviewed since 1990 by phone with the financial assistance of the Freedom Forum, for which I offer thanks. Those whose comments I found directly useful in the content of this new edition are listed in the back of the book. Specifically, I'd also like to thank the following:

Michael Thoele, Oregon author, former newspaperman, extraordinary interviewer. Down through the years I've absorbed so many of the Thoele principles of interviewing that I confess I'm not always sure which are mine and which are borrowed from Mike.

Also Don Bishoff, columnist at *The Register-Guard* in Eugene, Oregon; Jack Hart of *The Oregonian*; and Melody Ward Leslie, of Eugene, journalist and quintessential interview respondent.

Jim Upshaw, Alan Stavitsky, and Karl Nestvold, all University of Oregon faculty colleagues who specialize in broadcast reporting and interviewing—they offered advice on broadcast interviewing methods. Tom Bivins, another faculty colleague—thanks for the illustrations. John Russial, also a faculty colleague, former newspaper copyeditor—editor to the end, he combed through several chapters of this book correcting typos and offering useful suggestions. Steve Ponder, my river rafting buddy—many thanks for surfing the Internet and finding choice items for textbook display.

Sharon Brock of Ohio State University—thanks for reading chapters and offering valuable suggestions. (We had lovely e-mail discussions on “What is truth?” a topic on which we never could agree.)

Lisa McCormack, former Washington newspaper writer—thanks for helping me meet lots of important people.

Thanks to the readers of previous editions—John L. Griffith, Del Brinkman, Al Hester, Kenneth S. Devol, David Rubin, and John F. Dillon.

Special thanks to Joe Opiela of Allyn & Bacon, an encouraging kind of editor—the best kind if you’re a writer.

Though many years have passed, I remain grateful to *The Honolulu Advertiser*, which generously took me on as a “special writer” during a sabbatical leave in 1974–75, an experience that led to the first edition of *Creative Interviewing* (1977).

My wife, Betty Jane—thanks for being my life-long pal.

And special thanks to our three children. In earlier years, I thanked them for trying to be quiet around the house while I wrote. Now they’ve grown up, have become productive citizens, and have developed splendid expertise in their respective fields. Barbara, the first-born, works for a business consulting firm called Strategic Decisions Group at Menlo Park, California. She served as consultant for Chapter 8, which deals with preparation for an important interview with a prominent if hypothetical business executive. Scott is a civil engineer in Eugene, Oregon, who runs a branch office of a California engineering firm called Biggs Cardoza. He provided insight into the nature of “tech-talk,” the kind reporters must learn if they are to cover public affairs. And Doug, the youngest, works for Microsoft Corporation near Seattle; he patiently led me through the twisted streets and backroads of the Internet and thus provided valuable assistance for Chapter 15, *Electronic Aids to Interviewing*. Also helping in that task were Doug’s computer pal, Eric (Cygnus) Swanson of San Francisco, and Mick Westrick, computer genius for the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Oregon.

Many others who contributed to this book are quoted by name in the succeeding pages. Let it be emphasized that the author takes full responsibility for any errors that may appear in this book.

Ken Metzler



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▶ 1

What's Your Interviewing Problem?

- Q. What are your views on the future of humanity?
- A. Why should I care? I have just swallowed a cyanide pill. I'll be dead in twenty seconds.
- Q. Uh-huh. Okay. . . . Now I'd like to ask about your hobbies—uh, do you engage in any kind of athletic activities?

You think you have interviewing problems? Consider the plight of a young woman named Nora Villagrán. She was about to begin her first assignment on her new job as entertainment writer for the *San Jose Mercury News*: to interview folk singer Joan Baez. She put on a white dress that morning, complete with hose and high heels, and she hurried to her rendezvous with her first celebrity.

A problem intervened. She fell down a flight of steps en route to the interview. She received only minor scratches and bruises, but she was bleeding through her white dress, and her stockings were torn. Now what? Change clothes and repair the damage? No time for that. Cancel the interview? She might not get another chance.

She decided to plunge ahead. She appeared at Joan Baez's doorstep in her disheveled condition. The singer, answering the door in her bare feet, glanced at Villagrán and remarked, "You've either been mugged or been in a car accident—which was it?"

"Neither," she replied. Her recounting of events led Baez to invite her to use the bathroom to repair the damage. Baez prepared an ice pack for the swollen ankle.

Then she suggested that Villagrán take off her shoes and her torn stockings. They wouldn't have an interview, she said. Rather they'd be, in Joan Baez's words, "just two barefooted women talking."

Just two barefooted women talking. Recounting the incident later, Villagrán concluded that it had been one of her best interviews, one that involved great candor on both sides. What seemed like a disaster turned out precisely the opposite. She saw a barefooted celebrity exhibiting an unusual degree of candor—not in spite of the reporter's disheveled condition but possibly because of it.

This is not unusual. Villagrán, having taken a course in interviewing, had already heard of similar incidents through the class discussions, and she says her decision to go on with the interview drew inspiration from the "spilled coffee" story.

We've been discussing that story for years in the interviewing classes I teach at the University of Oregon. It concerns another young woman, Ann Curry, who later became anchor-correspondent for NBC News in New York. For a class assignment, Curry interviewed a prominent businesswoman. The conversation, though, failed to develop the candor that Curry had hoped for. She suggested that they repair to a nearby coffee shop. Sitting side by side at a counter, they conversed more amiably. Then Curry—in a gesture to emphasize a point—spilled her coffee. Mortified, she thought she had blown the interview. But, to her astonishment, the woman began talking more candidly. It was almost as though Curry's social gaffe had allowed the woman to drop her own facade of dignity. Suddenly they could become just a couple of women talking.

The story illustrates something unpredictable and ironic about human nature. We can discern at least two truths from the incident: One suggests that if you want candor—you want human responses rather than defensive exaggerations and false facades—try revealing a little of yourself in the conversation. The other suggests that striving for technical perfection can intrude on candor. Better to have just two people talking. The relaxed informality allows the full dimension of human nature to emerge. The best journalists savor the unpredictability of human response, and they pass it along to their audiences when they can.

The spilled-coffee story inspired a tradition in those interview classes: Can you top that story? Several former students have reported similar incidents. In Florida, reporter Scott Martell showed up at a black-tie occasion wearing blue jeans, ratty tennis shoes, and a smudged T-shirt. He'd dressed for a ride on a fishing boat in pursuit of a story, but stormy weather forced a cancellation. The paper reassigned him to a furniture store opening. Nobody

told him it was a formal occasion. Yet he looks back on it as one of his best interviews. He still wonders why.

Such stories suggest that a higher level of candor emerges in the context of “two barefooted women talking” than from the formal interview. The interviews we see on television have become so strained that an authority on oral history interviewing claimed that he’d learned quite a bit about interviewing by watching “Meet the Press.” He studied the reporters’ questioning techniques, he said, and then he did just the opposite.

You do indeed sometimes find reporters aloof and hostile—maybe that’s how they believe they must act with celebrities and high-level government officials. But most people respond most candidly to an amiable and friendly approach. Reporters often ask questions in an adversarial manner, yet research studies on questioning techniques suggest that the nonjudgmental approach works best to enhance rapport and candor. It shows that you have come not to judge, not to argue, not to destroy, but to listen, to ascertain the facts, to learn. When people discover that you have come not as judge and jury but as a student of human affairs, they become more candid.

Under such circumstances, the professional interviewer should be able to talk with practically anybody about practically anything, to paraphrase the title of a book by TV interviewer Barbara Walters. Name the most despicable of human beings—a rapist or a child molester, perhaps—and ask yourself: Could you interview this person without displaying your contempt? To the extent that you can answer “yes,” consider yourself a professional journalistic interviewer. Professionalism requires not that you win arguments or display moral superiority but that you learn something from the encounter that you can share with an unseen audience.

Given what seems to be a reasonably valid truth from the episodes described here, it seems remarkable that so many young journalists claim to have problems in interviewing. “I just hope that my source will do all the talking,” said one student, “so that I won’t have to ask any questions.”

In the twenty-five years I have taught classes in interviewing, the technology has changed but the problems have not. Interviewers who take their notes on tiny laptop computers still profess inability to cope with a taciturn or garrulous interviewee (henceforth called “respondent” in this text). How do you avoid that awkward silence when you can’t think of a question to follow an unexpected answer? Do you just go to your next question on the list? That could lead to non sequiturs almost as silly as the one illustrated at the head of this chapter.

Some 1,500 students attending interviewing classes at the University of Oregon over the years have filled out questionnaires identifying their most serious interviewing problems. The exercise defines two sets of problems, actually: the ones that novice interviewers know about and the ones they don’t.

THE OBVIOUS PROBLEMS

First consider the problems that young journalists identify in their responses to the classroom surveys.

Lack of Self-Confidence. Students have many colorful ways of expressing it. “Basically I am a chicken,” said a woman. “I wish I could find a way to avoid breaking out in a cold sweat during an interview,” said a man. By whatever label, it remains the number one problem of novice interviewers. A tally of comments over the years reveals that almost a third of the women and 20 percent of the men confess to having some form of the problem. “Most people are, I think, inherently uncomfortable in an interview situation,” suggests one student. “Although they are normally quite capable of carrying on a pleasant conversation with others, when it comes to what they consider a *formal* interview, they tend to become tense and unnatural.”

This appears to be a temporary problem. Most students find that the social skills that lead to pleasant conversation also serve in interviews. You’d be astounded to learn how many famous interviewers confess to shyness—Barbara Walters, Phil Donahue, and Gay Talese, to name a few. (Huber and Diggin 1991. For full citations, see listing by author in the bibliography.)

Getting Complete Information. “I had a wonderful conversation with my source,” complained one student reporter, “but when I sat down to write a story, I realized I had nothing new or interesting to write about.” You’ll find no easy solution to this one. But as you gain experience you will learn that the following elements help—preparation for interviews, careful listening, and, most important, the ability to recognize something “new and different” when it whizzes past you in conversation.

Knowing What Questions to Ask Next. A student explained: “Let’s say I ask a question, and the answer I get is something totally unexpected—I never know what to say next.” How about something like this? “What a wonderful answer! Please tell me more!”

Taking Notes. Journalistic note-taking differs from notes you take in the classroom. You must identify and record the major points. That’s not easy during informal conversations in which people just talk rather than organizing their thoughts into formal lectures. Second, you must record evidence—colorful quotations, illustrative anecdotes, facts, figures—all necessary to support the points. It’s hard to listen, make notes, and keep the conversation going at the same time. The conscious human mind doesn’t work on three tracks; it works on only one. The solutions, never easy, range from learning shorthand (or developing your own shorthand) to using recording devices or some combination of taping and note-taking. More about this in Chapter 12.