

Many writers dread the moment they have to interview a resource for their article or book. If you consider it to be nothing more than a discussion between two people with the object of learning from the other, it becomes no more difficult or daunting than the conversations you have with acquaintances every day.

The Interview – It’s Really a Piece of Cake

by Charles Jacobs

Your research is almost done. Just the dreaded interviews with two experts remain before you start writing your article or book. Like so many other writers, you quiver at the thought of interviewing. I’m not really sure why, but that fear of a one-on-one exchange intimidates almost all novice writers and many who are far more experienced.

Even some of the folks who are part of my retire-write programs are intimidated despite the fact that they have conducted interviews time and again during their working years. There seems to be some mystery about talking with an alleged expert that causes so many writers to lose their confidence.

Actually, the interview is no more than a discussion between two people, the kind you have every day at work, socializing at a cocktail party or just leaning over the fence and chatting with your neighbor.

Think of your interview in terms of a social exchange, a relaxed give and take conversation. You’re seeking some information that the other party has, so it’s a matter of asking the right questions and placing them in a context that’s comfortable and easy for the person you are interviewing.

Preparation Is Key

As foolish as it sounds, far too many inexperienced authors stumble because they haven’t taken the time to analyze exactly what it is they are seeking from the expert. The success or failure of an interview really depends upon understanding that.

The next step is to create a list of questions that address every aspect of the subject. The list has a double purpose. It is the tool to ferret out all of the information you need and to keep the interview on track.

As you formulate your list, avoid questions that elicit a simple yes or no response. All of your questions should be “open.” They should require the expert to respond with broad answers. For example, if you ask, “Do you enjoy watching a baseball game?” the answer will be a simple yes or no. But if you ask, “What is it about watching a ballgame that fascinates you?” the answer may go on for several minutes.

Contacting Your Expert

When you invite an expert to be interviewed, you are complimenting him/her. You're saying in essence "I think you are important and knowledgeable, and I want to learn from you." What expert wouldn't be flattered by that? Furthermore, you are offering your expert exposure. So don't think of your request as a one-sided arrangement. Both you and your expert will benefit from it.

The purpose of your first contact is to schedule a time to meet. Many of you have done that as part of your job. Those of you who have reached retirement certainly have experience at this. Try and arrange for at least an hour together. I much prefer personal one-on-one sessions to interviewing by telephone. But of course, the expert may be located too far away to make that possible.

Explain what it is that you are writing, and try to give a very brief but effective picture of your own qualifications to write this so your expert realizes he/she is dealing with a professional, not some unskilled amateur.

If you haven't been able to develop quality contacts from your research or your past experience, finding them is quite easy. Most colleges and universities maintain lists of experts who are available in a wide variety of topics. Contact the public relations department to help you set up interviews.

Perhaps you want an expert who is more hands-on than an academician. Head to the local library's reference room where you will find directories like the *Encyclopedia of Associations*. It lists 135,000 organizations dealing with many different topics. The organizations will be happy to direct you to experts in their field. The *Yearbook of Experts* produced by Broadcast Interview Source (www.expertclick.com) is another outstanding source.

Face to Face

Your goal in the opening moments of the interview is to set your expert at ease. The best way to do this is to learn as much as possible about the person. You might commend him/her for some unique achievement. At the very least, discuss some of the facts you have learned about your expert's accomplishments and/or interests.

Don't hesitate to take out the list of questions you have prepared. Your guru will be pleased to see you have approached this interview carefully and will not waste his/her time. Ask whether he/she has any objection to taping the interview. Explain that it is a precaution to ensure you don't misquote in any way.

The recorder serves you in several ways. It is an unassailable record of what was said, should your expert ever complain about your article after publication. It also allows you to concentrate on what the interviewee is saying by eliminating the distraction of taking word-by-word notes. However, I urge you to back up the recorder with some general notes on the most important statements of the interview just in case you later discover a malfunction in the recorder. That does occasionally happen.

While the original sequence of questions on your list undoubtedly makes a great deal of sense, it is almost inevitable that you will be forced to readjust during the interview as a result of the answers you receive and the probability that your expert will discuss issues you never considered.

When all of your questions have been answered, ask your expert whether he/she wishes to add something that has not yet been covered. That might open up a related area or perhaps an angle that you have not considered.

Be sure to jot down a reminder of any outstanding features of the expert's appearance and dress. Take a few notes on the setting in which the interview is being conducted. Injecting these into your article will give the reader a greater sense of being present and a better picture of your expert.

As you continue to interview for your writing, you will soon shed any reluctance and come to enjoy this chance to meet fascinating people and expand your knowledge. You'll also discover that interviewing can be lots of fun.