

Las Vegas Quill Keepers Lesson 3: Interviewing Skills

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This week, we lost television's Peter Jennings, John Johnson from Ebony Magazine, and Judith Rossner, who wrote Looking For Mr. Goodbar.

These events have put a scar deep in the hearts of readers everywhere. As a tribute to these journalists and writers, this week's lesson is on Interviewing Techniques. My hope is that you will use some of these tips as a guide to improving your own research, writing, and storytelling skills.

Every writer at one point or another is going to have to interview someone or at least, be interviewed. Those with poor skills have the worst written works. When you are asking someone questions you are reaching into that person, pulling out the essence of who they are, and translating this information to let others understand who this person is, and what she's accomplished. Very often, materials derived from these one on one sessions gets muddy, and unclear.

First, you should select subjects carefully. In effect, you'll need to interview YOURSELF to get an idea of who can help you tell your story. We'll use Jane Doe, author of four books on Hair Care. Her editor asked her to write an article about facial care, which may be selected for a book. Jane has never done an article of this nature, and has to decide what her angle is. A good angle will sell words better than a good story sometimes.

Jane takes a notepad, and begins to brainstorm by word association. She fills a sheet of paper with every word that reminds her of the faces she's seen with perfect skin. What can she do with these words? She can

connect similar themes based on her word choices. She finally comes up with six or seven sentences she feels will be strong topics of discussion. After thinking about it for a bit, she decides to go with "Reading age on a woman's face" as a topic.

With a strong slant, and topic in hand, she can now develop a list of potential subjects to interview. Jane realizes that she has a strong cosmetology background, but little if any medical knowledge. It is apparent with this topic, she will need to have well educated dermatologists discuss these issues, and she wants to research to read other articles on similar topics.

During her two or three days of research, she's noted the same five doctors have been interviewed, but none of them seemed very forthcoming with information other than "wear sunscreen". Jane sees that two of these doctors have websites, and one who does not lives nearby. She selected the local doctor first, knowing she could always reach out to another one if needed. She keeps it in the back of her mind that when writing articles, more than one source of information is always preferred.

Jane calls the doctor's office, and finds that he is about to speak at a conference regarding sun spots, and would enjoy chatting about this topic prior to his event. He thinks he can learn about questions he may not cover in his speech, and she knows she can learn about skin care in a way that books cannot show her. They agree to meet the following week, which gives Jane VERY little time to develop questions.

Every question can be asked in a minimum of three ways. "How are you?" "Are you feeling all right?" "Have you been feeling better?" These three questions are asking about someone's health, but entirely different

answers are available. The trick in a solid interview is to ask the key questions in at least three different ways to be sure you have a solid response, well-rounded, and one that may lead to more in depth questions.

Ms. Doe prepares her interview in a similar manner as she did in preparing her topic. She writes her topic sentence on top of a piece of paper. She writes down key points that she's discovered during her research. An unprepared interviewer cannot tell a story well. I say this again, UNPREPARED INTERVIEWERS CANNOT TELL A STORY WELL. This iteration should be a mantra for some. Perhaps you remember the teen magazines you read? They limit questions per teen idol, and any of us can recite them off the top of our heads. (Age? dating? hobbies? music? message for fans? future projects?) This method is clinical and uninteresting. Unfortunately, we've seen this carry on in hundreds of articles, books, and documentary films.

Knowing that UNPREPARED INTERVIEWERS CANNOT TELL A STORY WELL, Jane writes down the key questions that were answered by the articles and books she researched. Jane then becomes a member of her audience. This technique can not only get a good writer into thinking of smarter, richer questions, but can help develop a better way to discuss things with her audience. On a second sheet of paper, she begins to write down anything she feels pertains directly to herself that could be answered by this doctor.

She starts with, "Does every spot I have on my face mean I have permanent damage?" and moves on to "How can I tell I have a specific skin type?" After a few hours, she has written three or four pages of similar questions. Using her own ability to self edit, she sets aside the project for a few hours so she can return to it later with a clearer mind's

eye. When she returns, she lines out repetitive queries. She also lines out questions that she's already picked up from the research.

Now that she has several pages of questions, she uses this as a starting point for one more round of research. A good interviewer MUST know her topic at least at a layman's level. She should be able to understand the language, colloquialisms, and jargon. Whatever you choose to call it, she should be prepared to speak in the terms her subject will understand, and translate in a way for her audience to comprehend. In this way, she neither comes across didactic, nor condescending.

Jane has uncovered some interesting facts, and some techniques she's never seen before. She's read about European methods of skin care, and found a specific cream that is unavailable in the US. While answering her research questions, she finds more and more anecdotal information, which seems to involve six or seven of the points she has developed. This becomes the starting point of her interview questions.

Jane writes up fifteen questions. An interview that's scheduled for an hour should provide at least three minutes per response for each question. The subject may come up with more questions. Many interviews fail simply because the INTERVIEWER ISN'T LISTENING. During Jane's chat with the doctor, he mentions he almost didn't graduate because he argued with a professor at Tufts about the use of collagen. This is a very interesting point, since collagen directly relates to her topic. he offers information about by his theory is valid, and what has been proven since his graduation in support.

A big mistake is preparing the question as the subject is speaking. Watch a simple news conference for glaring examples. Not only does the interviewer get caught up in asking what has already been answered, but

key points made should help develop additional information. Have you been to a job interview, and were asked where you saw yourself in five years? This question may be important, but it's the one that HR professionals listen to the least. I tested this myself a few years ago. When asked, I responded, "I'd like to produce a Charles Manson movie, and maybe join the black panthers." The HR rep responded by asking her next question.

Develop your writing as if you were reliving the interview experience. Use active participation by selecting words that involve the reader. Describe how you feel about these responses, and teach the reader. After the interview, it's important to summarize the experience in a warm way. Watch any of the TV news magazines for an example of a warm summary. They start by telling you questions they wanted answered, then follow with an introduction to the subjects. They warm the subject up by inviting their viewers to be a part of the process of discovery. This keeps the viewer involved, interested, concerned, angry, happy, and most importantly, watching. The invitation is there, as warm as a grandmother's kitchen after baking an apple pie.

When you are the subject, you should also develop questions. In the years I spent doing stand-up, I've been interviewed no less than four dozen times. Two interviews come to mind as being the least professional. A national news reporter of some repute, and a regular on the AP circuit, requested to talk to me about being in the armed services while performing. I was impressed she had done her homework, and gladly set up the appointment.

I was only out of the Navy for about six months at the time, and was still recovering from the experience. The woman came to my home with four questions in hand. Four. She asked one about comedy, one about the

service, one about being a woman in entertainment, and one about my age. That was it. She stayed for an hour and a half only because I had taken the time to show her video materials, promo materials, boot camp shots, and an award letter from my command about doing work on a newsletter. I had to tell her who I was, and why she was interviewing me. It was deeply frustrating. She left with an autographed photo, and I saw the story in two markets because it simply read as if she was a fan, and not a storyteller.

The second instance was for radio. A lot of the time, you are asked to come in to fill air time. I listened to the show a few times, and agreed to come by, and do the interview. As one DJ read the sports page, the other surfed the net looking up dirty jokes to tell on air. It was horrible. I carried the entire show, answered calls, and at one point, did the weather, but to this day, I doubt they even remember me being there. The interviewers weren't prepared, and didn't care about me as a subject. Their producer suggested it, since I sold out a club three times that month.

To summarize the Jane Doe story: Find your topic and embrace it
Research information not only for facts but for anecdotes UNPREPARED
INTERVIEWERS ARE NOT GOOD STORYTELLERS BE your audience,
and understand their needs LISTEN LISTEN LISTEN Construct the
interview essay using inviting techniques

Here are some useful sites that explain interview processes:

<http://www.howtointerview.com/> A career site, but great tips

<http://www.prmadeeasy.com/freeforall/ivtips.asp> Reputation News

<http://www.freep.com/jobspage/toolkit/interview.htm> Basic Interviewing Tips

<http://communication.sbs.ohio-state.edu/sense-making/zenez/zenezhuescadervin96\\ \ aejmc.html> Rethinking the journalist interview

<http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/intrview.htm> Guidelines for Managers to Interviewing

- 30 -