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## Interviewing Insights: How to Get Anyone to Tell You Anything!

I’ve always been insatiably curious. As a kid, I wore my parents and teachers out with questions. No wonder I ended up in journalism! I still remember the thrill of my first student press pass: that tiny piece of paper was a license to go almost anywhere and ask almost anybody almost anything!

Lucky for me that interviewing came naturally to me, because it’s a crucial skill for journalists. Good reporting often depends on the cooperation of total strangers, many of whom are suspicious of your motives. You’ve got to develop solid interviewing skills.

You can use many of the same methods to gather priceless stories from your family and close friends. Here are the top interviewing skills that help me the most!

**1. Start with a comfortable environment.** Choose a time and place free from noise and distractions. Don’t try to open a deep conversation 10 minutes before Christmas dinner or in the midst of screaming kids and cheering TV football fans.

**2. Win their trust.** The secret here is making them feel safe. Everyone wants to be understood and appreciated, to know that someone else cares how they feel and what they’re really about. If you can genuinely extend the gifts of presence and empathy to the people you interview, they’re likely to tell you just about anything in return.

**3. Make them feel important.** Position them as the expert in the conversation. Let them know how much you admire and respect them. Ask for their wisdom and advice.

**4. Show genuine interest.** Give them your undivided attention. Make eye contact. Comment to let them know you’re with them, but don’t interrupt. Ask lots of questions.

**5. Focus and prioritize your questions.** Always keep your audience in mind. If you’re capturing the family patriarch’s story, what will future generations want to know?

**6. Do your homework.** The more you know in advance, the better the interview. For instance, what was going on in history during the times you want to discuss?

**7. Ask open-ended questions.** Such as: Tell me about . . . How did you feel about . . . Can you remember a time when . . . Why? How so?

**8. Work up to sensitive questions:** Make sure they’re feeling comfortable and the conversation is rolling, then lead into it. Keep your voice soft, uncolored by judgment.

**9. The pregnant pause.** When you get into emotional areas, people may need a few moments to compose themselves. Stop talking and give them that time. Sometimes also, a blustery person may get into TMI, which could be your best info.

**10. How to redirect a conversation.** Don’t be afraid to re-ask an unanswered question or ask for clarification. Some ways to do this:

* “I want to be sure I understand. Do you mean …?
* “I’d like to go back for a moment.”
* “So what I hear you saying is … Is that right?”
* “I’m sorry, could you explain what you mean by …?
* “Can you give me an example?”

**11. Humor and overshoot:** A little self-deprecating humor can help soften tough questions. So can hyperbole, as in “So what are you in for, murder?”

**12. How to capture your interview.** However they feel most comfortable, whether audio or video. It’s best if you don’t take notes so you can better focus on them. Best practice includes asking permission. Keep it rolling even after you “finish.”

## Great questions lead to great answers! Here are a few of my favorites.

Most influential people in your life?

Major events, decisions or tipping points?

Three problems you’d most like to solve?

Best/worst days of your life?

Favorite toys, games, pets as a kid?

Something that got you into trouble?

Favorite school or college memories?

Anything you wish you’d done differently?

Greatest success/disappointment?

What’s your best advice?

Anything else you’d like to talk about?