

Am Gross
file - Sharp
interviews

Sharpening your INTERVIEWING SKILLS

By

MARILYNN SEXTON

Submitted to National Scholastic Press Association

Nothing makes a story come alive more than someone telling, in his or her own words, what he or she thinks and does. And nothing sells yearbooks and newspapers better than having as many names as possible in print.

But it isn't easy getting those direct, "quotable" quotes that mean more names in publications. Too often the student reporter simply asks the first person in the hallway, "Can you give me a quote on (fill in the blank!)" Any topic will do. The reporter might as well have put a nickel in the quote machine that spits out generic statements for the reporter's use.

Getting quotable quotes takes time, research and a good ear. In short, it takes good interviewing skills.

Like any other skill, interviewing gets easier with practice. But interviewing involves more than just making an appointment and talking to a student or teacher about the baseball season or the school play. There is another, more important step that has to come first. The reporter must first decide who is the best person to interview.

Who will add life to the story? If the story concerns a school play, the obvious person to interview is the director. But the reporter also must play to talk to the "little" people: the prop and lighting crews, the makeup people and even members of the audience.

Once the reporter has decided whom to interview, he must begin to

research both the subject and the interviewee. In the example of the school play, the reporter should learn as much about the play as possible, perhaps even read it. He should look at last year's stories to see how this place compares to that of last year. Perhaps last year's play was a comedy, but this year's is a drama. Why the change? The reporter must attend tryouts to see how the director works and how actors are selected. His job is to learn as much as possible about the director or any actor who has done such a thorough job.

The second step to interviewing is thinking of questions to ask later. The questions should be open-ended and carefully worded to encourage the interviewee to express his or her opinions. They also should be designed to elicit in-depth answers. Avoid yes or no questions because that's what the interviewee will answer—"yes" or "no"—leaving the reporter with an *unquotable* quote.

In general avoid asking for information you already know. Your questions should demonstrate that you've done your homework and really do care about the interview.

The third step is to make an appointment. This often is the hardest part for student reporters, not only because it is their first confrontation with the interviewee, but it also may be their first confrontation with a teacher. Reporters who approach such interviews quaking in their shoes are surprised to find that teachers are usually more cooperative—if the

students remember a few guidelines.

1. Don't approach a teacher during class. Nothing upsets a teacher more than to be interviewed in mid-lecture. The best time to approach the teacher is during his or her planning period.
2. Practice common courtesy by introducing yourself clearly, stating your purpose for requesting the interview and asking what time would be most convenient for the teacher to be interviewed. Be sure to specify the amount of time you will need and stick to that limit.
3. Watch your word choices. "Interview" is a strong word and scare off even the toughest teacher. It's much more soothing for a teacher to hear that a reporter wants to "talk" to him or her.
4. Keep in mind that most teachers love the opportunity to talk about the team, club, or event that they sponsor. You have just given the teacher a great compliment by showing an interest in his or her work.

Now that the appointment is set, the reporter is ready to prepare for the actual interview. It's time to go back and polish those questions jotted down while doing research. Start with a few general questions, move on to the probing ones, and save the tough ones for last. Ask who, what, when, where and why questions and keep them serious. Silly questions change the tone of the interview. "What kind of a tree would you be?" may work for Barbara Walters in a celebrity interview, but not for the student interviewing the high school football coach.

INTERVIEWING SKILLS, Continued, Page 2

Remember that the prepared list of questions is only a safety net. They will get the interview going, but the reporter should be ready to take a different approach with new questions if the interviewee gives new information or takes the interview in a different, but pertinent, direction.

On the day of the interview, it's a good idea to send a reminder to the interviewee. People can be forgetful, and a reminder helps avoid the hassles that occur when an interviewee doesn't show. Stopping by before school to say, "I'm looking forward to talking with you today" or sending a note with a similar message are two good approaches.

Of course, the reporter should always arrive on time. One journalist recommends arriving five minutes early to avoid the appearance of being rushed and to allow time to get mentally organized. More than five minutes tends to create nervousness on the reporter's part.

Taking a conversational tone, the reporter should begin the interview with an icebreaker. Maybe the weather is bad that day. Maybe there is an interesting poster on the wall or a trophy on the desk. The interviewee needs time to size up the reporter before the interview begins. Chitchat puts the interviewee at ease and makes the reporter more than "just another journalist."

Even though it seems obvious, during the interview the reporter *must* take notes. That means taking along a notebook and several good pens. Some journalists like to use tape recorders, but most still rely on the good old pencil-and-paper method. People being interviewed expect the reporter to take notes; in fact, it's reassuring to know that the reporter is trying to record the material accurately. Tape recorders get the information accurately, of course, but they also can malfunction. The tape can be defective, the batteries can die, and the machine can make distracting noises. And it can be inhibiting. Pencil and paper are less intrusive. Besides, taking notes is the prelude to actually writing a story. Letting a machine do that work reduces the writer's creativity from the start.

True, it's difficult to listen, ask questions and write all at once, but with practice it can be done. Asking the

interviewee to pause can give the reporter a few extra seconds. It's also true that not everything a person says is worth writing down. The reporter should listen for the good quotes and write these down but soon the reporter develops his own brand of shorthand.

Above all, the reporter must LISTEN. And when a reporter is talking, he isn't listening. One adviser, when training her staff in interviewing techniques, has the class interview her. She deliberately responds with answers designed to lead the interview in a new direction—and to test if the students are listening. If they are, they ask follow-up questions pertaining to the new topic. If they aren't they go back to their prepared questions, and the adviser stops to point out what they missed. In a real interview, though, the interviewee will seldom stop the reporter and point out what was missed. That's the reporter's job; to listen and follow up.

While the reporter is doing all this listening and note taking, he also should notice the surroundings, the person's mannerisms and even voice inflection. A sarcastic tone can change the entire meaning of a comment, and much can be added

to a story when a description of the person's office or appearance is included.

To end the interview the reporter should always ask permission to check back with any further questions, then thank the interviewee and make it a point to keep in touch. This may involve sending a thank you note or simply saying hello in the hallway, but either keeps the door open for further interviews.

Back in the journalism room, the reporter should transcribe his notes immediately. Abbreviations need to be deciphered and notes organized. Spellings should be double-checked and quotes verified. Then it is time to begin writing the story.

If the student reporter follows these steps, the good quotes will come. The interviewee and reporter will build a rapport that will eliminate all those trips to the "quote machine."

