

Communication 4312 -- Interviewing

To be a good interviewer you must be curious. You have to want to know everything you can about a person. This curiosity has to be sincere. You can't make it up. Most of us have this curiosity, but often we don't know how to express it. For whatever reason, we don't show it. In interviewing, you must demonstrate that interest.

As with other aspects of the craft, practice helps. You can practice every day in casual conversations and more formal settings. When you meet someone you can in effect do a mini interview with her or him. In this way you can find out what works and what doesn't work.

The purpose of the interview is to collect information for a story you are writing. You have to have some feel at the start as to how you think the interview – and the resulting story – will go. Therefore, you must find an area that you can develop and hope that a story comes out of that.

Almost always the story comes from what a person does and what she or he has to say about that. That is, the story will be in the context of who the person is and what they do or have done. Keep asking yourself, what's the story about?

In that regard, preparation is extremely important. You should find out as much as you can about the person in advance. If you have to ask specific questions about the background, find a best place to do that. Sometimes you can take care of those questions at the beginning. Remember, some of a person's background can be important in defining who they are. But not everything in a person's background has a direct relationship to the story you are doing.

The opening question can be extremely important. Ask something that will result in more than a simple answer. Keep the interview going in a straight line. Don't wander. Avoid dead-end questions. Whatever you ask, be prepared to follow that up. And to follow that up, and so on.

Organize the interview. Keep like questions together. Don't jump around. Watch people who interview. Keep your questions simple and to the point. Don't preface a question with unnecessary comments. On the other hand, if you can make the interview as natural as a conversation, that's great and exactly what you want to do.

■ David McHam