

THE INTERVIEW

listen, silence is golden

RECORDING INTERVIEWS

An audio interview is a controlled situation, much like an environmental portrait. When you do an interview, it's your responsibility to make the person talking as easy to understand and sound as true-to-life as possible.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION!

Choose a quiet location. Find a spot with soft surfaces that absorb sound. Sit on a couch rather than a kitchen chair. Cover a table with a blanket. Close the curtains. Turn off the computer. Unplug the fridge. Just remember to plug it all back in before you leave.

What you're trying to do is create a sound booth wherever you are for the interview. This process is extremely important to the final product and is similar to shooting an image against a clean background as opposed to a busy one.

A car with closed windows is a great place to do an interview. Avoid places with lots of echoes like gymnasiums or hallways. If you have to interview someone in a space with bad acoustics, you can compensate somewhat by placing the microphone very close to the person's mouth. This will reduce the ambient audio and use their tone as the primary level.

For a dynamic microphone, two inches works great.

For a condenser shotgun microphone, you can get away with a foot or so.

Dynamic microphones are non-powered, more durable, cheaper and usually larger than condenser microphones. Condenser microphones require power, have greater dynamic range, and are more sensitive and more fragile than dynamic microphones.

The farther away the microphone is from the speaker's mouth, the more presence the ambient sound will have in the recording, and the less bass and richness will be made it from their mouth to the recording media. Microphone position is akin to composition.

AVOID CONSISTENT AMBIENT BACKGROUND SOUND

You will have a very difficult time editing if you conduct an interview with consistent background sound such as music playing on the radio. It's almost always better to find a quiet space with good acoustics and gather the ambient you will need before or after the interview.

Again, you're in charge in an interview situation. Ask people to turn off the com-

INTERVIEW QUICK TIPS

- ♦ Mic close!
- ♦ Quiet place!
- ♦ Record room tone!
- ♦ Use open ended questions: "Describe for me..." "Give me a sense of what it was like..."
- ♦ Avoid Yes and No questions!
- ♦ Don't talk over their answers. Don't umm and ahhh. Use body language and eye contact.
- ♦ BE A WEIRDO... Don't be afraid of silence. Let them fill the silence. You may be amazed with what they will say.
- ♦ Stack your questions. Ask two questions at once.
- ♦ Don't be afraid to reask a question. They may answer in a more interesting/usuable way.
- ♦ Ask about memories. Ask them to remember how it felt. Get them in the "memory space."
- ♦ THINK during the interview. Am I getting full and clear sentences? What is the focus of the story?
- ♦ Always ask at the end: "Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?"

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puter, even unplug the refrigerator. These sounds always come out much louder in the recording than they seemed while you were making the recording.

A smart tip shared by Brian Kaufmann, a student at Brooks Institute, about gathering audio in a scenario where there is ambient sound in your environment that cannot be quelled:

“Most audio equipment is usually carried in a pelican case that can be used as a sound booth. The inside of the case is covered in sound absorbent foam, so I will sometimes prop the lid open and set the microphone up inside the case facing outward. By having your subject speak into the microphone while this foam surrounds it, much of the ambient noise will be cancelled out. If I don’t have a pelican case around I use a cloth bag or place any kind of soft material (cushions, clothes, etc.) around the parts of the microphone that aren’t directly in front of my subject.”

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION! PART 2

Equally important, ambient sounds can make an okay interview really sing. If, for example, you were interviewing an Italian Chef, think how cool it would be to hear the ambient noises of a kitchen in a busy Italian restaurant in the background! (Bear in mind, though, that the background can overpower your speaker, or that someone might drop a pot just as the Chef is explaining his or her inspiration to you.)

You can always do the interview in a quiet place, record the kitchen sounds separately, and then mix the two together, thereby giving you much more control over the relationship between the two sounds. Always think about (listen to) your surroundings and how you can best tell the story.

HOW TO ENGAGE YOUR SUBJECT DURING AN INTERVIEW

You know how physically and mentally exhausted you feel at the end of a good shoot when you’ve really made some good, meaningful pictures? You should feel the same way at the end of a good interview. Getting a good interview takes energy.

You have to be thinking all the time, thinking about where the interview is going, what to ask next, but not at the expense of listening to what the person is really saying. Really look at a person when they talk to you. If you truly engage them with your eyes, it will help them ignore their surroundings and the microphone, and get into the space they need to be in to speak honestly with you.

GET YOUR SUBJECT TO QUALIFY THEIR OWN STATEMENTS

Suppose you’re interviewing the paperboy. You ask, “How long have you been a paperboy?” He says, “Two years.” “Two Years” is what you have on tape. What are you going to do with that statement? It can’t stand alone because there’s no context to the response unless you include the question.

Instead, ask, “How long have you been a paperboy, and what’s your favorite part of the job?” By having to qualify the order of his answer, “I’ve been a paperboy for two years and I love throwing the paper at cats.” Now you’ve got something you can use.

HOW TO GET WHAT YOU NEED IN AN INTERVIEW SITUATION

Ask open-ended questions. A good way to start any interview is to say, “Tell me about...” I like to ask questions that encourage people to remember things in a sensory way, “What did it sound like when...”, “How did it feel when...”, “What did it smell like....”

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Some people tend to go off in a direction you didn't think your interview would go. If you have the time, let them go. You will often get your best material from these situations. If you don't have the time, don't be afraid to politely step in and steer them back to the subject at hand. Sometimes you just have to ask the question again.

At the end of every interview always ask, "Is there anything I should have asked but didn't?" Sometimes, people won't volunteer things, even if they feel strongly about them. When they realize that this is their last chance, they will often divulge something that they've been thinking about throughout the interview, waiting for you to ask. This "last" question also allows them to end the interview, rather than you.

Often, people won't really open up to you until what they think of as the "formal interview" is over. It's only then that they open up the floodgates of information. If you can, that's the time to get the microphone back out and keep rolling.

Some people don't want to open up, don't want to let you in. You need to gain people's trust. Again, give a little of yourself if you expect them to give back. Be honest with people. Empathize with people.

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

When someone finishes answering a question, if you feel they might have more to say, simply remain quiet. Most people aren't comfortable with silence in a conversation, and they will say something to fill it.

NBC News Correspondent Bob Dotson spoke at the NPPA Video Workshop in Norman, OK and talked about the art of asking questions:

"Silence makes most of us uncomfortable. Use that fact to help you get a better sound bite more quickly. People nearly always answer questions in three parts. First they tell you what they think you have asked. Then, they explain in more detail. If you don't jump right in with another question, if you let the silence between you build, they figure you don't yet understand and they make an extra effort to explain their thoughts more concisely. Often they make their point more passionately and precisely the third time."

DON'T LET YOUR EQUIPMENT GET IN THE WAY OF GETTING A GOOD INTERVIEW

If you're not comfortable with your equipment, those you interview won't be either. Practice operating the equipment. Practice connecting and disconnecting the microphone. Learn which buttons are which by feel. You should be able to operate your recording device in total darkness.

You also need to trust your equipment. Nothing is more distracting and unsettling to someone than a journalist who constantly checks his or her gear to make sure it's working properly. By doing so, you simply remind people that they're being recorded, and you move farther away from getting something truly personal and honest.

Right before you begin the interview, try briefly touching the microphone to your cheek. This will subtly show your subject that they don't have to be afraid of it.

Don't pay any attention to the microphone that you're holding two inches from someone's lips. Look them in the eyes, not the mouth. This will tell them that the microphone is normal, that it shouldn't bother them that you are connecting with what they are saying. Listen to what they have to say. Soon, they will forget about the microphone, and they will relax enough to give you a good interview.

This ability to look the subject in the eyes is one of the reasons I prefer an audio interview over a video interview in which I have to ask questions while pointing a camera at the subject. Don't set the recording gear on a table between you and the interviewee. This only seems to put a distance between you. Set it off to the side.

DON'T RUIN YOUR INTERVIEW WITH UH-HUHS AND MMM HMMMS

When someone speaks to us, we often let them know we're listening by saying, "Uh huh", or "mmm hmmm." Don't do it. Let them talk. You will be very disappointed when you go to edit the audio and you hear yourself in the middle of some of their words. Simple nods and smiles are enough to let most people know you're listening.

Remember that body language is said to be the primary form of communication in an interview. Lean forward to show interest. Engage them eye-to-eye. Show physical interest with your body language and get wrapped up in what they are saying to you.

WEAR HEADPHONES. YES, WEAR HEADPHONES. AND BY THE WAY, WEAR HEADPHONES!

Not only are you expecting someone to talk into a microphone, you're doing it while wearing headphones at the same time. Headphones are the only way to truly monitor what the microphone is picking up. If you don't wear headphones, you really don't know what sound you're getting, or if your equipment is even working.

If you accept it as normal, so will those around you. Not wearing your headphones is akin to shooting an image without looking through the viewfinder. We've all shot from the hip now and then, but would you do an environmental portrait that way?

WOULD YOU PLEASE SAY THAT AGAIN?

If the phone rings in the middle of an interview, or someone coughs, or a dog barks, or a lowered 1992 Civic with a loud exhaust goes by, don't hesitate to ask the speaker to repeat him or herself.