

# Investigative Reporters and Editors

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## The Showdown Interview

### The objectives

- **Confirm the information you have, and gather new information.**
- **Get an admission of wrongdoing.**
- **Eliminate the counterattack after the story is published. We can do that by eliminating error, by finding just the right tone and context, and by telling their side of the story.**

Being fair to people is, for a newspaper man or woman, a self-serving thing to do. Fairness is not some hill we have to climb, it is not something we do just for others. It is something we do for ourselves. Because fairness makes our stories stronger. When we're fair, every lousy thing we report about somebody will stick.

The ultimate goal is to array the facts against this man or woman as skillfully as possible and, in the same story, to present their best defense. We want him to read his quotes and say, "Not only did I say that, that's what I meant to say."

If we do that, we're free to cut him. And not only will he not strike back, he'll get over it. And, in time, he may help you cut someone else.

That's a Perry Morgan rule. Morgan was my editor, and mentor, when I was a young reporter trying to learn how to do investigative work. Morgan said if you cut them cleanly -- accurately and fairly -- they heal. But inaccurate, unfair, stories are like dirty knives. Those stories leave wounds that don't heal.

### Getting ready

- **Begin preparing for the showdown interview on Day One of your investigation, by creating a question file.**

When questions come to me, I put them in the file. I don't organize them. I don't try to hone them --that will come later-- I just save them.

- **Build the case with other interviews and with paper or electronic records.**

Thorough preparation is critical. More than that -- it is decisive. In the ideal situation, you will know more about a small portion of their job, the portion you intend to write about, than they do. Ideally, our work will have been so thorough we will know the answer to almost every question we intend to ask.

- **Write down the questions you intend to ask, and take the list with you.**

Under no conditions that I can think of would I submit my questions in writing.

- **Tag the records you need to support various questions.**

During the interview, if I need a letter or whatever, I can find it quickly. I highlight the critical questions, the summary questions, so if he cuts off the interview I can find them and ask them.

## **Getting the interview**

I try to schedule showdown interviews in the morning, because I'm more alert in the mornings. And I like Mondays, because if I need more time to get ready, I have all weekend to hone the questions.

If possible, interview people face to face.

Seeing a person is a great help in ferreting out a fib. Sometimes their eyes will tell on them, or their body language. I saw a colleague interview a fellow one time and every time the guy told a fib, one side of his face would twitch

If you interview them in person, you are able to show him or her your documentation, and get their response.

And you are able to bring subtle pressure on him in a face to face encounter that you can't bring over the phone.

When you try to make an appointment and you are being put off, don't threaten, with words or tone.

Do not tell a secretary you're going to write a story and to tell the boss "it would be best" if he talked to you. Most people don't respond positively to a threat. And if and when the counterattack comes, here's the way that line is likely to come back to you: "That reporter said if I didn't talk to him he was going to write an ugly story about me."

Instead of threatening, say to the secretary, "I am going to write a story in which Mr. So and So will have a keen interest, and I am doing everything I can to give him an opportunity to comment. Please ask him to return my calls."

## **Final approach**

- **Carry an extra pencil.**

Before I leave my office and head out, I put a new tape and new batteries in my tape recorder. And I test it.

I sharpen several pencils, and put a couple of pens in my pocket. Nothing breaks the aura you want quicker than having to ask the person you're interviewing to loan you a pencil.

- **Never carry documents out of the office that you can't afford to lose.**

Don't take the stuff that would give you a heart attack if you left it in the guy's office.

Nothing with a source's name on it.

Or telephone number.

Or a computer printout that might identify the terminal that produced it.

Don't show the subject a handwritten letter, even if the tipster is anonymous.

He might recognize the writing. Do not make notes in the margin of documents you carry out of the office, as in, "This is BS."

In fact, don't make such notes, period. If you wind up in court, that might be offered as evidence that you made up your mind before you had all the facts.

- **I imagine I am going to be successful, but I don't try to image just how that's going to happen.**

Go with all the lights on in your mind. I try to leave my theories about what may have happened back at the office. I want to be open to new facts, and to new interpretations of old facts.

As I get out of my car and start into a person's office, I don't think about the questions I intend to ask. Or how he or she might respond.

I just say to myself -- "Relax and think. Relax and think."

And I say, "I'm ready. He better be ready."

- **Dress appropriately.**

If I were going to interview a police major --an officer in a quasi-military organization-- I would shine my shoes and get a haircut.

And sit up straight, too.

- **Arrive a few minutes early.**

The person who is on time starts with an advantage.

- **Show good manners.**

We can say "Please" and "Thank you" and still ask: "Did you steal the money?"

- **Pick a good seat.**

Sit as close to the subject as is reasonable, and in a position where neither the subject nor his associates can see your notes or documents.

- **I tape record showdown interviews.**

Sometimes, they want to tape the interview too. That's fine by me. I take my recorder out of my pocket, and I say, "This thing's on." I never ask permission and in all the years I've done this work, I've only been refused permission once.

I set the recorder on their desk so I can see the tape rolling.

I do ask permission to shut the door, to cut down on background noise and improve the tape quality. Also, if you get the door shut, there will be fewer interruptions. Since you will be perfectly prepared for the interview, and he may not be, interruptions will help him --by giving him more time to fabricate answers-- and hurt you.

There are many advantages to a tape:

You get the quote right. You get it in context. You eliminate the I-didn't-say-thats. It allows you to concentrate on listening. And it's a wonderful learning tool.

When I transcribe an interview, I sometimes hear --for the first time-- a qualifier the subject used to mislead me. Or that dead silence, which I interrupted, and let him slip away from a question he did not want to answer. And sometimes I hear myself talking too much.

The guy you're interviewing might say, "I've never written anyone a memo and told them to hire my brother-in-law."

No, he didn't write a memo. He called them on the telephone.

## The do nots

- **Don't show off.**

We are not there to score points, to show off how smart we are. Ask short questions. Let them do the talking. When we're talking, we're not acquiring anything.

- **Don't take them to raise.**

We are not there to reform anybody, to lecture or criticize. I don't care if they make a sacrilegious comment. Or a racist comment. I don't care if they cuss, or crack on women, or say The News & Observer is a rag.

- **Don't be embarrassed by silence.**

Don't step on your own questions.

- **Don't use gasoline words, like "lie."**

I did that one time. It was a foolish thing. I didn't actually call the man a liar.

What I said was, "That was a lie you could have kept from telling."

His lawyer immediately terminated the interview and, before I could return to Raleigh, to my newspaper, he called Claude Sitton, who was editor of The N&O, and complained about my behavior.

I ran into Claude as I was getting off the elevator. He sort of smiled and shook his head, as if he were dealing with a rookie, but all he said was, "Well, WAS he lying?"

If you just have to challenge somebody, do it with your eyes, with your face. Look away, out the window, or at a picture on the wall, and then straight back into his eyes. Smile slightly, as if to say, "Are you kidding me."

- **Don't threaten.**  
I don't know of anyone who responds well to a threat.
- **Don't say, "Someone told me," or "I've been told."**  
This invites them to ask you, "Who told you?" And when you decline to answer, so do they.  
Instead, just ask questions: "Did you do this? Did you do that? Why?"

## The interview

You always want the subject to misjudge how much you know.

Generally speaking, when you know a lot, it will suit you for them to think you know a little. And when you know a little, it will suit you for them to think you know a lot.

I sometimes carry along an armful of records I don't need, just for their shock value. I want to create the impression I already know the story, everything. They might as well tell the truth and put their role in the best light possible.

- **Be careful what you say, and how you say it.**  
Assume everything you say will be broadcast.  
These people are not our friends. Do not hand them sticks to hit you with.
- **Listen. Ask follow-up questions. Don't return too quickly to your prepared questions.**  
If you don't understand something, don't nod as if you do. Ask for an explanation. We can not explain to others what we do not understand. Besides, asking for an explanation tends to relax the subject. That's always good for us and sometimes bad for him.

- **Generally, I question people from the outside in, easy questions to hard questions.**

He's not likely to abruptly end the interview when you ask about his educational background. But he may when you ask how many relatives he's hired.

It all depends. If I sense I can break him down, I may follow an easy pitch question with the toughest question I have.

Preparing for an interview is science. But the order of questions, the words you use, your tone, your body language, your timing, I guess that's the art.

Sometimes, right at the gitgo, they'll say, "What's this all about? What are you trying to get at?"

Faced with that kind of challenge, I usually skip the warm up questions, the easy ones, and jump to the first tough question I have. If the guy wants to get down to business, OK, I'm thinking to myself, let's do it.

- **Ask about every embarrassing detail.**

And not just details, ask about the conclusions the details seem to point to.

We want him or her to correct errors.

We want his explanation – his best defense.

- **It's during this time that you show her --with questions, not statements-- just how bad parts of her story are going to look in the paper.**

When I did a story about some bogus government contracts I said to the official in charge:

“When I write that you signed all these contracts without reading a single one, nobody's gonna believe it. They're gonna say, ‘Why would that fellow do such a thing?’

Why did you do it?”

I was asking for an explanation, but I also was showing him how he was going to look in the story.

When a subject reads our story we want him or her to have a certain sense of relief, as in, it could have been worse. And that will happen if we ask about every embarrassing detail.

- **When she says “to be honest” or “to be perfectly candid” the hair stands up on the back of my neck.**

Almost always those phrases are followed by fibs. And I think to myself, I hate I heard that.

- **Remember to ask why.**

The “why” in any story is often the most interesting part.

Other favorite questions:

What makes you say that?

How do you know?

## **The defense**

- **Some will try to provoke you.**

If you bite, if you raise your voice, if you say one little bitty “damn,” they will terminate the interview and throw you out. If they do terminate the interview, remain seated as long as possible. Ask those critical questions – the ones you highlighted back at the office. You can not report that the guy refused to answer some question unless you've asked.

- **Some will try to interview you.**

“Well, you've asked me a lot of questions,” they'll say. “Let me ask you a couple: What's your opinion of that matter?”

Don't say, "I have no opinion." Of course you have an opinion, and they know it. Just say, "Our readers don't give a flip about my opinion. [That's true.] But they care a lot about what you have to say." And go on with your next question.

Sometime they persist. They want to stake you out, as for them or their position. Or against them. Don't play. You might say something like, even if I agreed with you, I wouldn't tell you – because you'd have no respect for me if I did.

Don't feign sympathy for their cause. And don't admit sympathy either.

- **Some will filibuster you.**

They will talk a lot, but they will not answer the question you've asked. You should repeat your question. They may talk some more without answering. And when they finish, you say, "Do you not understand the question, or is it that you choose not to answer it?"

Or they may say, "You just asked me that question."

And you say, as politely as you can, "I know. But you did not answer it."

- **They may try to take you off the record.**

Don't go. By staying on the record, you build tension. Sometimes they want to say it so bad, they'll say it -- on the record.

In any event, you want no confusion about what was on and what was off the record. You won't be confused. You have a tape. But the guy you're talking to may be confused. And if he thinks you broke your word, he is never going to heal up.

At the very end, when I've asked every question, I will go off the record.

Two reasons:

People have told me things off the record, and I've said to them, "I need that on the record. That's the strongest defense of your position I've heard. Give it to me and I'll put it in the paper."

And sometimes they do.

Second, off the record comments often help us find the proper tone when we begin to write.

- **Sometimes they will try to "committee" you.**

I take that as a sure sign that something's not clean in the milk

When you arrive, you'll be shown into a conference room. The big guy will be there, along with several subordinates.

Try to get them on one side of the room, or the table. You sit across from them, facing the main guy. You do not want them on your right and left, because you won't be able to keep them from reading your notes. You don't want one out of your line of vision cueing the boss on what to say. I always look at the main guy, and direct my questions to him. Except for a cursory glance, I don't give the others air in a jug.

The big guy is going to say to you, "I've asked Mary, Pete and Sam here to join us so we can answer all your questions."

What he really wants, of course, is to have them answer every single question. He wants to say, "hello, good-by," and nothing in between.

Tell him: "I understand that you may want to consult with one of your subordinates on some question. But I came to see you, not them, because the public -- I don't mean to be ugly -- but the public is not interested in hearing from a subordinate. . The public wants to hear what the boss man has to say."

And when you ask, a subordinate will answer.

Give the subordinate a glance, just enough not to appear rude, but keep your eyes on the main man. And when the subordinate stops talking, ask the main guy, "And what's your response."

## **The conclusion**

- **Take your time.**

Sometimes I stick pretty close to my written questions but most often I don't. It depends. At the end of the interview, I look back over my list to make sure I've covered everything. I do not hurry. I take as much time as I need to do this.

It's at this point that I asked, What have I not asked you that I should have asked you?

- **Say thank you.**

I thank them for talking to me, and say I may call them after I've transcribed the tape and ask them to clarify something or other.

- **Keep the tape running.**

I keep the tape running until I'm out of the room. Some of the best stuff you're going to get will come in the last few minutes, when you're wrapping up the interview, packing your stuff, getting ready to leave. People often see those closing minutes as now-or-never time, and they open up.

**Whatever they do, whatever they say, don't let them make you mad. This is business. It's not personal.**