

# Seven Interviewing Tips

By Vicky Rose

Almost every writer finds it necessary to conduct interviews at various times during his or her career. This holds true especially for Western writers because of the need for accuracy, not just in nonfiction, but in fiction too. For example, nothing would infuriate a knowledgeable reader more than to read of a man using a herd of “steers” to build a cattle empire. Sometimes the best information can only be obtained from living, breathing “primary” sources. More often than not, however, interviews are conducted for magazine and newspaper articles, or for nonfiction books.

Regardless of what category an author is writing in, interviewing guidelines stay the same. The following hints are intended to refresh what the good interviewer already knows and direct the novice into success.

## 1. Get Good Quotes

“The most important thing about doing an interview is to get good quotes,” Patsy Ziegler, lecturer in print journal-

ism at Sam Houston State University and former reporter for the *Dallas Morning News*, tells her classes. This is the cardinal, number one rule of interviewing no matter what the purpose of the interview. If the writer screws up every other aspect of the interview, but manages to do this, everything will turn out all right. Remembering to get good quotes is the most important thing anyone can ever learn about interviewing.

Good quotes bring life to a story. They add authority. A good quotation can draw in and please a reader as nothing else can. Even if only doing an interview for research on a bodice-ripping romance novel, an author should listen for good quotes. Writers work not just by their eyes and hands, but by their ears. While writers of nonfiction *must* give attribution to the sources of their quotes, writers of fiction can, do, and should lift good sentences and phrases heard in casual conversation and use them whenever possible.

## WHAT IS A GOOD QUOTE?

Look for:

**Strong Opinions:** “I *never* talk about a book I’m working on. I’m very superstitious about that,” John D. Nesbitt said in answer to a panelist question at the 2008 Western Writers of America Convention.

**Colorful Statements:** “God told me to go downstairs to my computer and write, and I would win a Spur award and lose weight at the same time. God was half right,” said Sandra Dallas, winner of the Best Western Short Novel Spur for *Tallgrass*.

**Little Known Facts:** “Wal-Mart requires our books to have a minimum of seventy-five thousand words,” Kensington Editor Gary Goldstein informed WWA members.

**The Voice of Authority:** “The floor is closed,” said Paul Hutton, WWA executive director and secretary-treasurer, when yet another location for the 2010 convention was mentioned after almost an hour’s worth of debate had finally brought a decision.

## 2. Be Intrepid

Use any possible legitimate connection to obtain an interview. If you live in Bug Tussle, Texas, and know that Joe Celebrity spent the first seventeen miserable, acne-filled years of his life in Bug Tussle, by all means seek an interview. Joe may be anxious to tell the folks back home about his success. The key here is “legitimate.” For example, do not claim that the interview is for *Wild West* magazine if no such agreement exists with that publication.

The simplest approach is to call and request a thirty-to forty-five minute interview. State your name; give your credentials and the reason for requesting the interview. If phoning to ask for an interview is not an option, or is just too big of a hurdle for a shy writer to face, an e-mail or letter serves the same purpose. In either case, if you are turned down, do not cajole or beg, but thank that person politely and move on.

Be wary of approaching other authors who have already published a book on the subject you wish to pursue, even if it is just for a short quote. They may have a high sense of proprietorship and a feeling that you are intruding into their territory. Authors have been known to scream into the telephone, “Just read my book!” and slam down the receiver.

On the other hand, museum curators often know their subjects well and are much more willing to share little known facts. They can be good sources for quotes.

## 3. Avoid Group Interviews

For in-depth interviews, person to person is desired. Do not take someone else along for the interview and hope and pray that any present spouse or friend of the interviewee will obligingly disappear once the interview begins. If distances or other circumstances do not permit a person to person interview, telephone interviews are the next best thing. E-mail interviews are generally good only when a short quote is desired. However, these are often the easiest and only way to get in touch with a busy person, especially one with a certain amount of fame.

#### 4. Be Prepared

Know as much as possible about the person you will be interviewing. The Internet makes this job much easier. Google, Yahoo, and Ask are three of the biggest search engines to employ.

Things to take along for an interview include a tape recorder with extra tapes and batteries, pens, paper, and a list of ten to twelve questions. Take a camera capable of shooting photographs of at least 300 dpi, along with extra batteries and spare memory cards. Take as many pictures as possible at the interview; out of two dozen photographs, only one or two may be of good enough quality to submit to an editor.

At the beginning of the interview, ask if the person minds being taped. Some people do, in which case you must use the pen and paper for jotting down good quotes and phrases that will jog your memory later. Many writers use both. In rare instances, the interviewee will request that the writer dispense even with the notepad. You must then try to commit to memory good quotes.

Electronic stores, such as Radio Shack, sell fairly inexpensive gadgets that hook telephones to recording devices. The legality of this varies from state to state—it is in about half of them. A call to your state's attorney general's office should tell you if it is legal or not where you live. Ted Schwarz, in his book *The Complete Guide to Writing Biographies*, advises, "Be certain the attorney with whom you talk checks the law books because I have found that most attorneys 'know' it is illegal until they check the records." Schwarz said that even if it is illegal in your state, you can still record phone conversations as long as you inform the subject upfront what you are doing and get their permission to continue. In most cases, you would do this anyway.

#### 5. Ask Probing Questions

"Do you like ranch living?"

"Yes."

"What do like about it most?"

"My cattle."

A much better question would be:

"Tell me about your ranch. What do you find is the most satisfying aspect of it?"

Listen and observe, watching facial expressions and hand gestures. The purpose is to lead the interviewee into discussing something that means a good deal to him or her. A gun collector may be an avid member of the NRA and a great proponent of the Second Amendment. Forgive the pun, but a wall shelf filled with cookbooks speaks volumes. In addition, a description of the interviewee and his or her surroundings, such as a home or office, should be put into the article.

Use your notebook with its ten to twelve questions as a guide, but follow your instincts. Don't hesitate to keep following a probe if answers hint at something promising.

#### 6. Fire a Shot in the Dark

The Associated Press probably does not sanction this method, but Bob Boze Bell, executive editor of *True West* magazine, told a writers group in

that wasn't me," he replied. "That was James Arness. He nearly drove those people on the set of *Gunsmoke* crazy farting all the time."

#### 7. Save Bombshell Questions for Last

A sensitive question may terminate the interview immediately. It is also a good idea when arriving for any interview to park your vehicle facing the exit.

At the end of the interview, quickly scan your notes and ask permission to call back later if you have any questions. Just before leaving, ask the interviewee if there is anything he or she wanted to talk about that was not asked. If he or she has been especially kind in granting you the interview, a thank you note later is not amiss.

Obtaining and conducting interviews requires courage, hard work, and tenacity. The rewards, however, are tremendous. How else could you meet such interesting people?

### ADDITIONAL TIDBITS

#### Choose a Good Site

A home or office where the person feels comfortable works best.

#### Dress Appropriately

Think about the person you are interviewing and try to dress in a way that will make that person feel at ease.

#### Limit the Time

Try not to go over forty-five minutes. If more time is needed, set up a second interview.

#### Start With Light Conversation

It is better to begin with a compliment on the person's office or home rather than make a personal comment.

#### Keep Control of the Interview

If you let the person ramble too off course, he or she may begin to wonder what it is you really want and when you will ever leave.

Gunnison, Colorado, of an amusing incident when he employed it and got unexpected results.

Bell, attempting to liven up an interview with actor Harry Carey Jr., and perhaps elicit a few good quotes, suddenly made up something. He said he had heard that Carey farted a lot on the set. Carey thought for a second or two before responding, "No,

*Vicky Rose has interviewed such luminaries as former Disney star and California businessman Fess Parker, Hollywood director and producer Frank Q. Dobbs, distinguished World War II hero Col. M.B. Etheredge, and Texas rodeo legend L.N. "Sonny" Sikes among others. She is currently working on obtaining an agent for a four-book historical fiction series set in 1880s Texas.*