

The Q's and A's of Interviewing--For Writers is a practical step-by-step guide to the interviewing process, and how to write and sell the personality profile.

The Q's and A's of Interviewing--For Writers

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Introduction: The Q and A Quandary

“Judge a man, not by his answers, but by his questions.”

- Voltaire

Question: What are your feelings about writing an interview in the r
fivequestion and answer format?

Answer: It’s boring.

Question: What are some of the problems with doing the Q and A?

Answer: It’s a one-dimensional exchange, and it’s too predictable.

First the reader sees the word “question,” then the word “answer.”

(Or the name of the interviewer or magazine.) I begin to scan the
questions to see if I even want to read the answers.

Question: Then you admit you read Q and A’s.

Answer: That’s not a question.

Question: All right, show me another reason why the format is
boring?

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Answer: The reader can't *see* the interviewee. The writer must be the eyes and ears of the reader. He must show the interviewee's physical and emotional reaction to questions. In the personality profile format, the writer can use narrative and descriptive passages, as well as good quotes, to make the interview come alive. Make the writing *visual*.

Question: Is there any way the writer can make the Q and A visual?

Answer: Yes, but ineffectively. Q and A interviews can use parenthetical notes to show the interviewee's feelings (laughs), or actions (wrings his hands). The Q and A format can also include an introductory paragraph or two in an attempt to *show* the reader what's going on.

Question: Is there any place to use the Q and A format?

Answer: We're using it now.

Question: For variety?

Answer: Exactly.

Question: Yet, you write Q and A's.

Answer: Only when that is the only format the editor will accept. Such as the author interviews I did for *Writer's Digest* magazine.

Question: Yes, the interviews with Jackie Collins, Richard North Patterson and Elmore Leonard that are included in the "Writers on Writing" section of your book. I enjoyed reading them.

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Answer: That's because you are a writer.

Question: Thank you for the compliment.

Answer: Did you also read the personality profiles on Jonathan Winters, Sharon Stone and George Washington in the "Celebrity Circus" section?

Question: Are you asking the questions?

Answer: Good question.

Question: You are an established interviewer of celebrities. What can a new writer do to get interviews?

Answer: *Interview the common person who has done something uncommon.* That's important. Please put it in italics.

Question: Of course. How can the new writer sell what he writes?

Answer: Also put this in italics. *Getting firsthand, expert quotes will beef up any nonfiction work and make it more saleable. The interviewing process will enable the writer to add vitality and credibility to a manuscript. This will also add variety and make the writing entertaining and readable.* I've included two feature articles in the "Writing Recipe" section, both of which show how quotes add that entertainment value.

Question: What was the best quote you got from a celebrity?

Answer: I've always liked the one from Karl Malden. He wrote a letter after seeing the profile, saying, "I didn't think I was that nice.

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But then, you writers can do miracles.”

Question: One last question: How can I improve my interviewing skills and *sell* what I write?

Answer: I would strongly advise reading the *Q's and A's of Interviewing – for Writers*.

All you have to do is turn the page . . .

Chapter One: The Art of Interviewing

Writing has laws of perspective, of light and shade, just as a painting does, or music. If you are born knowing them, fine. If not, learn them.

-Truman Capote

“Madam, Adam.”

“Eve.”

And so began the world’s first “interview.” The ensuing question and answer session must have been fascinating. Unfortunately, there wasn’t a third party, a writer with a tape recorder on the scene to record it.

What if Barbara Walters had been on hand to chat with Cleopatra and Mark Antony? What if Mike Wallace had been able to confront Genghis Khan? What if Howard Cosell had been there to interview David and Goliath before their big fight? What if *any* of

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today's interviewers had been there to question Shakespeare on the opening night of *Hamlet*?

I once asked actor Don Murray this question: "Of all the famous personalities in recorded history, who would you like most to have lunch with?" His quick response was, "Jesus."

Jesus Christ is a fascinating enigma because no one with a tape recorder and a list of questions interviewed him. Would Jesus be such a mystery today if he had been interviewed by a newscaster from the CNN Network? Imagine sitting down for a talk with Moses. How about John the Baptist? Pontius Pilate? A Roman centurion?

Studs Terkel, whose interview books included *Working* and *The Good War* are virtually devoid of famous personalities, once said that his biggest fantasy was to be at the foot of Calvary with a tape recorder. What, he wondered, went through the minds of the masses when Christ was crucified?

Would these people have agreed to an interview? Would Shakespeare?" Would Napoleon? Would George Washington? (Yes, he did agree to an interview. I know. Because I interviewed him. The George Washington interview, "Valley Forge - The Crucible of Victory," is included in this book in the section, "Celebrity Circus.")

From the beginning of time people have delighted in talking about themselves. Answering questions gives an individual an air of

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importance and boosts his or her ego. As journalist/interviewer A. J. Liebling said, “We are an articulate people, pleased by attention, covetous of being singled about.” Fortunately for the writer, people love to talk about themselves, their work, and their personal expertise.

Quotes Lend Credibility

Getting firsthand, expert quotes will beef up any nonfiction work and make it more saleable. Learning the interviewing process will enable to writer to add vitality, credibility and an authoritative voice to a manuscript.

A writer can't know everything. You may want to write an article on divorce settlements. Who to interview? A divorce attorney. Let's say you are writing a story on Columbus' perilous journey across the Atlantic to the New World. Who do you interview? An historian with expertise in that era. Want to write a piece on Mom and Pop grocery stores? Who do you interview? Mom and Pop.

A student writer decided to write about ATMs, the automatic tellers that banks use to provide patrons with day-and-night cash and deposit facilities. Who did the writer interview? Her husband—an ATM repairman! From him she got great quotes—“Look, Sarah, I told you so. There *is* a little man in that machine!”—and wrote the story.

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Where do you find these experts? It's as simple as running your fingers through the Yellow Pages. Anyone, from magicians to marble cutters, from wine consultants to zoologists, can be found in the telephone book.

Getting these "experts" to agree to a brief interview, especially a telephone interview is easy. Professionals like to make statements, to show their expertise, to see their name in print. Just explain what you are doing—"I'm writing an article on emergency care centers, called 'The McDonald's of Medicine,' and I'd like to get your opinion of their place in the medical profession." You'll get answers.

Quotes Add Variety, Entertainment and Readability

You're in the dentist's office for a checkup. You pick up a magazine, thumb through the pages and come across an article that interests you enough to start reading. After a few minutes your mind wanders and you have to reread paragraphs. Boring stuff. Your concentration trails off and you shake your head to get back on track. Nope, still boring. Like so many other articles you have read, this one can't maintain your interest. What went wrong? The idea was stimulating. The title was intriguing

The problem was the middle. It was just plain dull.

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Capturing the reader's attention with an exciting lead isn't enough. If you do not want your article to stimulate the yawn reflex, then you'll have to write with variety. Monotony in writing is like a paralyzing frost. The Greeks were aware of the value of variety and contrast: they set off the beauty of flowers by planting them next to onions and leeks.

To ensure interest in the "body" of your material here are six techniques that can improve your writing:

- Narrative
- Anecdotes
- Quotes
- Imagery
- Creating a scene
- Character, action and dialogue

A mix of these attention-grabbing elements throughout the article will add that needed variety—and readability. Call it a writing recipe. Like a master chef, you can spice up your writing by adding enticing ingredients: a pinch of dialogue, a teaspoonful of quotes, a dash of anecdotes and a cup of imagery. For instance, here's an anecdote that is a quote, and has dialogue and imagery.

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Dame Judith Anderson is standing on the edge of the movie set between takes while the cameras and lighting equipment are being reset. An electrician on a ladder yells down to her: “Hey, Judy, baby, move over a few feet!”

The great dramatic actress slowly swivels her head upward and in her deep resonant voice says, “It’s *Dame* Judy Baby!”

Here’s a quote that a student writer used to begin an article:

“Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.”

By using this familiar line, the writer has caught the reader’s attention. It has impact because we didn’t expect it and wonder how it ties in with the article. (In this case, the piece was about communication and angry, walk-out-the-door scenes in marriages.)

How about this one?

I see, Kiwi,
You have wings
But cannot fly.
Yes, *that is true*
But . . . what do you do?
Everything else.

- Old Japanese poem

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This poem was the lead to a story about a theatre for the handicapped. Quotations from poetry or famous works of writing, such as the Bible or Shakespeare, can serve as effective transitions within the story. They are also great to begin the story.

Note that at the beginning of each chapter in this book a quote that pertains to the text leads off. In the beginning (the lead) of the article, quotes can be used in two ways:

1. *Preceding the text.* To do this indent or center the quote on the page below the title and the author's byline, then space and state who said the quote. Double-space and begin the text.

2. *Within the text.* You may want to use the quote as your lead sentence or paragraph. Just start typing.

Styles of Quotes

An interview does not have to be a two-hour session for the purpose of writing a personality profile. You may catch a teacher in a hallway, an actor behind stage, a writer on tour, a guide on a bus, and have only time enough for one or two questions. Here are the different styles of quotes you may encounter.

- *The Quick Quote.* On a trip to Scotland my guide was a Scotsman who wore a kilt. Of course, I had to ask:

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“What do you wear under your kilt?”
With an impish grin, he answered,
“Why, nothing’s worn. Everything’s in perfect working order.”

The Dialogue Quote. If you are involved in a conversation about a subject you are going to write an article on, record the dialogue. I visited Devil’s Island, the infamous French penal colony, and wrote an article that sold to *Islands* magazine. It included many dialogue quotes, such as this one:

“Welcome to *l’Ile Royale, Monsieur,*” the Frenchman said, flipping the blackened cigarette into the sea. A whisper of air rushed through the palm trees and the Frenchman squinted suspiciously at the rustling leaves for a moment. He shrugged, then turned back to me and nodded to the neighboring island. “Saint Joseph. The *bagnards*, the prisoners, called it *la mangeuse d’hommes*, the devourer of men. On the island there was a special prison called the Reclusion. It was the place of solitary confinement. Few survived.”

“And Devil’s Island?” I asked. I had yet to see the island, hidden from view by the 500-foot-high plateau of Royale.

“Ah, *l’Ile du Diable,*” he sighed. “The *bagnards* called it the dry guillotine. Few survived on Devil’s Island.”

The Extended Interview. You may want to sit down with a recorder and talk to someone, perhaps an expert on the subject, or simply someone who has something interesting to say. This example is from

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the article, *The Spirit of the Delta Queen*. The complete article is included in this book. Here's an excerpt:

I had the opportunity to interview the Delta Queen's Master, Captain Michael Monaghan, who, at age sixty-four, was on his last cruise. "I've been on the river forty-three years," he told me, his face showing the deep lines that come from living with the ever-changing eccentricities of the Mississippi. "The river has its own smell, its own flow." He paused, scratching at his chin. "Nothing better than a nice clear night going up river to make me feel good. You know, I'd like to have captained a paddlewheeler a hundred years ago, to live back then with a plantation on the Mississippi to come home to." He nodded his head. "I'll miss this old boat."

The complete interview lasted twenty minutes, of which I used about half of the quotes for the story. Note that the mixture of dialogue and narrative make the information more palatable.

Quotes from Other Sources

Usable quotes don't always come directly from a one-on-one interview. There are many sources to obtain quotes that can be used in adding variety and readability to your writing. Such as:

- *Books and Magazines*. Yes, you can quote from the writing or other writers. You must attribute it to that writer and where it was written. Here's an example from my article, *Devil's Island*—

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the Green Hell. I found very little research material on Devil's Island. One of the books I used was *Papillon* by Henri Charriere, a fascinating story about a prisoner's life on the island. The following *quote* not only shows the brutality (which was the slant of the article) of life in the penal colony, but is also strikingly visual.

In his autobiography, *Papillon*, the celebrated inmate who spent twelve years imprisoned on the islands and escaped to tell about it, described the burial of a fellow prisoner, a close friend named Matthieu: "Wrapped in flour sacks, Matthieu's body slid from the small boat into the water. Jesus! He was no sooner in the water—for good, I thought—than he rose above the surface, lifted by, I don't know, seven, ten, maybe twenty sharks. The flour sacks were torn off, and for perhaps two or three seconds Matthieu seemed to be literally standing on the water. His right forearm was already gone. With half his body out of the water he was bearing down on our boat when an eddy caught him and he disappeared . . . Everybody, guards included, was terror-stricken."

* *Comic Strip Quotes*. Why not add a bit of humor to your article? If you are not funny, then quote from another source, perhaps the funny papers. Here's a comic strip quote that fits in nicely with the

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interviewing process. It's from *Calvin and Hobbs*, created by Bill Watterson:

Calvin enters the kitchen where his mother is cooking. He says, "Hi mom. I'm making my own newspaper to report the events of our household."

Mom: "That's nice."

Calvin, paper and pen in hand: "Now I'm looking for a page one lead story. Can I interview you?"

Mom: "Sure."

Calvin: "OK, what are you cutting up there for dinner?"

Mom: "Fish."

Calvin, writing furiously: "Knife wielding mother hacks ichthyoid! Grim melee is evening ritual! Suburban family devours victim!"

Mother: "Out of the kitchen. Out! Out!"

* *Television and Radio*. Quotes from prominent or outspoken people can also attract the reader's attention and add vitality and credibility to a manuscript. I happened to be writing a story for *The Saturday Evening Post* titled, "The TV Games People Play," about what it takes to be a game show contestant. Here's a quote I got from watching the *Oprah* show: (Note that it is attributed to the person who said the line, not Oprah.)

"What kind of contestant are we looking for? It takes a type," says Mark Goodson, TV's godfather of game shows. "We

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want hype and we want enthusiasm, personality and a little reasoning ability. And you can't fake it. It has to be there!"

* *Quotes from Writers*: As a lead for each chapter of this book, I have quoted a line from a famous author which pertains to the craft of writing. Here's another for good measure:

When asked what it took to be a novelist, author Somerset Maugham replied: "There are three rules for writing the novel. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are."

* *Quotes from the Experts*. Experts are all over the place, in books, magazines, on television, on-line. Quote from them. But how much can you quote? Here's what the copyright rules say.

Copyright and Quotes

Copyright codes imply that you can quote from a source as long as it is considered "fair usage." Now what does that mean? If you are writing a 2,000-word article and are quoting from another book, let's say, *The Q's and A's of Interviewing*, and want to use 1,000 words, that would certainly be considered beyond "fair usage." Perhaps 50 words would not be disputed. (Frankly, I never worry about this: let the editor who accepts your article make the decision whether permission must be obtained to use the quote.)

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For a longer project, such as a book, copyright codes say that approximately 200 words would be within “fair usage.” When I wrote the book, *Hollywood Be Thy Name—The Warner Brothers Story*, its length was 140,000 words. I wanted to use excerpts from Jack Warner’s autobiography, a total of 800 words. To do that I wrote to the Warner’s estate (his daughter) for permission to use the quotes. It was granted.

Warning! In the case of unpublished works, such as letters or books, you must have permission from the writer to publish quotes no matter the word count.

People in the Public Domain

If you want to quote from any of the celebrities in this book, such as Jackie Collins or Jonathan Winters, that is permissible. Famous people are considered to be in the “Public Domain” and you can quote from them at any length without permission. Just don’t take the quote out of context.

Let’s end this chapter on the “Art of Interviewing” with a quote from a famous author that may not pertain to art but it certainly does to writing:

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“I love being a writer. What I can’t stand is the paperwork.”

—Peter De Vries

(Note: The “Madam, Adam” and “Eve” quotes at the beginning of the chapter are palindromes. The phrases are identical spelled backwards.)

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