

Conducting an Interview

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In addition to learning the technology of recording video and audio, videojournalists also need to master the techniques of interviewing. Being a good interviewer requires more than just holding a microphone in front of someone's face. Being a good interviewer means knowing what questions to ask.

TELLING THE STORY FROM MANY POINTS OF VIEW

A good story needs a central protagonist—a hero, if you will. So start by asking yourself, “Who embodies the essence of this story?”

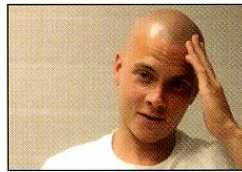
This symbol indicates when to go to the *Videojournalism* website for either links to more information or to a story cited in the text. Each reference will be listed according to chapter and page number. Links to stories will include their titles and, when available, images corresponding to those in the book. Bookmark the following URL, and you're all set to go: <http://www.kobreguide.com/content/videojournalism>.



Sometimes this choice will be obvious and sometimes not. At times, a decision to deliberately gravitate toward a less obvious choice can set your story apart from others on the same topic.

For instance, instead of experts or opinion-makers typically called upon by journalists to give the “official” word, you might pursue interview subjects less accustomed to being in the public eye. These people will probably not be as comfortable or as polished in front of a camera as the former, but that slightly rough quality often turns out to be an asset.

For Djamila Grossman’s story about heroin addiction, he found a convicted addict who actually had asked for a maximum prison sentence. Of course, the videojournalist could simply have interviewed drug experts, rehabilitation professionals, social workers, and police officers. Instead, he decided to interview this particular drug addict who was trying to get clean.



▲ **Heroin Addict Finds Hope.** The story’s producer focused on an addict to convey a more realistic vision of problems of going straight. (Video by Djamila Grossman, *Standard-Examiner*)



Here’s a checklist of what to look for when selecting the central character in your story:

- Knowledgeable? Informed? Involved?
- Affected/impacted by the story?
- Primary mover/shaker in the story?
- Strong feelings and opinions about the subject?
- Articulate and willing and able to speak candidly on camera?
- Reputable? Credible? Reliable?
- Trustworthy?
- Cooperative?
- Representative of a larger group, trend, or perspective?

But one person does not a story make! Think how boring a book or movie would be with only one character in it. The same is true of videojournalism and multimedia storytelling. An alarming number stories fail because they feature only one character source.

Constantly ask yourself, “What other perspectives are there? Who can best represent and articulate them?”

As you research and gather information for your story, search for names of individuals in previous accounts in newspapers, magazines, books, and on the Web. As you start contacting them, via phone or email, always ask them, “Who else should I talk to?” That’s one way to cultivate fresh perspectives—and perhaps even find the ideal “hero” for your story.

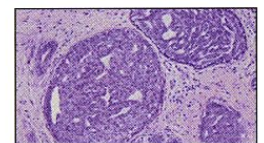
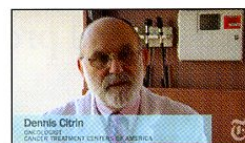
Contrasting Points of View

Whenever you can show a contrast between two sides of an issue, two points of view, two opposing characters, you have the potential for a good story.

Mel Melcon of the *Los Angeles Times* built a clever story by contrasting a Marilyn Monroe imitator and a Marilyn Monroe wax figure from Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum. Interviews with the lookalike and the museum’s PR person representing the wax Marilyn provide the contrasting points of view.

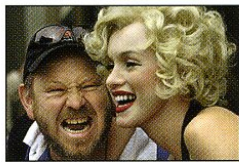
The best stories, in fiction and in real life, are those with intrinsic drama that is the result of showing two or more people in conflict. So always try to explore individuals’ motives—and then find someone who represents a competing interest or point of view.

Three years ago, Monica Long was told that a mammogram indicated ductal carcinoma in situ, or D.C.I.S., an early form of breast cancer. As a result, she had a quadrantectomy, in which about a quarter of her breast was removed. When Long’s medical records were reexamined later during a routine checkup at a different facility, she was told that she had never had cancer at all. Experts say that her case is not all that unusual. Videographers Stephanie Saul and Shayla Harris, working for the *New York Times*, not only interviewed the doctor who caught the mistake but also allowed the doctor who gave the original diagnosis a chance to respond.



▲ **Pathology of Errors.** Besides interviewing the central subject, the producers of this video interviewed doctors on both sides of a controversy over whether the patient really needed to have a breast operation for cancer. (Produced by Stephanie Saul and Shayla Harris, *New York Times*)





For another example that requires multiple points of view, consider the debate over a proposed city council measure that requires restaurants to provide health insurance for all their employees. Rather than featuring only the politician who sponsored the legislation, your story might center on a popular waiter at a local restaurant. But will you just follow him about his day and let him explain how important it is to have health care coverage? Well, that may be part of the story, but let's also hear from the supporting and opposing lawmakers. Let's hear from restaurateurs who favor the measure, and those who oppose it. What do they think the impact will be on their business? Let's hear from the rest of the wait staff and the kitchen crew. Are any of them opposed to the legislation? During your sleuthing, keep your eyes and ears open for unexpected sources that may be directly or indirectly affected by the matter at hand, even customers, for example.

▲ Battle of the Blondes. This multimedia piece presents a synchronized sparring match between two Marilyn impersonators—one live, one a wax model—who spend their days on Hollywood Boulevard. Melissa Weiss has played Marilyn Monroe on Hollywood Boulevard for the past nine years. Interviews with Weiss and a PR representative for Madame Tussaud's provide the contrasting narration. (Produced by Mel Melcon, *Los Angeles Times*)

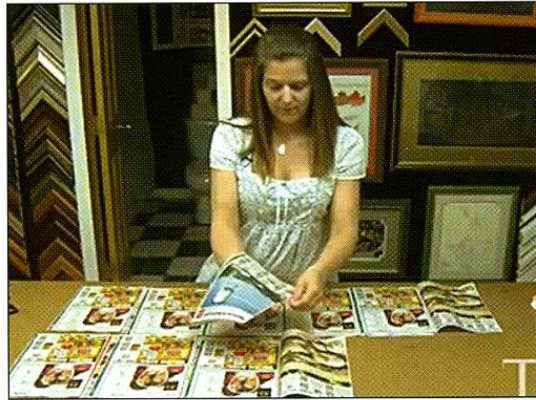


As you pare down your potential interview subjects, here are some other questions to ask yourself:

- How and why is this person knowledgeable about this subject?
- Can this person's information be independently confirmed through other sources?
- Who does this person speak for, or represent?
- What is this person's reputation?
- Why is this person willing to talk? Does his eagerness to participate affect his or her credibility as a reliable source?

HOW WILL INTERVIEWS BE USED IN YOUR STORY?

As you plan and prepare for your interviews, think about how they will be used in your video story. In typical TV news reports, for example, the subject and interviewer are on camera together, and we see and hear both of them during the interview—either in the same frame or, preferably, in alternating sequences.



▲ **Extreme Couponers Get Groceries for (almost) Free.** In a story about clipping coupons for supermarket discounts, Treasure Phillips tells her tale. However, the viewer never hears the original interview questions that stimulated the answers. (Videojournalist: Jacob Templin. Supervising Producer: Craig Duff, *Time.com*)



But for telling stories in short documentaries, the following situations are the better options:

- Subject is on-camera, and we see and hear her responding to questions. The original questions being answered, however, have been edited out.
- Subject is on-camera, but we hear the interviewer's questions off-camera.
- Subject's voice responds to questions while we see B-roll footage of what the person is talking about.

Each interviewee may be used once or twice in the final story. Or they may appear throughout the video. You will most likely use some combination of these alternatives to weave your story together. Sometimes the central character's voice narrates the entire video, essentially describing the footage as it's shown.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

The most critical aspect of interview preparation is researching your topic and your subject. Research not only helps you prepare excellent questions, but provides you with a high level of comfort and authority while you're conducting your interview.

Nobody expects you to become an overnight expert, but your interview subjects will generally be more cooperative if they feel you've done your homework and are taking them, and their pursuits, seriously. Some talk-show hosts claim they like to know as little as possible about their guests, so that they can ask "average person" questions. But they're usually being disingenuous, as their producers provide them with well-researched questions on file cards. And those who really do pride themselves on their ignorance frequently stumble and look foolish when they pose questions that reflect their lack of preparedness. Asking "average-person questions" is time-wasting and insulting to their guests, as well.

The best interviewers—such as NBC's Bob Costas and NPR's Terry Gross—are, as you can readily tell, exceptionally well prepared. They're able to steer in-depth discussions in unexpected directions.

The purpose of all your research is to ask good questions, so begin by envisioning specifically what kinds of information you're hoping to glean from your interview. You will be looking for someone who can describe an issue or an event or a process in a clear and engaging way. You'll want to try as discreetly as you can to extract opinions and attitudes. You'll also need to make sure in advance that your subject's responses will be lucid and complete. And with the subtlest approach possible, you also will want to get the person to respond to other perspectives—even the most contrary or competing ones, if applicable.

The more you know, the better your questions will be. The better your questions, the better their answers will be. The better their answers, the better your story will be. In short—if you want to end up with an excellent story, you must set out to obtain excellent information before you ever start.



▲ **Terry Gross** is the host of *Fresh Air*, a Peabody Award-winning weekday radio show of contemporary arts and issues. *Fresh Air* is among public radio's most popular programs with five million weekly listeners. (Photo by Will Ryan)

FINDING THE FACTS

When it comes to research, web search engines are your best friends. There is no excuse these days to conduct anything less than an exhaustive exploration of the person you're interviewing and the ideas and areas you'll be discussing. Search the general topic and see what comes up. There will probably be so much data that you'll have to narrow the search. Do make sure your web information comes from reliable sources such as original research in journals, government sites, and data available in the public record, including published reports in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and other news organizations that typically explore multiple sides of topics.

Don't stop with online research. Libraries are still valuable reference centers, and reference librarians can be invaluable in helping narrow research. Don't forget books and video.

You'll also be calling sources for facts and figures necessary for the story. Although they themselves may not warrant on-camera interviews, sources such as these can often lead you to others who may be camera-worthy. Be discreet. But don't be afraid to pick peoples' brains for references.

If you're working on a story about a resurgence of sales of vinyl record albums, a record-industry trade association spokesperson may provide a valuable statistic. Using that statistic may not warrant an on-camera interview, but

you may be able to use the data in a voice-over narration, on-screen text, or graphics. Also, you might ask that first person to recommend a record company executive for an interview.

What are some of the things you need to know before you can develop the questions for your interviews about the comeback of vinyl?

- **History.** What's the story behind vinyl records? When were they invented? How long were they in use? When did they fall out of general use? Why are people buying them again?
- **Controversial issues.** Find out anything regarding the medium's longevity. What devices played the music? How was the quality of sound?
- **Follow the money.** Does vinyl cost more or less than CDs to produce?
- **Contrarian point of view.** Who thinks vinyl is outdated and gone for good?
- **Who has the facts?** People in academia study all kinds of wondrous things. Are there professors of history or popular culture to query? What about canvassing musicians themselves? Or finding out who is developing new recording/storage technologies?

A far more serious, tragic story required extensive research that provided *New York Times* reporters Gabe Johnson and Michael Moss entrée into the loosely regulated meat-packing industry, where lax safety precautions have led to

PRE-INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

John Knowlton, Journalism professor, Green River Community College

- Have I made clear the purpose of my interview—both to myself and to my subject? (What do you really want from this interview and how eager are you to obtain this information? The more specific your purpose and the more apparent your enthusiasm, the more likely you are to gain cooperation.)
 - Have I made it clear (to myself and to the subject) why I want information from this particular individual? (A source may be flattered to be singled out.) Have I eliminated my own preconceived biases and eliminated my emotional barriers to communication?
 - Have I done preliminary research on the person and the topic to be discussed—read things about him or her, done preliminary interviews so that I can develop new areas of inquiry?
 - Has my research included preparation for “small talk” or “icebreaker” kinds of commentary?
- (For example, review news accounts of recent Supreme Court decisions when preparing to interview a lawyer.)
- Before requesting the interview, have I prepared a few “sample” questions cold-bloodedly calculated to be both provocative and ego-reinforcing?
 - Am I prepared to use my listening “down time” effectively? (Your mind runs three to four times faster than people's speech, so you can tune in and out of the conversation. You can make effective use of the “nonlistening” time to evaluate what is being said, make comparisons with other data, take notes, and to think up new questions.)
 - Am I (or will I be by the time of the interview) well-rested, well-nourished, and sober with all my mental faculties alert so that I can catch the fine nuances of meaning or things left half-expressed or even unsaid—in short, am I ready to listen between the lines?

a surge in food poisoning cases in recent years. Consuming a home-cooked hamburger containing a virulent strain of *E. coli* bacteria nearly took the life of a young dancer, Stephanie Smith, and left her brain damaged and paralyzed.

By focusing on the numerous stops along the trail—from stockyards to your dinner plate—this investigative video piece provides a clear explanation of what can, and has, gone terribly wrong with our food regulatory systems. By bookending the story with one woman’s heartbreaking consequences of unwittingly eating an *E. coli*-infested hamburger, it turns a scientific story into a personal—and *frightening* story.



▲ **Tainted Meat.** The *New York Times* reporters used the case of Stephanie Smith, who was brain damaged because of meat she had eaten, to tell the story of lax food regulations.

(Produced by Gabe Johnson and Michael Moss, *New York Times*)



PLANNING THE INTERVIEW

Thoughtful interviews are well planned. Planning means contacting your subjects, explaining your story and why you need their input. It also requires detailing who your story is for and how and where it will be used. Good preparation also demands you arrange a mutually suitable time and place for the interview. And it means

preparing questions that will elicit the most informative and engaging responses. Never just show up on someone’s doorstep unannounced, expecting a thoughtful and cooperative subject to be waiting for you.

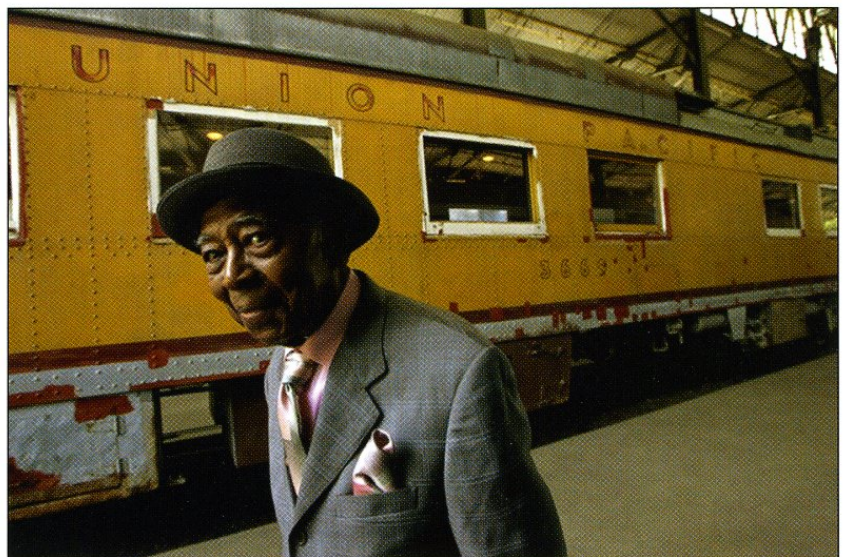
There’s no need to go into exhaustive detail in your initial contact. You want to offer just enough information so your subject will be prepared for the interview, but won’t give them the opportunity to rehearse responses. Offer general areas of conversation you’ll be exploring, but don’t provide a list of specific questions, as that will ruin any chance for spontaneity.

Choose a time and location that will provide minimal distraction and noise. Ideally, you can shoot your subject in his or her “natural habitat”—at work or at home, or in a location that’s appropriate for the story itself. Make sure to schedule enough time—and remember to include time for setting up your location for recording optimal audio and video.

You don’t want to be rushed. Depending on the nature and complexity of your story, you may need to make multiple visits, at a variety of locations—especially if you’re following a process over a period of time. Or things can become more complicated as you unearth new information that requires an on-camera response or rebuttal from other sources. Let the subject know that.

How much time should you request for your interview? That really depends on too many factors for us to generalize. TV news reporters are accustomed to getting in and out fast. They have frequent and rigid deadlines to meet and they know that only a short sound bite—a telling comment or observation extracted from a longer interview—will be used for their minute-long

► **Pullman Porter and Family Patriarch.** Mel Melcon of the *Los Angeles Times* interviewed and photographed Lee Wesley Gibson, who turned 100 in July 2010 and worked for the Union Pacific Railroad for 38 years. The *LA Times* staffer interviewed the centenarian in a quiet place with little distracting noise but took pictures of Gibson in a number of locations, including an old Union Pacific railroad car, the subject’s house, and at a funeral. (Produced by Mel Melcon, *Los Angeles Times*)



story. They realize there is no point in burdening the editor (most likely themselves) with wading through a half-hour conversation for the “money” quote. Instead, they fire off three quick questions, and they’re good to go.

Videojournalists face fewer such constraints. But at the same time, busy audiences do expect and appreciate economy. Even though stories can be told more expansively, nobody has the patience to sit through rambling monologues, especially when so many other online distractions beckon.

What If the Person Doesn't Want to Talk with You?

If someone does not want to be interviewed, that’s certainly his or her right. Plenty of people are wary of strangers in general and journalists in particular. Even a public official is not obligated to grant an interview. But if a source is important to your story, here are some tips for enticing him or her to cooperate:

- Don’t use the word “interview”—it can be off-putting. Say you’d like to talk or chat. It sounds less intimidating. (But be clear that your conversation will be on camera.)
- Like a good salesperson, try to intuit what’s causing the resistance and overcome specific objections by anticipating and accommodating the person’s concerns.
- If it’s a question of the person not having enough time right then, offer a more convenient time or place—perhaps in the person’s car on the way to work.
- If someone is afraid of looking bad or sounding stupid, explain why his or her perspective is so vital and necessary for your story.
- If the person claims to have nothing to say, reiterate the information you are seeking. If he or she still feels uncomfortable, at least ask for suggestions of other possible sources.
- If you’re having trouble getting access to a source, particularly one in an official capacity who may be surrounded by protective underlings, be persistent. Call, write, email, or just show up. Find a mutual acquaintance (or another source) to serve as intermediary.
- Be clear that the story will be told with or without the person’s cooperation—and so to be fair, you want to provide an opportunity to tell his or her side of the story.

- Appeal to the person’s vanity. Each person has something special and important to contribute to your story. Emphasize the person’s unique contribution.

What If the Person Asks You What to Wear?

Sometimes your subjects will ask what to wear for the interview. If the story is about a retired soldier, you might suggest his or her uniform. A costume might be appropriate for a stage actor before or after a performance.

More general useful advice is that blue is a color that shows well on screen and is not distracting, as are pastel colors. Most critical is what *not* to wear for a video interview:

- Bright white reflects the maximum amount of light and can throw off exposure.
- Black is too harsh, can suck up all the light, and throw off exposure.
- Bright red “bleeds” on screen and is distracting.
- Stripes, herringbone patterns, small intricate designs, and checks can actually pulsate on screen. Hats, sunglasses, or tinted glasses tend to hide the face and be hard to light. Large, dangling earrings distract and can make noise or hit the microphone during head movements. Logos make the interview look like an advertisement. Shiny objects, including ties, can end up looking like plastic or mirrors.

DEVELOPING YOUR QUESTIONS

The two most important things you will be bringing to your interview (besides your equipment) are your list of questions and your sense of curiosity.

You’d be amazed at how many would-be interviewers leave those things at home, and instead think that the most important thing to bring is themselves—their own sparkling wit and personality. They somehow forget that the interview is about the other person.

Your curiosity is probably what got you impassioned about storytelling in the first place. Good interviewers are curious about the world and are sincerely interested in other people and what makes them tick.

As you’re preparing your questions, invite interested friends and associates to contribute as well. Nowadays, the Web makes it especially easy for journalists to solicit questions for upcoming interviews, especially via social media such as Facebook or Twitter. You can invite input from

total strangers who may share an interest (and even some expertise) either in your topic or in your interviewee.

Now that you've learned all you can in advance about your subject, and have determined what fresh information, ideas, and emotions you'd like to see shared with you and your audience, you need to structure a conversation designed to elicit all that. Even though some interviewers smugly pride themselves on their provocative or challenging questions, in truth, a question is only as good as the response it evokes. This fact is doubly true in videojournalism, where you're unlikely to include the questions when editing.

Remember: you're a journalist, not a talk-show host.

Core Questions

In addition to standard biographical background questions, nearly all your inquiries will focus on:

- What your subject has done, is doing, or plans to do
- What your subject thinks about _____
- How your subject feels about _____
- What your subject knows about _____
- What your subject has experienced regarding _____



▲ **Tami Tushie's Toys.** Just as their mothers may have done, women still give parties in their homes to sell merchandise to friends and neighbors. These days, plastic containers or candles aren't the only things being sold. Tami Tushie is a working hostess of "Pure Romance" parties, where she hawks sex aids—lotions, potions, and toys designed to perk up a woman's sex life. Notice how the story answers the who, what, where, when, and why questions readers have. (Produced by Melody Gilbert, Kiersten Chace, Adrian Danciu and Emily Rumsey)



What people remember most about a story is usually not factual. Rather, a viewer recalls the emotions the story stirs up and the senses it awakens. That's why asking how a subject feels, in every "sense," is a completely useful and valid interview tactic.

"Describe what it was like to _____" is a good phrase for teasing out how a subject feels about something without asking "How did it feel to _____?"

Allow flexibility, so that the conversation can follow a natural course and go down unexpected but fruitful paths.

Keeping in mind that your story will follow a narrative arc—rising action, conflict, and resolution—you'll want to ask questions that lend themselves to that dramatic structure:

- How did you get started?
- What is your goal?
- What drives you? Why are you passionate about this?
- What are the obstacles or hurdles preventing you from reaching that goal?
- How have you overcome them? How do you plan to overcome them?
- What does the future look like?

TIP Remember to listen to your subject's answer, not prepare for the next question. Your next questions could expand on what the interviewee just said before you change topics and take the interview in a new direction.

Types of Questions

There are two general types of interview questions—closed-ended and open-ended. What's the difference? A closed-ended question can be answered with a "yes" or a "no" or a one-syllable word, whereas an open-ended question cannot. The best questions are open-ended because they lead to expansive responses. Look at the difference:

Closed-ended: Do your teenage kids respect you?

Open-ended: Tell us about your relationship with your teenage kids.

Closed-ended: Are you going to vote in favor of this legislation?

Open-ended: What do you think about this proposed legislation?

Closed-ended: What's your favorite hobby or activity?

Open-ended: What do you do on weekends?

Questions to Close

Here are some other tried-and-true "closers" that you can adapt for your purposes:

- What is the significance of what you've told us today?
- What have you learned from this experience?
- What would you like our audience to do about this?

- Is there anything you would have done differently, knowing what you now know?
- What are your plans for the future?
- What obstacles and challenges lie ahead?

It's also a good idea to ask whether you can call on the subject again if you need further information.

Finally, always ask your subject, "Is there anything else you would like to add?"

Structure Your Questions in Themes

So that you're not hop-scotching all over the place, structure your questions to be clustered around themes. (Editing will also be easier.) Know well ahead where you plan to begin, and where you hope to end.

The first question should be nonconfrontational—just to get everyone relaxed and rolling. Save tougher questions for later in the interview, especially if they're confrontational in nature. The final question might be an open-ended summation, along the lines of, "So what's the most important thing we should remember about _____?"

Organize the Questions with Bullet Points and Key Words

Instead of writing specific detailed questions, consider writing a list with bullet points and memory-jogging keywords. That way, you won't fall into the trap of reading the questions verbatim, like a spelling bee moderator, or worse, a police interrogator. You'll also be more inclined to pursue the interview as a conversation, which is conducive to the subject's sharing stories. Conversation is preferable to Q&A, which more often produces clipped, lifeless responses. To make sure you aren't leaving out important themes you intend to explore, or information you need to get on-camera, do, of course, consult your list.

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

Respect other people's busy schedules by arriving punctually and prepared. Dress

professionally, or at least appropriately for the setting. Your appearance affects how people relate to you. You want to do everything you can to win your subject's trust and confidence.

Before You Start

If you think there is any possibility you will need them later, take care of signing release forms first.

If you're at your subject's home or office, look at the surroundings to get a sense of what the person is like. A picture on the desk or wall may lead to small talk with your subject, serving as an "icebreaker" before the formal interview begins. Look for personality clues and identify any items that might be relevant to the discussion and might be used as visual props.

Take charge of the shooting circumstances:

- Find a suitable spot, with even, non-fluorescent lighting and a minimum of ambient noise.
- Arrange your seats so that you are relatively close and facing each other.
- Ask everyone present to mute their phones, and everyone other than the subject not to speak.
- Unplug noisy appliances.
- Mic the subject, and, if your questions also need to be recorded, perhaps yourself.
- Record some sound and check the audio quality. (See Chapter 8, "Recording Sound," for more on the technical logistics of recording the interview.)

Prepping the Subject

Put your subject at ease. Begin with a bit of casual small talk—traffic, weather, sports, and the like. Be sure to say "thank you" in advance for the time being generously shared with you.

Ask the person to look into the camera and say and spell his or her first and last name distinctly and to say, for example, "My name is _____, and I'm a [profession] for the [name of company, etc.]."



▲ **Popular Science.** David Frank and Natalie Angier put the forensic science teacher and his students at ease during an interview for a story about what maggots reveal about decomposing bodies—and the popularity of this new high school science topic.

(Produced by David Frank and Natalie Angier, *New York Times*)



To make the interview easier to edit, ask your subject to incorporate your questions into the answers. Provide an example. “For instance, if I ask, ‘Where did you grow up?’ it would be good if you could respond, ‘Where did I grow up? I grew up in Philadelphia.’ By including the questions in the answer, you will avoid a one-word response, like ‘Philadelphia.’” Rehearse with your subject by asking the person’s favorite ice cream flavor. If he gives a one-word answer like “Chocolate,” then ask him to respond in a complete sentence that incorporates the question: “What kind of ice cream do I like? I like chocolate ice cream.”

For another example, if you ask, “What went through your mind when the winds and water of Katrina came roaring through your neighborhood?” the answer might go like this: “What went through my mind when Katrina hit?

I thought the wind was going to blow us away!” When you get back to the editing suite, you’ll be able to use that quote anywhere, because it’s a complete statement.

During the Interview

Remember that being interviewed is not a natural activity for most people, so it’s up to you to put them and keep them at ease. Your body language speaks volumes. Maintain comfortable eye contact and lean forward in a manner that says, “I’m interested” without seeming overly intense.

Some videojournalists take notes during an interview. Note taking allows them to see the answers to their questions and make sure they have follow-up responses. Notes also help when it’s time to edit. Other videojournalists find that interviewing the subject, checking the focus and framing on the camera, making sure the sound

SOME DON'TS AND DOS TO REMEMBER WHILE YOUR SUBJECT IS TALKING

DON'T:

- **Don't kid yourself into thinking that sharing your personal secrets will entice them to share theirs.** It won't. It only makes them think you're wasting their time. Nobody cares about you. Even famous interviewers like Oprah Winfrey and Barbara Walters succeed in ferreting out private insights without tipping their own hand or heart.
- **Don't do all the talking.** Again, it's not about you. You're not there to impress anyone. And don't clear your throat—just ask your question.
- **Don't preface questions with** “I'm wondering if ... ” or “I'd like to ask you this ... ” or “Here's a question” Also, don't offer your opinion as an opening statement. Get to the point. Pretend it's a 140-character tweet.
- **Don't interrupt.** Your voice will ruin the subject's audio track.

DO:

- **Do heed the power of silence.** If your subject answers a question tersely, incompletely, or unsatisfactorily, just sit quietly and look at the person instead of moving on to the next question. The silence may seem uncomfortable, but before long, he or she is likely to jump in and fill it. Your silence also conditions subjects to avoid simplistic or pat answers, and it shows them that you expect them to work a little harder and think things through. Psychotherapists use this moment of silence technique on their “subjects” all the time. You can do it too.
- **Do listen! Listen! Listen!** And show that you're listening (and not just getting ready to pounce on the next question on your list). Otherwise, you might miss the revelation of a key piece of information that begs further exploration.
- **Do use body language** to change the interview's direction. If you're getting an unusable long-winded answer, use body language (e.g., raising an index finger) to subtly but silently interrupt, and then say, “I understand, but” And then pose your next question.
- **Do resist the urge to say “mmm-hmm” or “yeah”** or emit other reflexive responses that are likely to intrude into the final audio. Instead, nod in acknowledgement, or use approving facial expressions (smile, raise eyebrows, and so on).
- **Do guide the interview** by using your list of topics and questions, but be open to possibilities. If you're listening carefully, you'll find plenty of opportunities for unanticipated follow-up questions that take you down unexpected yet fruitful paths.
- **Do repeat the question** if you don't get a satisfactory answer to a question; don't be afraid to rephrase it and try again.

has no interfering hisses, and so on, is enough of a job, so they don't add note taking to the list. You will find your own method of working after you have tried several one-on-one interviews.

How to Ask Questions to Get the Best Response

The single most important follow-up question is: **"Why?"**

The single most important follow-up question to a follow-up question is: **"Why?"**

Try a psychotherapeutic technique. "Mirror" your subject by **repeating the tail end of his or her response** as a method of eliciting an expanded answer as well as verifying your understanding of the response. **Subject:** "I think global warming is a fraud and climate scientists have deceived us for years." **You:** "Climate scientists have deceived us?" **Subject:** "Yes, climate scientists were afraid of losing their grant money, so they rigged their data. . . ."

Ask **one question at a time**. Multi-part questions are too confusing and don't lend themselves to coherent, cohesive responses.

Keep the questions **short**. It's the answers that are important.

If anyone starts reeling off statistics, or any abstract concepts, ask for **concrete, real-world examples**.

Prod the storyteller who lives within all of us: **"What happened next?"**

Be unfailingly **polite**. Take the high road.

Common Problems and Dilemmas

Despite the best research and preparation, even the best interviewers are sometimes confronted with problems and dilemmas during an interview.

What should you do if the subject offers only monosyllabic responses? Skilled interviewers often follow up with questions such as . . .

Q: "Why?"

Q: "Can you expand on that, please?"

Q: "If you had to explain it to _____, what would you say?"

Q: "Tell me more."

Ask questions that call for a story:

Q: "What motivated you to become active in environmental causes?"

A: "My mother"

Q: "How so?"

A: "She took me to a rally when I was 12."

Q: "Really? Take me back to that event, and walk me through it. What were you thinking and feeling?"

What if the subject offers a lot of long-winded responses? Preface your next question with . . .

Q: "Briefly, Miss Jones, before the (video) battery dies, I want to make sure I get these few quick questions in . . ."

Feign disinterest.

Put down your list of questions or your notebook.

What if the subject is dodgy and evasive or outright lying?

Don't ever call anyone a liar or even suggest that he or she is not telling the truth.

Re-ask:

Q: "But XYZ has another perspective on that . . ."

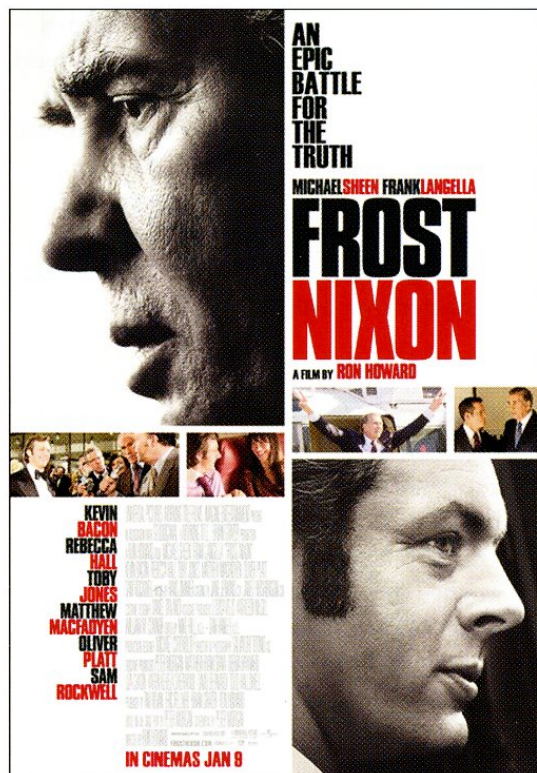
Q: "For those who say [the opposite], how would you respond?"

Catch the lie on camera. Then unravel it when you interview other sources.

CONFRONTATIONAL INTERVIEW

What's the best way to conduct a confrontational interview, without losing the subject's participation or cooperation?

There's no better case history of this than David Frost's historic adversarial interview with Richard Nixon, available on DVD. (Or you can enjoy the dramatic re-creation in the movie 'Frost/Nixon').



▲ **The Epic Battle for the Truth: Frost/Nixon.** Poster from the movie about David Frost's interview with Richard Nixon.

Writing in *American Journalism Review* and using Frost/Nixon as an example, CNN's Mark Feldstein offers a "how-to" primer for confrontational interviews that includes these suggestions:

- **Take charge** immediately by interrupting self-serving filibusters and by carefully avoiding pleasantries that might weaken the necessary resolve to go for the jugular.
- **Go for the tight shot.** Prepare to zoom in slowly on the interviewee's face when the exchange grows heated. This cinematic effect visually reinforces the editorial goal of zeroing in on the quarry.
- **Use props.** As every good trial lawyer knows, tangible exhibits such as video, photos, and documents not only help buttress a cross-examination but also add theatrical flair.
- **Set up targets to lie.** You can't force anyone to do so, of course, but it is always better to provide an opportunity to tell a falsehood on-camera before (not after) you pull out the smoking-gun memo that proves culpability. A single lie captured on-camera shakes the foundation of everything else the subject says afterward.
- **If you've the luxury of having a second camera,** keep it rolling no matter what. That way, if your subject rips off his microphone or storms out of the room, you have footage of his defensive tantrum. Also, the second camera comes in handy if interviewees blurt out embarrassing comments during a lull when they think they are not being recorded.

Are any of these tactics unfair? Not at all, Feldstein says. "No more so than the carefully coached evasions, posturing, pontificating, stonewalling and outright lying that your target has perfected over a lifetime."

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

After the interview is over, you may be tempted to breathe a sigh of relief, pack up your gear, say "Thanks," and head out the door. But hold on—your work isn't quite done yet:

- Confirm that your video and audio functioned throughout the interview.
- Exchange contact information, and invite the subject to call you if he or she thinks of anything pertinent after the interview.
- Arrange for future interviews, if needed.
- When you get back to your work space, tie up any loose ends by doing the following:
- Transcribe and organize your handwritten notes while they're fresh in your memory.

- Write down any observations made during the interview, including questions for other sources, and ideas for additional video, that will support or refute what the person has just said.
- Verify facts, dates, statistics, and quotes.

HOW A VIDEO INTERVIEW DIFFERS FROM A PRINT INTERVIEW

Unless you're following your subject over a period of time, or in a variety of locales, you'll probably get only one shot at an in-depth video interview. If you forgot to ask a question, or later think of a follow-up question you wished you'd asked, it's probably impractical to go back for another formal shooting session to capture that one quote. Besides, the subject will probably be wearing different clothing from the original shoot, the lighting conditions may differ, and so on.

Now, if it were a print interview, you could just phone, ask your question, and insert the response wherever it fits best in your story. Not so easy with video. Instead, you would need to add missing information with your voice-over (VO) narration (if there is one) or perhaps with text that runs over the footage.

On the Record

By definition, a video interview is "on the record," whereas the subject of a print interview can try to negotiate conditions before imparting information (e.g., "off the record" or "not for attribution" or "confidential").

If the subject of a print interview mispronounces a word, or uses faulty grammar, or has a strong accent or even a speech impediment, all that may go unnoticed or get "cleaned up" in print. A video interview, by contrast, hides nothing. Certainly, some sections may be edited out, but otherwise what you see (and hear) is what you get.

TIP Learn from the best. Watch how the masters conduct interviews. Find journalists you enjoy watching, and study their techniques.

Better yet, as you're watching an interview on television or on the Web, imagine you're in the interviewer's chair. Listen carefully, and think about what question you would ask next.

If you're watching a video story in which the subject does all the talking, with the questions edited out, write down what questions might have elicited those responses.

What more would you like to learn? What other questions would you have asked?

AUDIO LOGISTICS

Now that you've learned how to prepare for and conduct an interview, here are some practical considerations for recording audio and video.

For a "sit-down" interview, your first challenge will be where to record the conversation. Start by finding the quietest place possible. Stand for a moment in each room of the subject's house or office, and just listen.

Check Ambient Noise

What noises do you hear? Do you hear the sound of the refrigerator going off and on? Can you hear the sound of the freeway traffic zooming by or the ticking of a wall clock? Repetitive noise like a hammer banging or a fan whirring is particularly irritating. Even sophisticated editing software cannot eliminate distracting noises like these.

As MSNBC multimedia producer Jim Seida observes, "We turn off the background noise in our minds—a radio playing, pen tapping, an air conditioner, but the recorder amplifies background noise, which removes it from its original context."

Make an On-Location Sound Studio

When you survey a situation for an interview location, look for a room with padded couches and thick drapes that will absorb sound.

"Sit on a couch rather than on a kitchen chair," advises Brian Storm of *MediaStorm.org*. "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 for the interview wherever you are. This process is extremely important to the final product and equates to shooting an image against a clean background, as opposed to a busy one."

In extremes, Storm recommends interviewing in a car with closed windows. He cautions to avoid places with lots of echoes like gymnasiums or hallways. A small tiled bathroom is the worst place of all.

"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," says Storm. "This will effectively amplify the person's voice and thereby reduce the ambient noise."

Placing the Mic for an On-Camera Interview

Ira Glass is the host and producer for the highly successful *This American Life*, an hour-long weekly program on Chicago Public Radio that is distributed by PRI. The program is well known for its ability to tell profound, almost visual stories in interviews. No pictures. Just sound.

In his booklet *Radio: An Illustrated Guide*, Glass says that placement of the microphone is the single most important factor in capturing a high-quality recording.

Proximity is the most important factor. Glass tries to locate the microphone four inches from an interviewee's lips. This proximity helps bring out the natural bass in the subject's voice and makes the person sound more "present." When the mic is close like this, the recording sounds richer and captures less of the natural hum in most rooms.

With the microphone this close, interviews can be marred by the sound of the subject breathing. Avoid recording the breathing sound by positioning the microphone below the subject's mouth rather than directly in front of the person's face.



◀ **Wired Mic.** The videographer uses a microphone attached to the camera by a cord. He has placed the video camera on a tripod at about eye level with the interviewees. He is wearing headphones. (Photo by Ken Kobré)

Techniques of Recording a Good Interview

- Shoot with the red record light on the top of the camera turned *off*. This signal alerts you to when the camera is recording but can be distracting to your subject during an interview.
- Use wired or wireless lavalier mics or a handheld mic.
- Use both a shotgun and a wireless lavalier mic at the same time to help guarantee you've recorded everything.
- Keep the camera at least 8 to 10 feet from the interviewee—possible if you have one person operating the camera and another doing the interviewing, but harder if you are working solo.
- Use windscreens over the mic if you're recording outdoors and there is a breeze or a risk of a breeze coming up.
- Try to avoid placing an audio recorder with a built-in mic on a table between you and your interviewee. If you must place one on the table, put it on a soft surface such as a towel or a sweater to avoid the bounce-back of sound waves hitting the hard table and echoing into your microphone.

Shut Up, Please

If there are other people present during the interview, do not be embarrassed to politely ask anyone in the room to be quiet. Extraneous voices will dramatically reduce the impact of the interview. Ask everyone nearby to shut off their cell phones and unplug their landlines. There is nothing more distracting during an intimate interview than the obnoxious sound of a telephone ringing exactly when the subject is about to reveal something personal.


The Sound of Silence

Now that you are set to record the interview, take a minute to record silence. Of course, there is no complete silence. Your 60-second recording will pick up any ambient sound in the room, even if it's just the "room tone" of a quiet room. Later, while editing, you will find 60 seconds of room tone very useful. This audio can be used over places where a door banged, someone coughed, or you need to add a pause between a subject's sentences. (For more about recording interviews, see Chapter 8, "Recording Sound.")

Interviews in the Field

Of course, you cannot carry out all interviews in a sound studio, real or even contrived on the spot.



▲ **Deadline Every Second.** By putting a tiny wireless lavalier mic on the subject, the videographer was able to interview the photographer during his assignment. (Photo by Ken Kobre) 

Interviewing someone as he is working has the advantage of saving time and bringing viewers into the subject's life.

In a documentary about the work of AP photographers, for example, a photojournalist was interviewed as he was covering a wildfire—allowing viewers to actually accompany the photographer on his assignment.


Despite the sound of fire crackling, the photographer's voice remained clear because a wireless lavalier mic placed close to his mouth captured his speech while muffling the background sound. The ambient sound in situations like this helps reinforce what is being said.

VIDEO LOGISTICS

Keep the Background Simple

Besides trying to find a quiet place for your interview, consider what the background behind the subject will look like on screen. Try to interview people in their natural environments. Their personal workspace or living quarters lets viewers learn a bit about them. If possible, meet the subject at the site of a key element in the story.



▲ **Reginette's Story.** Bill Greene of the *Boston Globe* shot from a low angle and used a wide aperture on his lens to blur the background for his story about a 13-year-old girl who lost her leg in the Haiti earthquake. (Photo by Bill Greene, *Boston Globe*) 

This can evoke powerful feelings and memories of the actual event for the subject and help viewers relate to the story.

Whether outdoors or inside, study the potential background carefully. Avoid having the proverbial potted plant appear to be growing out of the back of your subject's head. Other backgrounds that can be distracting include strongly patterned wallpaper, or a sign with bold lettering. Viewers may lock their attention onto these distracting elements and fail to digest what your subject has to say.

Interviewing subjects in front of a sunlit window presents two additional problems. First, the window is often lighter than the person, and anything bright in the video frame can be distracting to viewers. Also, if people pass outside the window, their movements will draw attention away from the person speaking.

The easiest way to achieve a nondistracting background is to pick a location that is visually simple. Don't be shy about rearranging a couch or table, moving pens and paper on a desk, or pushing potted plants out of the frame of your shot to improve the background for the interview. You also can ask the subject to change positions to improve the shot's composition.

If you're stuck with a distracting background, try to limit the light falling on it. You might have to close the drapes to a window or turn down the lights in the room. The tricky thing is to still leave enough light striking the person being interviewed.

TIP To avoid problems later, run this test. If you're shooting the interview in someone's home, position the camera and subject and then record a few seconds without the subject talking. Hit playback. Besides listening for any irritating ambient noise like the sound of a refrigerator or air conditioner, watch for bright lights or distracting graphics that might ruin the visuals of an otherwise great interview.

Framing the Interviewee

The basic interview shot includes the subject's head and shoulders and not much else. Commonly called a "bust" shot in video lingo, the close-up interview shot is framed tight just above a subject's head and extends down to a few inches below his chin. Don't waste excessive empty space above someone's head. Position his face slightly off to one side or the other of the frame.

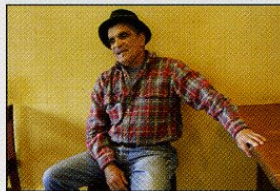
Leave enough "nose room" so the frame's edge does not cut off an important facial feature. Leave a little room below the person's face—space you can use when editing to add a title with the person's name.

For a psychologically neutral shot, adjust the camera's height to meet the subject's eyes. Avoid having the camera pointed down toward the person, as this angle can suggest that the subject is subordinate and insignificant. From the other extreme, angling the camera up makes people seem extremely tall and therefore overly important and dominant.

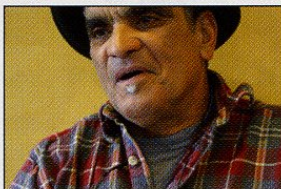
FRAMING THE INTERVIEW



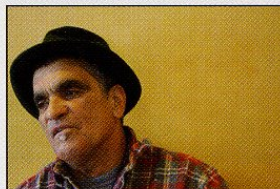
◀ Too far away—lots of lost space around the subject.



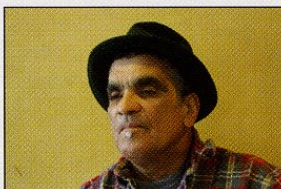
◀ Subject too small in the frame.



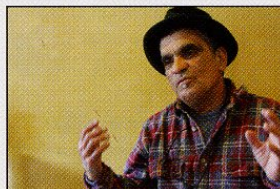
◀ Cuts off the top of the subject's head.



◀ Subject seems to be looking off the screen because he's too far to the left.



◀ Comfortably framed.



◀ Good if the subject uses his hands a lot.
(Photos by Ken Kobre)

When the subject is talking about something personal or emotional, prepare to go for the extreme close-up. Adjust the lens or bring the camera nearer so that just the person's face fills the frame. This extreme close-up shot pulls the viewer into the same emotional space as the subject and helps to cement a bond between them. *60 Minutes*, the most popular investigative journalism program on television for many years, often uses the extreme close-up technique to heighten the impact of their interviews. The shot is effective when someone reveals a loss or a bad guy admits his crimes.

Keep the Subject's "Eye Line" Even with the Lens

During the interview, the subject should look at you, not at the camera. You want to control the subject's "eye line"—where the person appears to be looking. You don't want anyone to appear to be looking at something off screen because viewers will wonder what is happening that they cannot see. Position your own head next to one side or the other of the lens. By positioning yourself in this way, you will control the subject's eye line. When the subject locks gaze with you, viewers have the sense that the interviewee is having a natural conversation with someone just off camera. You might have to stay in this awkward position for the whole interview, but your final shot will look professional!

"Put the camera at eye level when you are shooting interviews," reminds Steve Sweitzer,

former news operation manager for WISH television in Indiana. "Both the camera and the interviewer should be at the same level as the interviewee's eyes. So, if you're talking to kids, get down on your knees."

Ideally, Interview, Shoot, then Interview and Shoot Again

Photographers often must simply shoot first and ask questions later. If a student wearing a shark costume is walking across a college campus, shoot, shoot, shoot. Capture the candid moments when they occur. Do not interrupt the action until you have observed how other students react to this "fish out of water." Only then should you interview the walking fish and, hopefully, some of the passing students who have turned to react.

Sometimes you must ask questions first and shoot later. When working on a story about a geology professor who is going to lead a field trip to the local mountains, interviewing the teacher first is likely to lead you to watch for scenes that include the kinds of rock formations that coincide with the purpose of the trip. Had you not interviewed the professor before the hike, you would have been likely to miss photographing formations on the tour.

The real answer to "Which comes first, the interview or the photography?" lies in the need to do each more than once.

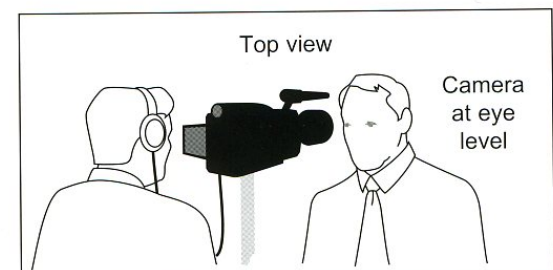
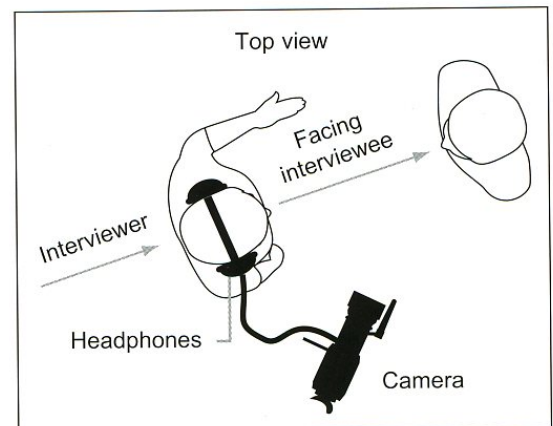
If you start with the interview and then shoot, you can watch for images that support the

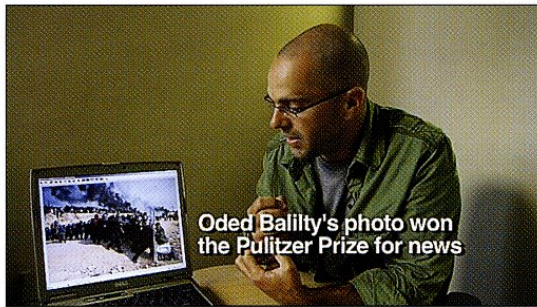


▲ **Watch the direction of the eyes.** For the primary interview for the documentary, the videographer stood just to the left of the camera in order to keep the subject's eye line even with the lens. (Photo by Ken Kobre)



► **Try to maintain the best subject "eye line" for an interview.** Adjust the camera so that it is at the same height as the person's eyes. Now position yourself on the left side of the camera, at the height of and as close as possible to the lens.





▲ In the documentary **“Deadline Every Second: On Assignment with 12 Associated Press Photojournalists,”** the videographer on camera interviewed AP photojournalist Oded Balilty as he related the situation that was unfolding the day he shot a Pulitzer Prize-winning image. (Produced by Ken Kobré and John Hewitt)



subject’s remarks. Following this round of shooting, the best journalists will follow up with a second interview. The second interview provides another opportunity to seek information based on what was observed and photographed.

Depending on the subject’s level of interest, you may even want to show him or her the footage you have shot and have the person comment, on camera, about the situations you photographed.

In fact, showing subjects your original footage, or even photographs or historical documents while recording them as they relive the experience or otherwise react to what is before them, provides dynamic material for marrying words and images during editing.

In particular, recording subjects’ observations about footage you have shot of them generates a tight lock between images and audio that results in the clearest possible material for a multimedia or videojournalism piece.

(See also Chapter 9, “Combining Audio and Stills,” for a further discussion of the problem of when to conduct the interview and when to shoot the candid photos.) ■

LOGISTICS CHECKLIST

- Check to make sure everything is working before you leave home or the office.
- Get to the shoot early and check all equipment again.
- Set up and check everything again.
- Start recording and check everything again.
- Wait to ask the subject to sit or stand in place until you are ready to shoot.
- Use the LCD viewfinder to confirm that you like where the subject is looking. The person will want to look at you, and that is good. Stand next to the camera’s lens.
- Watch for distracting items or action in the background. Avoid poles, trees, picture frames, or windowsills coming out of heads!
- Come in close with the camera. A big face is good, especially for online video viewers.
- Pay close attention to the light! If you’re in bright sun, protect the subject from squinting, but also make sure the sun isn’t directly behind the person. In a home, you may need to move the lamps or close drapes for better lighting.
- Stay in one place and maintain eye contact with the subject. If you walk around, the person’s eyes will be following *you*. That will look weird.
- Wear headphones! All kinds of noise can come along and ruin the audio during an interview. In many cases, you will not notice if you are not monitoring the sound.