

Interviewing Techniques

When they try to trick you, trick them back!

Veteran reporters can easily recall those first and most difficult times in their careers when they felt they had been deceived, manipulated or misguided by people they interviewed.

“I wish I’d known better” is a common reaction among experienced journalists who reflect on the early phases of their careers. They now admit their first interview subjects “played dirty tricks” to retain the high ground and put them at a disadvantage during the interview.

In some press cultures, reporters tend to be overly solicitous of officials and elderly people, unfamiliar with the modern techniques of interviewing or simply fearful of the consequences of asking probing questions. Taking advantage of these constraints, a shrewd politician, for example, has the luxury of rambling along from one extreme (making a long-winded, empty statement) to the other (giving snappy yes and no answers).

But what other tricks should journalists be aware of and how can they counter-attack?

- When interviewees take an aggressive posture by denouncing the press in general (e.g., “Can’t you ever get quotes right?” or “You people are only interested in bad news and in getting people.”), try to keep calm, let them vent their hostility and then proceed courteously with the interview.
- When an interviewee turns the question around and seeks to interview you, the journalist (“What do you think?” or “What would you do?”), you can reply, “I’m sure our readers are much more interested in your opinion on that.”
- When an interviewee tries to go off the record, you can explain the need for attribution and urge that the material be placed on the record for the sake of credibility, or return to the subject later with a rephrased or related question to get the information on the record. You also may flatly refuse to take off-the-record information.
- Don’t be intimidated by hostile interviewees who go on the offensive by saying things like “That’s a stupid question,” or “You didn’t do your homework,” or “That’s none of your business.” Keep calm. Tell them about the sources you checked before the question was asked. Explain why the answer to the question is necessary.
- Many interviewees choose to wander widely off the track as one way of dodging a question. Allow them to ramble on but look out for any useful information they might inadvertently reveal. Otherwise, try to bring them gently back to the question by saying, “That’s very interesting, but...”
- Other interviewees use the easier tactic of giving curt “yes” and “no” answers. To make it difficult for them to employ this tactic, phrase your questions so that they cannot be answered by one word, or ask “Could you elaborate?” or “Why do you say that?”

- As a journalist, every so often you will come across people who, for reasons of their own, will try to make your life difficult. Instead of answering a question, they will refer you to an obscure or inaccessible source—e.g., “Look up my book X, in which I discuss that question thoroughly.” Plead deadline pressures or ask for a summary of the interviewee’s views on the subject.
- One of the most popular tactics employed to confuse reporters is the use of jargon (political, economic, scientific, etc.). Don’t let jargon-speakers fool you. Raise your hand, stop them and demand an answer in plain English—language that your average reader or listener can understand.
- Claiming to be interested in the accuracy of what you’re going to say about them, some interviewees insist on seeing the story before it is published. If your employer’s policy permits, agree to check major points with them by telephone. Allowing interviewees to “edit” your story in advance is not to be encouraged.
- An interviewee is likely to be suspicious of how much you know about the subject at hand and, therefore, might not take you seriously. Do your homework. Be prepared. But share your knowledge with the interviewee without trying to prove that you’re an “expert.”
- Don’t pretend to be dumb, either. If you do, one of two things is likely to happen: your sources will dismiss you as unprofessional and refuse to waste their time with you; or they might use you as a vehicle to publicize their views.
- Finally, you can be provocative without being confrontational. Tell interviewees what their critics say about them, but don’t give your own opinion. Remember that you’re there to collect information, not to fight anyone.