

The Interview

by Roger Martin, University Research Magazine Association

The interview you're about to witness is ugly. It's with the dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at our university. I did it in the early 1990s right in front of a group of journalism students. The idea was for me to show how I interview scientists. My style, as you will see, is so attacking, so relentless, that one of the students says, in so many words, at the end of the tape, "That's rude, dude!"

Why do I interview this way?

Because I'm an obsessive perfectionist who runs on high-octane anxiety. Thank God for pharmacies, for Ritalin and Zoloft, which I wasn't taking when this interview was conducted.

Another reason that I interview in this manner is that when it comes to science, my mind is porous. I was a teen-age English major, with no head for protease inhibitors. So I have to ask the same elementary questions over and over again.

How do you bone up for an interview?

As a general practice, scan *The New York Times* science page on Tuesdays. That's a drip irrigation approach to becoming versed. There's also the crash-course route. Natalie Angier, of *The New York Times*, says she'll read a few *Scientific American* articles to prepare for a particular interview. Ron Kotulak, who won a Pulitzer in '94 for science writing, starts by talking to other researchers who are doing work similar to the person he plans to interview. Science writer Paul Raeburn, whose latest book, about Mars, was published in 1998, says he actually cracks a science textbook from time to time.

Do you work from a written list of questions?

Kotulak doesn't. Raeburn says he thinks of areas he wants to cover, not specific questions. Angier: "I usually have several questions in mind when I start, but mainly I improvise. I consider it important to have one really big question, the 'what does it all mean' question, framed beforehand and asked early on, so that the scientist gets into the mode of thinking in grand, rather than

plodding, style."

Usually, I write down a lot of questions but then discover, as the interview unfolds, that their importance fades. More and more, as I've gained confidence and wrinkles, I just wing it.

Oh, and I'll ask anything, no matter how stupid-sounding. A few years ago, I asked Liz Pennisi, a former student writer of mine who was then writing for *Science News*, to do me a favor. Would she poll her colleagues on the question of what they wish they'd been told about interviewing scientists before they began their careers?

She did. Here's what they said:

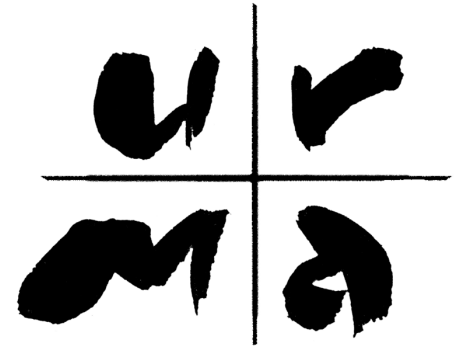
You have to not be afraid to seem really foolish, because, in the end, it helps you write a better story.

The tape you're about to see is a cut of eight minutes from a two-hour interview. It is full of questions so baldly foolish that I wince to hear them coming from my mouth. All I can say is that this is what works for me.

[Video segment runs here]

You know, the kid is probably right. I should probably keep my trap shut and let the good doctor speak. Trouble is—and I'll use a sports metaphor here—when I'm with a source, I'm in a zone. The world dwindles to a singularity, and that's the person I'm interviewing. Angier says, "The important thing while interviewing is to remain absolutely alert, absolutely present." Interviewing someone, then, is an act of profound love, for what is the greatest gift we can give to one we love? Our alert presence when we're in his or her company.

In an odd way, this presentness liberates me from the other's opinion, from longing for her approbation or dreading her opprobrium, from fearing that I'm making a fool of myself. The source is reduced to a voice, gestures, ideas bundled in language that I must decode. In contrast to the warm tones of love's intent listening, the listening that goes with interviewing is peculiarly impersonal. In essence, I'm inviting Sally Frost Mason to offload her file on salamanders



and pigment onto my hard drive.

I believe sources know that when I'm with them, they, alone, exist. And I think they love this. They love it for deeply emotional and irrational reasons. As a *Newsweek* reporter once wrote about Studs Terkel, the oral historian, Terkel "understands that what people need—more than sex, almost as much as food—and what they perhaps will never find, is a sympathetic ear."

Though Kotulak and Raeburn told me they don't change their behavior much when they interview, Angier said she's conscious of being friendlier as an interviewer than she is in real life. "My main trick," she says, "is to always appear fascinated by what the person is saying. Even when I think the work is tedious, I insert periodic Hmms! That's amazings! and Wows!"

How much scientists, and scholars in general, need this! Imagine their feelings—among the brightest people in the world and they get no respect. "Ain't got no common sense," says Joe Bob Underclass. Well, scholars know how dissed they are. There's no other reason that people this smart, with jobs this nice, would feel so underrated.

Now I want to talk a little further about this matter of diddling with one's persona. Everyone who's ever taught has felt the slight shift in self that occurs when he or she is in front of a class. One is oneself, sure, but tweaked maybe 17 or 18 degrees. A little more eager. A little friendlier. ON.

Now when I interview, my persona is what could generously be called The Eager Ignoramus. I flash my ignorance every few seconds. I present myself this way because I want to evoke in the professor his Mr. or Ms. Wise Parent:

"There, there, little Johnny, calm down and eventually you'll understand everything I've got to tell you."

Taking a one-down position during an interview isn't original. Listen to what Wil-

liam Howarth says about the interviewing style of John McPhee, who's written books on geology, nuclear processes and food:

"At times," Howarth writes, "his brow knits, he asks the same question over and over. When repeating answers, he so garbles them that a new answer must be provided. While McPhee insists his air of density is not a deliberate ruse, he does not deny its useful results."

My persona isn't the slow adult but the eager child. I interrupt. I ask dumb questions. I stare hard and thoughtfully. I hunch forward in my seat. My neck cranes. My hands wave. I use simple words. It's a monkey-see-monkey-do world out there; as professors watch me and listen to me, they get simpler and simpler. They pay out what they know in small bills. There are several advantages to this role:

1: If I'm a kid, I can ask anything. Interviews take forever, but I learn what I need from the ground up. In the process, I'm doing the catch-up work that most citizens in our science-ignorant land would have to do. It's worth the scientists' time because what I learn, thousands of others will also learn, through what I write.

2: If I'm a kid, I get to interrupt. That lets me meter the rate at which information flows toward me.

3: If I'm a kid, I get to parrot back what I've learned. But using this feedback technique, says Kotulak, "you're already starting to put the story in your own words." And if I get the paraphrase right, the professor says, "Exactly." I feel reinforced. She feels reinforced.

Interestingly, taking the time to echo what a person has said in order to demonstrate that you've understood is a standard technique for nurturing love. (I know this because I read self-help books about relationship, even the ones with embarrassing references to the names of nearby planets in their titles.) And so I repeat: Interviewing, at its best, is an act of profound connection and of love.

My final words concern this business of risking being a fool in front of another human being. I don't believe that you can decide, by force of will, not to be afraid of that risk. I advise that you welcome the feelings of foolishness and embarrassment and reframe their meaning. They are a testimony to your excitability and curiosity, your aliveness.

Once, at the end of an interview with

Gay Talese, Talese summarized his impression of the interviewer's style. He said, "You have this youthful enthusiasm, this exuberance... You have this sense of naivete, this eagerness—this almost bridegroom eagerness—in anticipation of the great event... You have an eternally youthful quest for knowledge and a sense of discovery you convey. That's what interviewing must be, it has to be a shared sense of discovery."

Zounds! Do I ever like that. Carve it on my headstone, please: "He asked questions with a bridegroom's eagerness."

Here's my message: Great lovers make great interviewers; great interviewers make great lovers. Be both.