

Teacher/Facilitator Guidelines for Audio School Workshop 2: The Art of Interviewing

II. The Art of Interviewing

Description: Emily Raymond of KRCB’s youth radio contingent describes what it was like for her to interview her musical idol, Billy Corgan of Smashing Pumpkins fame. From deciding what to ask (and why) to getting reticent talkers to gab, Emily shares her insights into the art of interviewing.

Length: Approximately five minutes.

Objectives:

- Students will gain a “behind-the-scenes” look at the thought process that is involved in conducting interviews.
- Students will gain valuable interviewing tips.
- Students will benefit from hearing tips/samples of audio documentaries from their peers.

Activities:

Note: Students should already have received instruction on technical aspects of interviewing—how to hold the microphone, double-checking equipment before interview, how to make eye contact, etc.—though these activities can serve to reinforce those skills.

Objective: After hearing this module, students will gain hands-on experience at conducting their own interviews.

1. Ask students to get into groups of three and interview each other, taking about 10 minutes for each interview. They should take turns being the observer; after the interview, the observer shares three things that the interviewer did that worked well and one thing that could be improved upon.
2. Another possible activity would include having your students approach and interview people they run into on the street (but always have them travel in pairs or groups for safety concerns). Encourage your students to sit and observe whatever area they are in before approaching people for interviews. These can be short conversations—5 minutes or so and focused on a particular theme (asking about people’s dreams, what they consider home, what family means to them, etc.)—but the idea is that your students become more comfortable interviewing strangers and that your students learn how to get people to share their stories. Emphasize to your students that every one has a story to tell—you just have to get them talking.
3. Another activity following the module would be to watch a portion of Alex Chadwick’s 50 Cent Interviews video (available online at http://www.musarium.com/interviews50cents/intro_fm.html). Have a discussion about his techniques: What did they notice? What worked well? What techniques could they use from the video in their own interviews? What interviews might we not be seeing (that were perhaps edited out of this montage)?

General tips:

Source: Teen Reporter Handbook, <http://www.radiodiaries.org/handbook4.html>

A good interview depends on more than just a list of questions.

*** Make your approach polite and respectful**

Explain what you're doing. Be confident. Assume your subject will want to talk to you. The way people respond depends on how you approach them. The trick is to make people realize that your project is both fun and important. Also let people know that everything can and will be edited.

*** Make the interview situation comfortable before you start**

Move chairs around, get close so you don't have to reach. For example: sit at the corner of a table, not across, so you can hold the microphone close and your arm won't grow weak.

*** Record interviews in the quietest place possible**

Be careful of TVs, stereos, traffic noise, wind, anything that will be distracting from the interview. Even refrigerators can make an annoying sound that you might not notice until you get home and listen to the tape. Sometimes you want the sound of the environment. But it's best to gather that separately, and record all the important interviews in a quiet place. Anytime you are in a loud room or noisy environment, remember to collect a few minutes of that sound on its own < what is called a "sound bed" or ambiance. If you have to record an interview in a loud place, it can help to bring the microphone even closer (2-3 inches) to the speaker's mouth.

*** Keep the microphone close**

It bears repeating here: just as when you are recording yourself, the most important thing is to keep the microphone close to the speaker's mouth (5-6 inches). If you want to record your questions too, you'll have to move the microphone back and forth.

*** Always hold the microphone**

Don't let the interviewee take the microphone. It's better if you keep control of the equipment.

*** Put people at ease**

Talk about the weather. Joke about the microphone. It's a good idea to begin recording a few minutes before you actually start the interview. That helps you avoid the uncomfortably dramatic moment: "Okay, now we will begin recording." Just chat about anything while you begin rolling tape. Before they realize it, you've started the interview.

*** Maintain eye contact**

Keep the microphone below the line of sight. Talk to people just as you would normally.

In groups, don't let everyone talk at once. If you are interviewing a few people at once, have them gather around close to the microphone.

*** Try to focus on one or two people**

Less is more. You're better off zeroing in on the characters you think are the best. Also get people to identify themselves on tape.

*** Watch out for uh-huhs**

Be aware of natural conversational responses like uh-huhs or laughter. Try to use quiet responses: a concerned nod, questioning eyes, the silent laugh.

*** Don't be afraid of pauses and silences**

Resist the temptation to jump in. Let the person think. Often the best comments come after a short, uncomfortable silence when the person you are interviewing feels the need to fill the void and add something better.

*** Let people talk in full sentences**

Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no. Instead of, "Are you a doctor?" ask, "Tell me how you became a doctor." Remember that you want people to tell you stories.

*** Get people to 'do' things**

In addition to the sit-down interview, have people show you around; record a tour of their house, their photo album or their car engine. It's more fun to get people moving around and talking about what they're doing, rather than just sitting in a chair. It helps to relax people before and during an interview. It's also a way to get good tape.

*** Listening is the key**

A good interview is like a conversation. Prepare questions, but don't just follow a list. The most important thing is to listen and have your questions come naturally. If your questions are rehearsed and hollow, the answers will be too. If you are curious and your questions are spontaneous and honest, you will get a good interview.

*** Interviewing is a two-way street**

Conducting a good interview depends, in part, on asking the right questions. But it is also important to establish a relationship with the person you are interviewing. Sometimes it is appropriate to share some information about yourself in an interview. Remember that it's a conversation. What's more, for it to be an honest conversation, people must feel that you care about what they say, and will honor and respect their words and stories.

*** The foolproof question**

Here is one simple question that always works: "How do you see things differently since (blank) happened?" If you're talking to your mailman about the time he was chased for 2 blocks by a neighborhood dog, ask how he feels every time he goes by that house.

*** Take notes**

Remember specific details. Take notes immediately after the interview, while it's still fresh in your mind. You can also use the tape recorder like a dictating machine.

*** Relax and forget about the microphone**

One thing that's always amazing: in the beginning of an interview people are usually stiff and self-conscious, but after a while, they forget all about the tape recorder and start to be themselves.

*** The last secret to a great interview**

There is one simple rule for getting people to talk openly and honestly: you have to be genuinely curious about the world around you.

Advice from Youth:

- “My goal for interviews is always to have that person, whoever they are, to tell a story at the end.... something easy for listeners to wrap their head around.”
--Emily, KRCB
- “If something gets the person talking, stay on it even if it doesn’t jive with the questions... you may end up using it. If they’re excited about something, let them go off.” –Emily
- “Picture the worst case scenario...that’s not going to happen. The odds are for you... You’ll be fine.” –Emily
- Be yourself basically. Everyone has their own style. It’s something they have in you. When you start working you have it, it’s in you. Really try to think what you want to get out of it... be thinking about how it relates to you and other people. Set your goals on paper so you know what you want and you can achieve that through your audio documentary. –Aaron
- Don’t giggle nervously all the time, which I do a lot because it tends to, like, ruin any tape you get. –Kiera
- Silence is OK. – Kiera
- Have a backup plan in case one of your questions that you think is really good totally falls through. –Amber
- Plan out your questions before you ask them and expect the unexpected. [People] can say some weird stuff. –Addie
- Pretend like the microphone isn’t there, so that they can open up to you and they can tell you all their deep secrets! –Deandre
- One of my tricks for making features is to actually do my research. I find that if you get the history down, if you know about the subject, you can ask more questions. And the kind of questions you can ask, if you map them out before hand, can really make a difference. Also, silence can really make a difference. If you pause and not ask them a question, they will feel like they need to answer the question more... you can get great stuff. –Dan
- Treat places that you go with respect. --Dan

Additional resources on interviewing techniques:

- Allison, J. (2001). The basics (interviewing/recording tips). Retrieved April 12, 2006 from http://www.transom.org/tools/recording_interviewing/200101.basics.jallison.html.
- Chadwick, Alex (2002). Interviews 50 cents. Retrieved on April 12, 2006, from http://www.musarium.com/interviews50cents/intro_fm.html.
- Davis, K. *Shout out! A kid's guide to recording stories*. Retrieved in November 2005 from <http://www.transom.org/tools/basics/200501.shoutout.kdavis.html>.
- Radio College Training Guides (Association of Independents in Radio) at <http://www.radiocollege.org/lc/training/index.php>