

THE
POWER



OF LISTENING

A BEST NEWSPAPER WRITING
BROWN BAG

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The Power of Listening: A Best Newspaper Writing Brown Bag

By Chip Scanlan

Poynter Senior Faculty-Writing

To be a good interviewer you must learn to listen -- both to others and to yourself.

"A lot of times we beat ourselves," says Pat Stith, a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter for the Raleigh *News & Observer*. "We don't listen. We don't ask simple, direct, follow-up questions. We just talk, and we talk, and we talk. We forget why we're there. (We're there to acquire information.) When we're talking, we're not acquiring anything."

Effective interviewing is a pillar of good reporting and writing. The ability to talk comfortably with people and to persuade them to give you information is one of the reporter's most important skills. Yet journalists get little or no training in this vital aspect of their job. Most learn by painful trial and error.

To help rectify that situation, this Best Newspaper Writing Brown Bag is devoted to interviewing skills. Listen to ASNE winners and finalists talk about successful interviewing techniques, practice some of those tips, and explore other resources.

"Somebody once wrote that there's no more seductive sentence in the English language than, 'I want to hear your story,' and maybe they're right," Albom said in "Best Newspaper Writing 1996." "Because often you don't have to do any more than just say that."

Perhaps not, but a good interview may also require preparation. The night before an interview, legendary Associated Press feature writer Saul Pett recalled, "I'll be sitting in a motel room, nervously trying to think of questions, and it makes for a more spontaneous interview."

Prepare your questions. Write them down. Train yourself to ask them as you wrote them. Don't stumble. Ask the question and then stop. Don't apologize for asking it. Don't be afraid to ask the question again and again. Broadcast journalists know they may have to ask the question more than once to get an answer on tape that conveys meaning.

A good interview may have to be short, but the smart reporter always makes time to listen. Colin Nickerson's prize-winning package of stories included one from the first Persian Gulf War that was written "four hours after I started reporting" and was based on "two or three good interviews," he recalled in "Best Newspaper Writing 1992." It's not time that matters, he said, but interest. "You need to show that you care about their story."

During my reporting career, using a tape recorder taught me my most important lesson of interviewing: to shut up. It was a painful learning experience, having to listen to myself stepping on people's words, cutting them off just as they were getting

enthusiastic or appeared about to make a revealing statement. There were far too many times I heard myself asking overly long and leading questions, instead of simply saying, "Why?" or "How did it happen?" or "When did all this begin?" or "What do you mean?" and then closing my mouth and letting people answer.

"Learning to listen has been the great lesson of my life," David Ritz wrote in *The Writer*. "You can't capture a subject or render someone lifelike, you can't create a living voice, with all its unique twists and turns, without listening. Now there are those who listen while waiting breathlessly to break in. For years, that was me. But I'm talking about patient listening, deep-down listening, listening with the heart as well as the head, listening in a way that lets the person know you care, that you want to hear what she has to say, that you're enjoying the sound of her voice."

There's a scene in "All the President's Men" when Robert Redford, as *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward, asks a Republican how his \$25,000 check ended up in the Watergate money trail. It's a dangerous question, and you see Woodward ask it and then hang there, not saying a word, until the man on the other end of the phone finally blurts out another piece of the puzzle. The moral here: To get people to talk, we need to learn the power of listening.

BNW Winners on Listening

“I always try to get right to the point. I don’t make silly talk, because I think people distrust that. I think the minute you say you’re from a newspaper, everybody’s antenna goes up. So get to your point. Don’t say, ‘So, how you doing? How’s things going? Hey, you’re working at Ford. Ford’s got a nice new Taurus out, don’t they?’ I wouldn’t want to be insulted like that.

“Never assume that you can pull the wool over anybody’s eyes, just because you’re a reporter and they’re an average citizen, you know. You wouldn’t try that with a savvy politician or athlete. Don’t try it with the average person. I always say, ‘Here’s why I’m calling. I know about your son’s story. I know it’s probably a very painful thing for you to talk about, and I certainly understand if you can’t.’ And I always offer them that option, right from the start. In any situation that is uncomfortable, they need to know they don’t have to do it, and they need to hear you say they don’t have to do it.

“Remember, I am not investigating a criminal offense by a prominent politician, in which case he shouldn’t have an option not to do it. He owes his public an explanation. These are people who have suffered private tragedies, and owe nobody anything. They don’t owe me a story, and they don’t owe the newspaper a story, and they don’t owe the public anything. Right off the bat, you can’t make them feel that they have to give you a story. And so I try to state to them, ‘Listen. You know, I’m going to ask you something here that may be too tough for you, and I understand perfectly, and so please don’t think I’m pressuring you. Here is why I’m interested in your story. Here’s what good I think can come out of it.’

“I don’t walk up to people with a notepad. That’s so frightening to the average citizen. I keep my notepads and my tape recorders in my pocket if I go up to somebody, and I ask them if it’s something they want to do. And if it is, then I say to them, ‘OK. Let me explain how this works, if you’ve never been interviewed before. I’m going to use a notepad and a tape recorder, and I can’t often read my notes and so I have a tape recorder.’ Try to put them at ease with it, and they usually laugh. I say, ‘So is that OK with you?’ And they say, ‘Yes.’ So I reach in my bag, and I take it out. Then already they don’t look at it as a weapon. Somebody once wrote that there’s no more seductive sentence in the English language than, ‘I want to hear your story,’ and maybe they’re right. Because often you don’t have to do any more than just say that.”

— Mitch Albom, *Detroit Free Press*
Best Newspaper Writing 1996, Sports Writing

“If you go in there with a laundry list of questions, and you’ve got blinkers on, and you don’t observe what’s going on, you really are going to miss the guts of the story. You keep your eyes open and as far as relating to people is concerned, I hate the laundry list approach. Sometimes I’ll use it if all I’m interested in is a factual response. But most of the time I’m interested in an emotional response and I’m trying, even in the half-hour interview, to get a little closer to this guy than might ordinarily be possible.

“I usually do that by showing real interest in what he does for a living. And I am interested in what he does for a living, so I guess it shows.”

— William E. Blundell, *The Wall Street Journal*
Best Newspaper Writing 1982, Non-Deadline Writing

“I kind of plan the opening, either with a little humor, or something to relax them, or something that will interest them. I think the success of an interview depends on whether you interest the guy. You get him to where he feels like talking about himself. This sounds like a contradiction: The night before, I’ll be sitting in a motel room, nervously trying to think of questions, and it makes for a more spontaneous interview.

“I want it to be relaxed. Ideally the interview will come off like a conversation. There’s another trick – it’s so obvious – but it’s a thing I had to learn: Relax, Charlie. Don’t be a district attorney. Give the man time. Don’t worry about a pause. If you ask him something and he says yes or no, and he pauses, you let him pause. He’s thinking about something. You frequently get some awfully good things that way, letting the guy or woman talk. If you get an interview only on the basis of their quick and ready answers, you’ve got kind of a formal thing.”

—Saul Pett, Associated Press
Best Newspaper Writing 1981, Non-Deadline Writing

“I tend to give my two cents and say, ‘Oh yeah, I know what you mean. That happened to me once,’ because that makes people comfortable. But you can’t do too much of it.”

—Anne Hull, *St. Petersburg Times*
Best Newspaper Writing 1994, Non-Deadline Writing

“I find that people understand the things they are fascinated with. If you are willing to be technical with athletes, to deal with them at the level at which they do it ... If you talk to a golfer about how you extend down the line of a long two-iron shot, you will find that he opens up and goes from the particular to the general in wonderful ways. If you’re willing to wade through the particulars of what they do, you’ll see the general illuminating principle that’s behind it.”

—Thomas Boswell, *The Washington Post*
Best Newspaper Writing 1981, Sports Writing

“One thing I learned early on as a reporter, that it’s a lot better looking stupid to your sources than looking stupid to your readers. Throughout my career I’ve confronted people who have said something to me in a very offhand way as if I should know exactly what they are talking about. And I’ve said, ‘Wait a minute, what are you talking about?’ I think sometimes their esteem for me fell a little bit as a result of asking the question, but I’d much rather have that than having to write around some point to camouflage the fact that I didn’t know what I was talking about or else get it wrong.”

—Peter Rinearson, *The Seattle Times*
Best Newspaper Writing 1984, Business Writing

“I will never intrude upon somebody’s misery or sadness. If they don’t want to talk to me, I can perhaps understand it. Of course, we have a job to do also. We have to call back. And we have to look at another avenue of approach to this person. It can be a catharsis to talk about tragedy. It relieves just a little bit of that burden. If that’s what we can also do, fine. But that’s our job: to make people want to talk with us. We have to approach people and let them have their dignity and let them have the choice. If you put that up front, people are much more willing to cooperate.”

—Joe Nawrozski, *The (Baltimore) News American*
Best Newspaper Writing 1984, Finalist, Deadline Writing

“The quotes are not dropped into your lap. I’ve heard so many reporters complain that they don’t get good quotes. If I had simply gone in and asked two or three questions, they’d have simply given me the usual gung-ho nonsense: ‘Well, we’re proud to be here. We are ready to do our job. We just want to do what we’re told to do.’ It’s when you sit down with them, and maybe share water from a canteen, and just chat, that finally they’ll open up and say what’s really on their minds ... You can spend time. When I say, ‘time,’ it might be a half-hour, it might be 15 minutes. You need to show that you care about their story... You are interested in what they’re thinking; you are curious about them as people.”

—Colin Nickerson, *The Boston Globe*
Best Newspaper Writing 1992, Deadline Writing