

Painless Interviewing Tips for Authors

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Why bother interviewing someone?

- ✓ The internet is great, but...
- ✓ Its information is often second-hand, impersonal, and stale.
- ✓ Real people will spark ideas you never dreamed of (fresh take on tired stories).

Finding someone who can help bring realism to your story

- ✓ What information do you need to add realism, depth, or heart to your story?
 - History, medical conditions, professions, hobbies, locations/geography, science, paranormal or magic systems, psychology, etc.
- ✓ Who can help you with this information?
 - Subject matter expert: anyone with experience with or passion for the topic.
- ✓ Where can you find subject matter experts?
 - Relatives, friends, museums, restaurants, professionals, teachers or professors, support groups online/social media, hobby stores, hobby or enthusiast associations, etc.
- ✓ Everyone loves talking about something they're passionate about!

Preparing for the interview

- ✓ Do your homework *before* the interview so you don't waste time on mundane info.
- ✓ What's your specific purpose for talking to them? Narrow your focus.
- ✓ Write down a list of questions.
- ✓ Select the right location for the interview.
- ✓ Tell them how long you'll take. Stick to it.
- ✓ Give them time to prepare—tell them what you'll be asking about so they have time to find documents, dates, anecdotes, etc.
- ✓ Choose your tools (recorder, notepad, laptop, etc.).

Conducting the interview

The warm-up

- ✓ Remember, they're nervous, too! So be warm, friendly, and reassuring.
- ✓ Start with simple questions (name, spelling, title, years worked, etc.) and small talk to warm up.
- ✓ Briefly explain what you're writing about and why you have these questions, but don't give them the whole story (2-3 sentences, max).
- ✓ Get permission before recording.

Getting to the good stuff

- ✓ Don't talk – you want their quotes, not yours.
- ✓ Let silences happen. It gives them time to think.
- ✓ Keep them focused on your questions. Control their rambles.
- ✓ If relevant, note their environment (knickknacks, photos, etc.) and their personal appearance (disheveled, prim, nervous, gregarious, etc.).
- ✓ Avoid Yes/No questions. Always ask open-ended questions.

The finish line

- ✓ Look at your questions! Get answers to all your questions before you leave.
- ✓ To end an interview:
 - Thank them.
 - Ask if you can call again if you have another question.
 - Give them your contact info in case they think of something else to tell you.

Incorporating your research into your story

- ✓ Always try to find the *story*.
- ✓ Think about the scene in your story, not the facts you've learned.
- ✓ If you're using direct quotes:
 - Keep wording as accurate as possible.
 - Verify their quotes with them, preferably via phone so they can't edit your story.
 - Never send the whole manuscript to an interviewee to review.

Record-keeping (a.k.a. CYA)

- ✓ Keep copies of interview notes and research labeled, dated, and filed with your story.
- ✓ Useful in case of legal issues or complaints after publication.
- ✓ Useful for future stories, but get their permission to re-use material from their interview!