

You're asking the wrong questions: How to interview like a journalist

[General Interest](#) · February 2, 2015 · [Jory MacKay](#)

I have a little cousin who responds to everything you say with 'why?' and I think she's on to something.

Asking questions is how we learn. It's how we pass our experiences from one person to the next.

Whether you're trying to understand your customer's behaviours, sitting down with an influencer or potential mentor, or even just making new friends and connections, asking the right questions is an integral part of how we grow.

So how come so many of us suck at it?

[The journalist's playbook: how to get the most from every conversation](#)

Here's a quick disclaimer: I never *really* wanted to be a journalist. At University I signed up for an ambiguously titled minor in 'professional writing' because I thought it would give me better real world skills than an English lit degree.

Two years later I took my first real job at a magazine publisher in the UK.

Journalism training didn't just get me a job, however, it changed the way I think and talk. I became more observant of people, picking up on the subtle nuances in someone's voice and learning how to read their body language. It changed the way I viewed the world and what details I look for. Everything became part of a bigger narrative—colours, smells, sounds became fodder plucked out of the real world and put on page.

But most importantly, it taught me how to ask questions.

Knowing how to ask questions and conduct interviews won't just help you grow your business or connect with the people you want to, it will make you a better conversationalist, and just more fun to talk to.

So, here's my personal guide to asking the right questions taken from years of interviewing and learning from some very smart people:

[Before the meeting practice the two P's](#)

There's a saying in newsrooms that good interviews follow the two *P*'s: persistence and preparation.

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Persistence is knowing what you want out of the conversation and not giving in when your questions aren't answered or aren't answered properly (we'll go more into this later).

Preparation seems pretty self-explanatory, but there's a few tricks you can learn here.

Before you talk to someone, you need to gather as much background information as possible: Read past blog posts, Tweets, published articles, or old interviews and see what common themes come up.

[A.J. Liebling](#), a master reporter who moved from the newspaper newsroom to The New Yorker magazine said:

“The preparation is the same whether you are going to interview a diplomat, a jockey, or an ichthyologist. From the man's past you learn what questions are likely to stimulate a response.”

Obviously, you want to be well researched and ready for any major conversation you have, but life is a funny thing and sometimes we're thrust into important conversations without much (or any) warning.

One trick I learned at journalism school was to create a cheat sheet of questions you can draw from. This can include generic ones about background and current/past work, but also ones related specifically to the *type* of person you're talking to. If you're a founder talking to other founders, I'm sure there are initial questions that come to mind about starting and running a company. If you're talking to an influencer in your field you'll want to know how they got to where they are, what actions they took had the biggest impact, and who their mentors and personal heroes are.

Come up with 10-15 questions you would ask someone in a specific position so you're always prepared when the time comes.

When forming questions use the DOS system

When you think of the reason why you're asking someone a question it really comes down to a very simple explanation: they have information you want. So why would you complicate the transaction?

Here's my own personal formula for crafting questions:

1. Direct

What's that? Come on now, spit it out. There's nothing worse than a longwinded, roundabout question that leaves your interviewee saying 'huh?'

If you want an answer, ask the question that would naturally lead to it, or as investor [Brad Feld](#) says, “If you want a response, ask specific questions”.

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While it might seem scary at first, the easiest way to get what you want is usually the shortest way. So ask direct questions that clearly state what it is you're after.

2. Open-ended

In a nutshell, an open-ended question is one that can't be answered with a simple yes or no. They usually start with 'how', 'why', or 'what do you think about...'

Asking these sorts of questions means you're going to get a more thought out response than something that can be quickly answered.

However, open-ended and closed-ended questions both have their uses and a common journalistic trick is to start with open and move onto closed-ended questions (especially when dealing with a sensitive subject).

3. Short

Keep it simple. Keep it short.

Shane Snow, co-founder of Contently (and a damn good journalist), [wrote a piece](#) highlighting the difference between questions asked by Digg Founder Kevin Rose and veteran PBS/CBS interview host Charlie Rose during interviews with Elon Musk.

Kevin: *What led you into entrepreneurship? Was it something that you always knew that you wanted to be, an entrepreneur on your own? Or did you stumble into it?*

Charlie: *What are you doing in terms of planetary exploration?*

Kevin: *Where do you come up with your best ideas? Are you on vacation, or do you wake up in the middle of the night and draw things down?*

Charlie: *How did you go about the design?*

Kevin: *When did you decide to get into computers and technology? Did you start coding? Or was it a lot of...?*

Charlie: *What do you think?*

What's the takeaway? Just ask the question. That's it. Don't offer potential answers. Don't give any options to dodge or deflect.

Instead of saying: 'What would you like me to do today? Should I work on the monthly roundup or should I jump into next month's calendar or what about this project that's due tomorrow?' Just say: 'What would you like me to do?'

When you crowd someone else's brain with your own ideas you're not giving them space to really think. If you do half the work for them while asking the question you'll only be getting half an answer.

Embrace the silence

Immediately after you've asked your question you'll want to fill the [awkward, empty space](#) in the air with more words, but don't. Let your questions sit out there in the world. I know you want to go and nurture them, but you've thought them through and now they have to do what they were made to do.

One trick I've used in the past to stop myself from blurting out useless follow-ups is to count in my head until the other person starts talking. That way, you're keeping your mind occupied while giving the other person time to think.

And silence isn't necessarily a bad thing. Silence can also show that the person you're talking to is giving your question time and consideration. So slow down!

Learn to use the subtle art of conversation persuasion

The beginning stage of any conversation is a feeling-out period—a give and take. While you're working your interviewee to see how they respond to certain types of questions, they're judging you on how much research you've done and deciding ultimately whether or not they trust you enough to answer thoroughly and honestly.

Sometimes, no matter how well prepared and persistent you are, the conversation just won't go the way you want it to. People, especially influential ones, are slow to build trust and wary of giving too much away.

If you have the time, one way to work around this is to start with a generic set of questions that show you're invested and interested in them as a person, not just in getting what you want. Everyone likes to talk about themselves and people will actually perceive you as nicer and more trustworthy if you ask questions about them.

And what if your interviewee still won't relax and answer the harder questions you've prepared?

Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist [Wendell Rawls Jr.](#), suggests using 'junk questions' as a way to guide the conversation in the way you want.

“Don't tell people what you know. Ask questions. Then back off. Use diversion. I love to do that—talk with people about things you're not there to talk to them about. You ask a question that may be very meaningful. Then you move away from it...maybe ask two or three questions about junk, and then come back and ask another very pointed question.” – Wendell Rawls Jr.

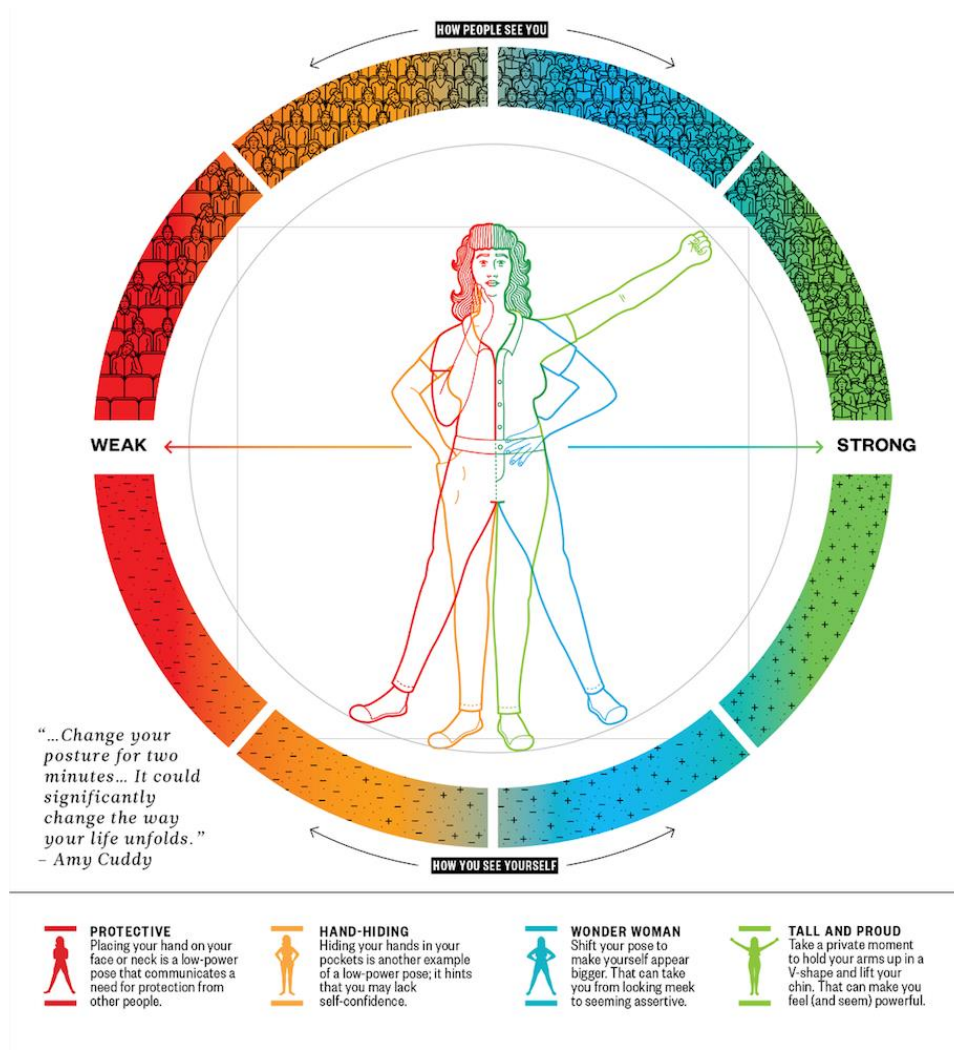
Of course, we don't always have time for simple chatter or junk questions, so read the situation and choose your plan of attack.

Which brings us to...

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Read body language—It's not always what's said...

If you're talking in person, body language and other non-verbal clues are huge indicators of how your interviewee is feeling and whether or not you're getting the best from them.



“Great reporters are great listeners,” said Carl Bernstein of the Woodward-Bernstein reporting team that exposed the Watergate cover-up, but they’re also great at reading situations and picking up non-verbal cues.

How did your question make your interviewee feel? Are they uncomfortable? Are they smiling? Did you hit a nerve or trigger a happy memory?

How are they holding themselves?

Are their feet facing you or have they shifted away? (signalling they want the conversation to be over)

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Are they in a [high power pose](#)?

What about the eyes? Have their pupils shrunk (signalling anger) or dilated (showing excitement)?

So much of what someone is telling you goes beyond the words themselves and being blissfully unaware of those signs can ruin all of the hard work you've already put in.

While interviewing someone as a journalist is a formal process, the act of asking questions and discovering someone's story is natural for all of us.

Which brings me to my last, and possibly most important tip—the whole point of interviewing, asking questions, or just talking to someone new is to *learn*. If you don't understand what someone's said stop nodding along and ask a follow-up, or better off come on out and say 'sorry can you explain that bit about X again?'

It won't make you look stupid and in the end you'll get what you were after, which was the whole point.

Reference:

Mackay, J. (2015, February 2). *Blog*. Retrieved February 11, 2017, from crew.co:
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