Tips For Interviewing Someone You Know

In normal conversations, we “interview” people we know all the time. But casually saying hello to a friend or relative can feel really different than sitting down with them with a goal in mind. You’ll want to capitalize on your familiarity with your interviewee to get the best stories and answers as possible, but also keep in mind that your conversation can’t be so filled with inside jokes and references that other people won’t understand what you’re talking about.

To set the scene for a strong interview with someone you know, it’s a good idea to:

(a) Sit next to them instead of across from them – this position facilitates intimacy and can feel less formal than other types of interviews.
(b) Interview them in a place that’s meaningful to them – their room, home or favorite spot will make for a better scene than a loud, sterile place like a busy coffee shop.
(c) Go into the interview with set goals. It’s really easy to let conversations wander when talking to friends and family. Know the kinds of answers you’re looking for and redirect the conversation if it strays too far from the main point.

Even though you know the person you’re interviewing, you’re going to want to spend some time writing questions ahead of time. Here are some tips to get the best responses possible when talking to someone you already know well:

Get the whole story ... Even if you think you already know it.

Many times when we interview people we know, it’s because we’re trying to capture stories we’ve already heard from them before. But getting our friends and family members to retell the same story in an exciting and detailed way can take a little probing. Keep asking for more details in a step-by-step fashion.

EXAMPLE: “So walk me through the day you first came to the United States..... And then what happened?... And then what happened?”

EXAMPLE: “You once told me that you hated your first job. What exactly did you hate about it? What did you do? And then what did you do?”

Interact with them during the Interview

When you interview people you know, don’t become so formal that you forget to react to the things they are telling you. The way you interact with people we know tells readers and listeners a lot about your relationship with that person. Emotions, humor and energy make for excellent “tape,” meaning the audio quality of the interview.

EXAMPLE: “What?? You never told me that you used to be a flight attendant? When did that happen?”
Let the silence do the talking

If you ask a person you know a question and they don't answer immediately, it can be tempting to fill the silence yourself. But sometimes the best technique is to simply sit in silence until the other person responds. This is especially true when you are asking a difficult or emotional question.

EXAMPLE: “How did that make you feel? ....(silence)”

Clarify inside jokes, words or references

It’s perfectly normal to reference inside jokes or use special vocabulary when talking to people we know. But during an interview, we want to make sure listeners and readers understand too. Ask the person you’re interviewing to explain what a term means or go into more details about a past story.

EXAMPLE: “Can you explain what you mean when you say ‘someone pulled a ‘Nikki,’” for someone who doesn’t know Nikki?”

Probe for specific examples

Stories are more powerful than general sweeping statements, so it’s always a good idea to ask for examples. Have your friends and relatives give examples and look for details that enrich the story.

EXAMPLE: “You say you had a funny relationship with your parents. Can you give me an example?”

EXAMPLE: “You say got really dressed up for your date. How exactly did you prepare?”

Make it a conversation

It’s tempting when we write interview questions to read them straight off the paper. But, especially when talking to people you know well, sticking too much to the script can make your interview seem too halting and disconnected. Keep your goals in mind, but let the interview flow as naturally as possible. Make sure to take a few minutes to go off-script and just be yourself!

EXAMPLE: “Hey I forgot to ask you, how did that job interview go last week?”

EXAMPLE: “Hold on, I want to hear more about that. How come mom never told me that?”

Be careful with how you share information you are privy to because of your relationship

You may know that your story will end up on the national news, but does the person you’re interviewing know that? You may already know the deepest, darkest secrets of the person you’re interviewing, but that doesn’t mean you have his or her consent to bring it up in the interview. If you’re not sure whether or not to ask about a sensitive piece of information, try asking yourself if it is truly relevant to the story, if it changes the context of a person’s answers, and if it adds anything new to the story. In the end, it’s a moral call that is up to you and your interviewee.