

Conducting an Interview

Research, research, research....

In order to formulate insightful questions to ask your subject, you must learn as much as you can about them before hand. This applies whether you're interviewing a local politician, a famous musician, or your grandmother.

Consider the nature of the interview when formulating questions. For the politician you'll want to learn about any legislation they've been involved with, and read as many news articles as you can find in which your subject has been mentioned or quoted.

For a musician, you might want research their current projects, listen to their past recordings, or go see them perform if possible.

Just before the interview...

Setup:

You want your subject to be relaxed, so make sure they have a sturdy and comfortable place to sit. Avoid chairs that roll or spin, as people tend to move around and swivel when they are nervous. On a similar note, it is advisable to remove any objects that your subject might be tempted to fidget with. If they need something to do with their hands, consider giving them a cup or mug of water (this is a common practice on TV talk shows.)

Lighting:

It is best to light an interview with soft even light. Dramatic lighting can distort facial expressions and wind up portraying responses in a way not intended by the subject. If you are indoors, consider putting a light source near the camera.

TIP: Use soft light if possible.

Consider conducting an interview in an environment natural to the subject:

Either by choice, or by necessity, you might end up interviewing someone within a non-traditional setup. You might consider interviewing a carpenter in his or her workshop so they can demonstrate what they are talking about; or you might meet someone on the street with a story to tell, but no chair to sit in. Be flexible and try to find creative ways to make the best of the environment you are in.

During the interview...

Framing:

A traditional, and neutral, way to frame a subject in an interview is slightly off-center and with a small amount of room above their head. Use a tripod and set up the camera at about their eye level.

TIP: Avoid wide-angle lenses while shooting an interview.

TIP: Interviews can be effective with the subject addressing the interviewer, and they can also be effective with the subject addressing the camera. However, it is best to pick one or the other and stick to your choice throughout your interview.

Be aware of your demeanor:

Be relaxed, friendly, and polite in the way you ask questions. Even if you fundamentally disagree with the person you are interviewing, do NOT let those feelings show. Asking attacking questions can cause your subject to close-off and be guarded in their responses. If you want the truest depiction of your subject, it is best to make them feel relaxed and comfortable--even consider joking around a bit. If you do this, they will be more relaxed. and therefore more likely to answer your questions truthfully.

What role do you play in this interview?

Are you going to be on-screen asking questions, or are you going to be off-screen with your subject speaking to the camera? If you will not be seen, it is best to ask the subject to rephrase each question in their answer.

Example:

Question: How long were you married to your husband?

Response: Frank and I were married for 54 years.

If your subject does not rephrase the question and just replies "54 years" your audience will have no clue what she's talking about.

Sound Tip: If you have access to a lavalier or shotgun mic, this would be a great situation to use it.

After the interview...

Be respectful of your subject when editing. Video is a powerful medium, and a subject can be made to say things they clearly did not intend with relative ease in the cutting room. If you are going to break up the footage, make sure it is in a place where the context of what your subject is saying is not lost.

If a subject tells you something is "off the record" during the interview... it is just that. You CANNOT publicly display that footage, because to do so would be unethical. The fact that the camera was rolling is irrelevant.