

Basic Training: Shooting an Interview

by Kyle Cassidy

It might not be 60 Minutes, (more like 15 minutes!) but if you want to make your interviews shine like Ed Bradley's on CBS, read on!

Videotaping interviews is as ubiquitous as weddings and baseball games. There are a few tips and tricks that can turn fifteen questions in the back yard with your parents into a professional looking document.

There are several styles of interviewing, and you should choose the style that works best for your particular project.

1) Interviewer is visible and audible -- think TV talk show -- Oprah, the Tonight Show, etc. Often used when you have a celebrity or professional journalist as the interviewer. The audience is interested in the question and the questioner as well.

2) Interviewer is not visible, but audible -- allows you to get close up reactions of the subject. The questions themselves are important, but the subject's reactions are more so. Think "press conference."

3) Interviewer not visible or audible -- this is a common method of getting the subject to narrate. Recently the HBO miniseries "Band of Brothers" began with interview snippets from WWII survivors, their commentary set the stage for each episode -- but without hearing or seeing the interviewer, the viewer was left with a more intimate perspective, as though the interviewees were speaking directly to them.

Mimic the Masters

Your homework assignment for this week is to pay attention to every interview you see on television -- from the news, to comedy shows, to late night, to documentaries. What are the producers doing that makes the interview work? Is there anything they could be doing better? How is the background? How is the light? What kind of light was it? How much time do you think they spent in preparation? Are they using a shallow depth of field, or a deep one?

Be Prepared

Just like the Boy Scouts say. The better prepared you are, the better your interview will be and the less annoyed your subject will be. In the case of busy people, like corporate executives or politicians, minimize their time on set as much as possible, they have other things to do rather than sit around and watch you take light meter readings. Use a stand-in while setting up lights and testing equipment. Always arrive on time with equipment you've tested and set up before. If necessary, rehearse setting up first. Be prepared for changes as well.

Sure, they told you it was a 15x18-foot room, but anticipate that you may have to move to a 9x8-foot room at the last minute.

Lights! Camera! Lights!

A large percentage of interviews are shot using standard three-point lighting. It's called standard for a reason. If you aren't familiar with setting it up, start practicing. Even if you're not using it, you will some day. Like not knowing whom the first vice president was, you don't want to be caught looking like a fool. Softboxes are very nice for casting beautiful soft light. For best results, get your softbox as close as possible. Window light is the old standby, everything else is just an imitation. If your interview is brief and there's good natural light, don't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Shoot Coverage and Reaction Shots

You may remember the scene in *Broadcast News* when TV anchor William Hurt shocks his camera crew by being able to cry at will, not while listening to a sad story, but rather after the story had been taped. It's common for the camera crew to tape "reaction shots" -- which are images of the interviewer nodding, brooding, acknowledging, listening, etc. (But not "crying on cue," which serious journalists would consider unethical.) Then you can cover up jump cuts during editing later. Also, shoot coverage shots of things like the subject's hands. At the same time you may want to record "room tone" -- which is the ambient sound of the room with no one talking. 30 seconds of this might save you in the editing room when you need to cut in some quiet and not have it sound strange.

Shooting and Interviewing

Things become significantly more complex if you're the interviewer and the shooter as well. It forces you to choose between static camera shots (over your shoulder, a two shot, or maybe a 3/4 closeup of the subject's face) or your own ability to be in the shot. If you're controlling the camera, be sure to wear headphones and listen to the audio as it comes from the camera -- be sure of your voice levels. If you're in the shot, you might be able to wear a single earpiece and have it not show. Make sure one voice isn't louder than the other. If you can, use two microphones so you can adjust the sound mix in post if necessary.

Walking and Talking

"Perp walk" is a phrase used by journalists to denote the embarrassing gauntlet from the car to the courthouse steps that people involved in court cases must make. Often times these people are beset by journalists and photographers, the journalists walking along side and asking questions while the suspect, attorney, or other individual inevitably barks "no comment!" before ducking into the courthouse. You and your cameraperson won't always be bouncing through a field of hungry sharks like this, but some things still apply if you're walking through a park with an aging civil rights leader recalling a march that took place 30 years ago. Your cameraperson is probably walking backwards, so be careful

where you steer him. On a large production, an assistant will walk backwards behind the cameraperson, holding onto him, usually with a good grip on the back of his pants or belt, watching the ground and making sure nobody trips. Also, wired microphones are usually out for this sort of thing, which relegates you to wireless or boom mics. Make sure you have enough crew to help ensure that your production will go off without a hitch.

Conclusion

Don't figure things out on your subject's time. Be prepared, study, practice. Know your equipment and how to use it. Be thorough and professional, make a product that you and your subject can be proud of. And don't shine that light in my eyes.

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Sidebar:

How to Deal with Difficult Subjects

1) Subject talks too much, strays from the topic

Ask the subject to speak concisely, limiting answers to a specific period of time, which may be as little as five seconds if you're looking for a sound bite, or as long as several minutes, depending on what your final use will be. Ask the subject to stay on topic, let them know that there will be a period at the end where you'll ask them anything that you've missed.

2) Subject doesn't talk enough, gives one-word answers

Explain to the subject that the viewers might not hear the question and that they need to answer it fully. Instead of "yes" they should answer, "Yes, I think it's time that someone makes a movie of The Catcher in the Rye." It is also the onus of the interviewer to ask questions that invite the subject to speak. In stead of asking open-ended questions such as "Do you think it's time someone made a movie of The Catcher in the Rye"?, ask "What are some of the challenges about a movie adaptation of The Catcher in the Rye?"

3) Subject is nervous

Tell a joke. Ask the subject to tell a joke. Ask a few easy, lowball questions like "did you have any pets as a child? What do you remember about them?" to get people talking. Unless you're doing hard news or live television, you can also assure your subject that if they fumble an answer and want to start again, they can do that. Interview them in comfortable surroundings -- how about their living room instead of your studio? Minimize lights -- maybe window light and a single reflector will work instead of using your impressive light kit.

4) Kids... how to get a comment

Children invariably will answer, "I don't know", "neat", "gross", and a host of other

one word comments when you ask a simple, "How did you like your first day of school?" To get a better response, draw them out to supply more information with a comment instead. If you ask, "Tell me about your first day of school.", you'll go a lot farther and get better usable sound.

Finally, kids (and some adults,) often end their comments with the phrase, "and stuff like that." A lazy journalist leaves that comment in, a good editor will cut out that throwaway phrase, to end the sentence on a strong point.

