

Silence has a curious potency – actors use it as a form of emphasis: of what they have just said or are about to say. It can also signal a change of direction. You don't let it go on for ever, but often all that is necessary to move things on is a simple prompt ('What do you think?' etc.) or an interrogative movement of the head.

So it is more than just cutting back on your contribution: there is technique to it. In fact, if you talk less and listen more you will be able to 'steer' the interview more effectively, in the right direction and at the right pace – because you won't be doing all the work. Not doing most of the talking signals to interviewees that that's *their* job, that *they* are the focus of the interview.

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Organizing and Managing the Interview

The topics and questions that you are clarifying and developing have to be inserted in some overall structure. This doesn't have to be elaborate (better not) but you do need a clear idea of the framework you are using – on which the detail rests.

Initially you can think of it in terms of four main stages:

- the introductory phase;
- the opening development of the interview;
- the central core of the interview;
- bringing the interview to a close, both socially and in terms of content.

Even in a short interview the first and last of these are important, but often neglected because they are not *centrally* what the interview is all about. But attention to them helps to get the interview content into shape, and this is particularly true of the introductory phase where you explain the purpose to the interviewee. 'Closure' – bringing the interview to a close – includes an element of *reviewing* what has been covered: and important additional material may emerge even at this point.

The introductory phase

This isn't just a matter of what you say in an 'introductory' way at the beginning of the interview. It starts in advance of the actual interview.

Before they come to the interview the people concerned need to have:

- a clear idea of why *they* have been asked;
- basic information about the purpose of the interview and the research project of which it is a part;
- some idea of the probable length of the interview and that you would like to record it (explaining *why*);
- a clear idea of precisely where and when the interview will take place.

Much of this is first dealt with in person (although perhaps over the telephone), *but you confirm everything in writing*. Particular care has to be taken over the last, practical part if the meeting place is not familiar to the interviewee. You should include: a photocopied section of a street or campus map; precise instructions as to the location of the room if the building is a large one; details of how to get in touch with you if there are queries or changes or things go wrong.

This 'efficiency' aspect is partly so that valuable time isn't wasted (and possible confusion is avoided). But it is much more than that. The fact that you have taken the trouble to consult and inform people carries its own message: that you are taking the interview seriously; that you appreciate their cooperation: that the occasion is important to you; that you respect their rights and feelings in the matter. These factors (or the obverse) will have a marked effect on the attitude of interviewees, and their mental preparation for the interview.

It is the same thing with the setting and its arrangement. What messages do they convey? Are the room and the chairs you will be using reasonably comfortable? Does the room

look 'organized' and prepared? Do you have refreshments to offer (the interviewee may have had to travel)? Are you prepared in all practical respects? These details are not trivial: and in combination they add to (or detract from) the 'message'.

What does your appearance convey? It is not a matter of whether you are formally dressed (though a markedly 'informal' appearance may suggest a carelessness of attitude) but if you are dressed with a bit of care that conveys something positive.

If you are going to record the interview it is necessary to make sure that you are *entirely* familiar with the machine and that *in position* it records conversation well (but you will need to check this again at the start of the interview). If you aren't prepared in this respect it is easy to get flustered: this is not impressive and it can lead to mistakes.

Make sure you are in the interview room well ahead of the appointment time. This is common courtesy, and it can be a source of confusion if you are late, another 'message' conveyed.

This pre-interview stage has been spelt out at some length because it is important and because it is often entirely missed out in books dealing with interviewing 'technique'. Technique is only half the picture.

The introduction (like 'closure') has its 'social' components: a handshake, a question about their journey, an offer of refreshment. Introduce yourself by name, but not by title (a lack of taste, which makes things appear more formal than necessary: 'I'm Janet Jones'). If the interviewee chooses to address you by your first name then that cues you to do the same; but don't assume that all people are willing to accept that from a stranger without that 'guide'.

Your manner initially should be low-key – not *too* friendly, certainly not too familiar. An indiscriminating 'friendliness' can be very off-putting because it is perceived as false. It can also be seen as insufficiently respectful – especially important

when there is a big age difference. Essentially, it is a matter of thought and sensitivity.

The interview itself: opening development and substantive content

At this point we haven't started the actual interview, but in a sense it can clearly be seen that we *have*: that the tenor of the whole thing is partly determined.

Begin by explaining not just the purpose of the interview, but the purpose of the research. You will have mentioned this in your letter or on the telephone but you need to expand on that a little and also ask the interviewee if he or she has any questions about it.

Explain why you prefer to record the interview: how you will transcribe and analyse it, and deal with the issue of confidentiality. If they are comfortable about being recorded explain that you need to double-check that the machine is recording and playing back satisfactorily.

You should have your questions (and simple 'prompts' for topics the interviewee might omit to mention) on one or two sheets on a clipboard in full view in front of you. You can say, 'I've got my list of questions here to remind me. Can I start by asking you ...?' This 'openness' will encourage the interviewee to be correspondingly open in response; if you hug your clipboard to you that conveys the sense that what is on it is something 'secret'.

A sample schedule is given on p. 29 and you can see how simple it can be. This is to your benefit: an elaborate schedule with too many questions can easily cause you to lose your way. Note that the questions in the example given, while all 'on the topic', are all distinctively different. Elaboration within them comes from how you handle the interviewee's responses, i.e. steering them but allowing them to *lead* you.

For some interviews you will need to supplement the basic factual information (which you should have obtained before the interview) – such things as the 'history' of how the interviewee has reached the present point in their professional or personal life. Such questions are 'closed', i.e. specified, by their very nature. But you need to move on from this before a 'question-and-answer' style is established, i.e. where the interviewee just answers your specific questions instead of *responding* to the topics you raise.

In a semi-structured interview the main questions are 'open' – where you are raising the topic and indicating the *kind* of answer but where the actual answers are entirely up to the interviewee.

Question *order* should display some sort of logic (chronological, thematic) so that one question could be seen as 'following on' from the previous one – which is some level of preparation for it. One of the things you will discover in your progressive question-trialling is that you are *not* getting the order right.

The other point you have to watch is that your questions are *genuinely* open, i.e. that they don't signal the desirability or the expectation of a particular answer. Tone of voice can do this, even when the words don't, e.g. the way you might say, 'What do you think of recent government legislation on this?'

If you start with a beginning question which is wide open, that sets the tone for the style of response you are expecting. For example, 'How did you first come into nursing?' One can see how that question could be a starting point for the examination of the interviewee's present feelings and attitudes about the profession – reflecting back on his or her initial expectations.

The logic of the order of substantive questions in an interview is difficult to specify because the variety of interviews is so vast – as many as its precise purposes. But later questions can take a more *prospective* form, e.g. 'What are your views on the future of the profession?'

Because interview development – which means the development of the interviewee's responses – is a major topic in its own right, and not just a matter of organization, it is not dealt with here, but in the next chapter. The essential point, however, is that the interviewer's task is to ask initial questions that allow the interviewee to determine the answers, and to follow up the responses which focus the interviewee and encourage him or her to elaborate where necessary, or cover aspects of the answer that have been omitted.

Closure

Like preparation, this is an easily neglected phase of the interview. It is easy to give interviewees the impression that you have got what you wanted and just want to hurry them off the premises. Carelessness here can undo much of the previous good work, common courtesy quite apart.

There are two main elements to closure: pulling together the content (cognitive) and the more obvious 'social' element. You signal this phase in various ways so that the whole thing has a kind of shape: topics or questions that indicate that they are the 'last chapter'. And you can follow this up simply by saying 'Now the last thing I want to ask you about is . . .', or some such phrase.

Sometimes it is useful to *summarize* what you think you have learnt from the interviewee so that he or she can give you feedback on your summary impression. And this can call forth material that emerged nowhere else, occasionally of major significance (incidentally a common experience in therapeutic interviews).

And when the response has run its course, switching off the recorder indicates that the substantive phase is done. Some appreciative comment is needed here: 'You've given me a lot of useful material there – I'm very grateful' endorses the

value you place on the session. If you go on to explain that you will be preparing a summary report (of the two-page variety) and/or doing a presentation – and indicate when – you can offer to send the interviewee a copy or invite him or her to the presentation. People often have the experience of contributing to research and then hearing nothing about it.

The offer you make here as part of the interview closure should be followed up by a letter that repeats the offer as well as your thanks. To some extent the impact of your research is going to depend on the observation of such courtesies – particularly if you are aiming at a primarily local effect.

So there is a little work to be done, even when the interview is over; which may take only a few minutes but which will leave either a good or a bad impression.