Notes on the interview

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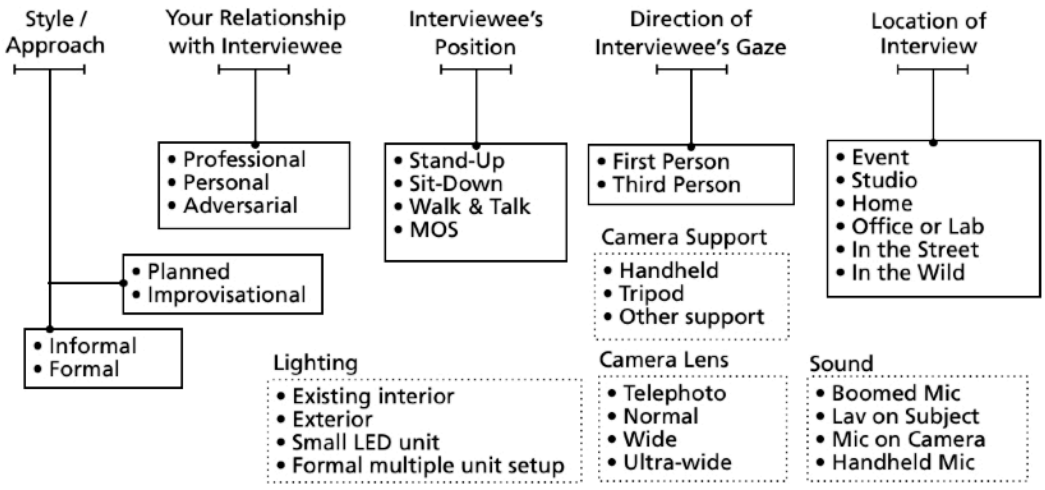
The interview

Some documentary media makers do interviews while others prefer to observe people and eschew formal interviews (in the traditions of direct cinema and cinéma vérité). Documentary makers who perform interviews choose between formal interviews and informal interviews, or simply capturing conversations as they happen. There is no right or wrong, no good or bad, simply different schools of thought.

I like to mix things up, and choose an approach that seems to make the most sense for each project. In documentary, most decisions start with your subjects and the topic, always tempered by matters of style and budget. Primarily good interviewing is about listening, empathy, and preparation (knowing as much as you can about the subject to start with). The rest will fall in place as you practice and get the hang of it, there is no substitute for experience when it comes to orchestrating a dialog between yourself and your subject in order to capture it on video.



There are many creative and technical options to consider as illustrated in the chart on this page. This chart represents the decision making process that goes through my head for each project. Which technical and interview style approach is best? It really depends on the specific nature of your documentary. Ask yourself, does a particular approach make sense for what you are doing? How might it work out for you?

Rules of thumb

I've collected quite a few tips and rules of thumb over the years, here are some of them. I never apply them all at once, rules were meant to be broken, or at least applied selectively.

Preparation is key. Some knowledge of the subject is important. Be familiar with your subjects background and their work and whatever is relevant for your specific documentary. Design your questions carefully given the specific issues you want to discuss. Research and preparation is crucial. Your interview subject understands that viewers may be new to the topic, but they will lose patience with you if you don't demonstrate you've done your homework and know something about the topic or person that you're discussing with them. Your interests and familiarity with topics of common interest will put you interviewee at ease and help you build the rapport that is so important for a good on-camera interview.

Design questions to elicit stories. It depends on the kind of documentary you're making and the purpose of the interviews, but most of the time I like to *elicit stories, rather than information.* Of course, if the purpose of the interviews is "expert testimony" that's one thing, but stories are usually more interesting and reveal a lot. So the most important thing is to listen and follow-up on things that will elicit stories, rather than trying to get all of your questions answered. Great stories make the difference between "talking heads" and "storytellers," and storytellers are much more interesting than talking heads!

Pre-interview on the phone to determine if this person is right for your documentary. Sometimes spontaneity is more important and you will not pre-interview. Make this decision on a case by case basis, or depending on the specific topic of your documentary and the nature of the interviews. Personally I prefer to pre-interview whenever possible, and on the phone, not email. Over the phone I can get a hint at how confident and articulate someone is, and determine if they are going to be able to tell me stories rather than just deliver facts and descriptions.

Rehearse your questions out loud to make sure there is no room for misunderstanding if the stakes are high for a particular interview, most of the time being straightforward is all you need to worry about.

Release forms. Don't forget to get a personal release form signed and make sure you have name, address, phone, email, etc. in order to be able to contact them and stay in touch. Do this before the interview starts, no release, no interview, unless special circumstances require a delay in obtaining the release. There are times I've had people sign the release and allowed them to keep it, and only after they have decided they are comfortable being in my documentary do they need to give it to me. For every guideline there are situations that call for another approach. You need to have the rights to everything that ends up in your documentary, otherwise, you may run into trouble later. It's simpler and easier to ask for a release to be signed than to track them down what could be years later.

Groups. Consider putting people together to talk, sometimes couples or groups give you more; sometimes disagreements often yield good dialog exchanges. But this is much harder to shoot, and may require more than one camera to capture multiple sides of a conversation, however, you can certainly manage with one camera as long as you're getting good audio of each speaker that is not dependent on the position of the camera.

Notebook. Keep your list of questions in a small notebook that does not call a lot of attention to itself, but allows you to make your own notes as you go along, e.g. making a note to make sure you get back around to a particular topic. Do whatever works for you, but certainly you want to come up with a system for this.

Setting. Decide what setting is best for your interviewee, their home, office, in the park, in their studio? The context has a huge influence on the look and feel of the interview.

Disclosure. Explain clearly to your interviewee why you are interviewing them and what you are exploring with your documentary.

Right before the interview. Be natural in your interviewing, this comes from practice and genuine empathy for your subject. Make sure you have some quiet time with your subject before you jump into the interview. This is easier if you can work with a partner who sets up the camera and sound (and lighting if you are using lighting instruments) while you sit down and talk with the interviewee about how things are going to roll.

Warmup. The first ten minutes or so are usually a warm up period, even if you've done a pre-interview and have spoken with your interviewee right before the interview, it's a new setting, a new context, give your interviewee time to warm up. Start with some pleasant, warm-up questions, but don't make them trivial or seem like throw-away.

Complete sentences. Depending on your stylistic choices, instruct interviewees to include questions in their response, speaking in full sentences as this will make things much easier to edit. You may have to coach your subject on this, and approach it that way, rather than telling them they are doing something wrong, explain how it makes the editing easier and if they would give it a try.

The first two questions. Usually the first question I ask is something fun, like "what's your favorite breakfast" during which the sound recordist (or you if you're doing your own sound) can set prior dialogue levels). Then I ask them to spell out their name on camera while I'm rolling in order to both "slate" the interview and make sure whoever is editing the interview has the proper spelling of the interviewees name and title.

Interruptions. Depending on your stylistic choices, if you are going to redirect or interrupt interviewees let them know this in advance, and try to make it conversational and organic.

Listening. Listen actively and carefully to make sure answers can stand alone. This gets easier the more you interview. You are also listening actively not only for what you want, but what the interviewee is really saying, don't rush to the next question, if you don't have something complete or coherent, ask the question again, or take another angle on the same question. It has been my experience than very often the second time around the answers are more coherent. This, of course, depends on the nature of the interview. Practice active listening: Getting deeper: try gentle "And…" and "Yes, go on…" and even silence.

Specific details. Avoid vague and general questions. Ask for details, specifics, examples, etc. as this makes the interview more interesting. In most cases you not only want stories but specific details that bring the story to life.

Interviewee's gaze. Ask interviewee not to look at the camera unless you are doing first-person address (discussed in the next section).

Context & visuals. Showing people in their own environment is often my preference, some people are better when they are walking around their own space and talking to you, the walking and talking interview can be very effective, especially with artists and craftspeople who work with things. Don't forget to cover the environmental context with visuals, a.k.a. B-roll, this illustrative footage, can be very important. B-roll is not merely cutaways to cover jump cuts, your story should be driven by elements that help move your story forward in a visual manner. Ultimately, documentary video is a visual medium. Images should drive the story while the stories interviewees tell provide emotional connections, help bring us into the story, but all in a visual context.

Timing of specific questions. Start with factual questions and keep the more intimate or emotional information for later when the subject is more comfortable with you and relaxed and with the situation.

Multiple replies to a question facilitates editing. Try to cover each issue in more than one way to give you the ability to cut in and out of the interview in order to tighten the material. Let people talk at their natural pace, avoid too many interruptions, but for important things you want to cover again, circle back and ask the question again in a different way or ask for expansion.

Delicate issues. To get into a delicate area, you can use the devil's advocate approach, for example, saying "some people would say there's nothing special about the river dam project" and let the interviewee respond… Another way to get into a sensitive topic is to start with a general question and then ask for specific examples.

Silence. Don't be afraid of silence, a moment of silence between questions serves two purposes. First, in some situations, it's the best way to get more from the interviewee. If you allow some moments of silence after an interviewee has finished answering a question, look at them, approve with your gestures, but be quiet for a moment, they might be thinking and go into something else. Second, even if the moment of silence does not result in any follow-up or additional materials, your sound editor (or yourself if you're editing your own sound) will appreciate having little pieces of "room tone" that match closely what was said. While most production books talk about recording 30 seconds of room tone at the end of an interview, since ambient noise often changes over time, I've discovered that recording room tone an hour later yields a very different sound, and most often the pieces of room tone I end up using when I edit are those moments of silence after a question has been answered.

Winding down. As the interview has wound down and you feel you've gotten all that you need, I suggest you ask: "is there any question I should have asked that I've not asked today?" Sometimes people will go on a whole other tangent that relates to something important to them, and sometimes this is great footage, other times people have nothing to add. But just in case your subject has been wanting to say something, give them the chance, it may turn out to be what you needed for the interview.

Discourage interviewees from editing themselves. It's important to remind your subject that they should not edit themselves, and that you will cut out any "bad bits" and it's your job in the editing to take the best parts of the interview and make sure they end up "looking good" or coming across as "credible." In all cases, you should be empathetic and respectful to your subject, you want to bring out the truth and the best in people, unless you are doing an adversarial interview. Even then, you have to find what you like in the person, otherwise, you're not going to get a good interview with your subject, as they will sense where you're coming from.

A good story bares repeating. Sometimes you want to go around and get he most compelling stories a second time. It's my experience people repeat themselves and most of the time tell stories quite well a second and third time, often in a more concise manner. It also depends on the specifics of the project and what the person is like on camera. I will often ask people if they can clarify portions of a story that was particularly compelling, and shoot this retelling in a different framing. This allows me to later intercut the versions as needed in order to compress the story in editing, and the shot variety is nice to have too.

Positive acknowledgement. Always acknowledge what was successful about the exchange at the end of the interview. Be positive and thankful, yet don't lead your subject to believe they are going to be in the documentary. If they ask, explain to them that the interview was successful, but it's eventually up to the editor what ends up in the final documentary, but express you're happy with what you've got. Basic respect is key in managing the relationships with your subjects, many of whom you'll end up developing relationships with over time.

Good sound as a baseline. Always make sure you are recording excellent sound (never, never cut corners on this). Sound is half the picture, yet most often it receives only casual attention by video makers. Viewers can't articulate what's wrong, but quite often it's the sound that either engages or dis-

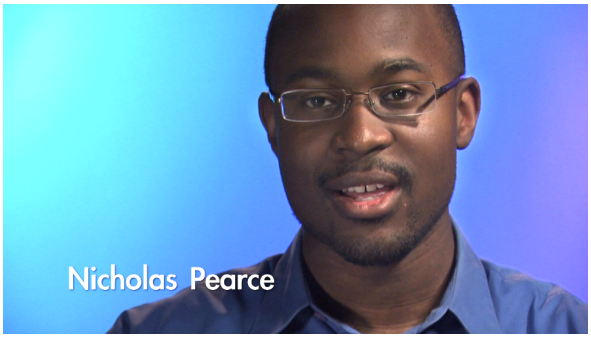
tances them. Position the microphone as close to the subject as possible for more "voice" and less "reflections and noise" in the soundtrack. The human voice is a beautiful thing but it can be marred by reflections and ambient noise level, which reduce intelligibility. See the sound recording presentation notes for more on sound.

Lighting and exposure. Strive for good lighting and exposure, which need not require a lot of gear. Favor your subject's face over the background when it comes to exposure. It's OK to go for a minimal, natural look, but adequate lighting sometimes might require some instruments. It's not too hard to set up the interview using natural light sources, or if that does not work, try a minimal, but usable lighting set-up, starting with some form of a large, soft key light. As far as the soft key goes, the larger the source (in terms of size), the better for a nice "wrap" around the face. Play with the positioning for a pleasing, dimensional look.

First or third person address?

The subject's gaze vector (in what direction are they looking towards in relation to the camera) depends on the placement of the camera, the interviewee, and the interviewer. One important decision when your planning an interview is to decide what will be the relationship between the audience and the interviewee by choosing an on-camera-axis or off-camera-axis interviews as appropriate, in other words. third-person address or first-person address.

With **third person address** the interviewee is talking to an off-screen presence, the interviewer may be off camera slightly to the left or right, or even sometimes under the camera lens. The interviewee may or may not appear in the shot. In the example above, the interviewer is holding a reporter's microphone and standing quite far from the camera, usually interviewers will stand closer to the camera, so the interviewee's gaze is just to the right or left of the camera.

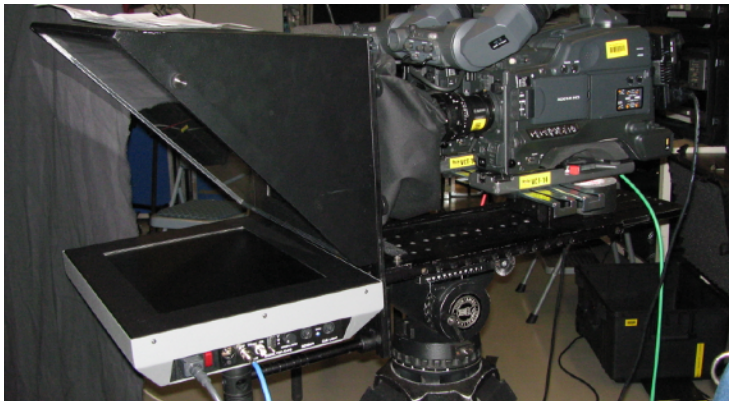


With **first person address** the interviewee is talking right to the audience, this works best when the interviewer appears right in the camera lens. This requires a special arrangement to keep the interviewee engaged as if they were talking to someone, and in fact, they usually are.

The Fog of War (2003) and *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* (1997) are two documentary films by Errol Morris that feature interviews with a unique quality in which the interviewee appears to be looking straight into the camera, with facial reactions that are the result of very intimate communication with the interviewer, which as a viewer we sense as the interviewee addressing us, the viewers, directly. This is accomplished through the use of a device some call the Prompter-cam and Errol Morris calls the Interrotron. This technique is used in advertising, corporate videos, promotional pieces, and documentaries, but it's been through Errol Morris' use of the technique that it has achieved widespread attention outside of the industry.

The Prompter-cam system is basically two tele-prompters (which uses a semi-transparent mirror at a 45 degree angle to the lens with an LCD screen below it to have text appear in front of the camera lens), but instead of projecting text for the subject to read, it projects the face of the interviewer in front of the camera lens. A similar setup is used by the interviewer to see the interviewee in the cam-

era being used to allow the interviewee to see the interviewer. This way the interviewer and interviewee can make direct eye contact with each other and the interviewee is reacting directly to the interviewer's facial gestures. This two-way video conference arrangement makes for interviews with a piercing sense of intimacy, as if the interviewee was talking not just into the camera lens, but directly to us, the viewers of the documentary. This is sometimes called first-person address interviews, and with the Prompter-cam first-person interviews achieve their most intimate and direct expression.



Two camcorders behind a single teleprompter glass allowed us to shoot two framings at the same time for each interview

The special arrangement is needed because most people can't pull off the intimate gaze simply looking down the barrel of the lens, they need to be looking at the interviewer and responding to them personally as another person, this is what the viewer senses, the direct connection with another human being, which we as viewers sense from the manner in which facial expressions manifest themselves.

Looking over the interviewees shoulder, they see the interviewer in the camera lens

I have used this approach for testimonial interviews with two cameras capturing the close-up and medium shots simultaneously. The behind the scenes photos above are from a Prompter-cam shoot I did at MIT several years ago for a series of interviews for *Class of 2007 Journey to MIT* (2007, 1:48, with over 26,000 views on MIT TechTV, techtv.mit.edu/ videos/678-class-of -2007-journey-to-mit). We decided not to have any cutaways, so we shot everything with two cameras in order to facilitate cutting between different framings. The interviewees appear to speak directly to the viewer in this piece.

Looking over the interviewers shoulder, they see the interviewee in the camera lens

First person address works for some projects, yet there is a reason a lot of documentary makers don't use it: it's the cinematic grammar of salespeople and hucksters, however, in the right context, it can be engaging and intimate, giving the audience the experience that the interviewees are talking directly to them.

Which style is right for your documentary?

There are many different styles of interview. When I do formal interviews I feel they should be beautifully lit, composed, and with excellent, rich dialog. On the other hand formal interviews are not al-

ways the right way to go. In many situations I do informal interviews with minimal or no lighting, but always with good sound. There are many options to explore when doing interviews.

The seven habits of highly successful interviewers

1. Get a signed release form,
2. Do your research and preparation,
3. Have empathy and respect your your interviewee,
4. Prepare good questions (but let your interviewees run with what excites them),
5. Interview for the edit (you'll appreciate having complete sentences when you are editing),
6. Practice active listening, and
7. Pause after each question (give your interviewee time to think and get good room tone too).

Quotes

We'll end with some tidbits of wisdom:

> "You have to understand, my dears, that the shortest distance between truth and a human being is a story." — Anthony de Mello, from *One Minute Wisdom*

> "I think if you ask people well-researched questions about subjects they love and are knowledgeable about, it's very easy to get them to open up and talk to you." — Barbara Multer-Wellin

> "The image is the basis of the visual language of motion pictures … the camera can actively comment upon or interpret what it observes, making each frame a picture worth the proverbial thousand words … the camera is to the filmmaker what brushes and oils are to the painter." — Saul J. Turell and Jeff Lieberman from notes on *The Art of Film*

> "…good close-ups radiate a tender human attitude in the contemplation of hidden things, a delicate solicitude, a gentle bending over the intimacies of life-in-the-miniature, a warm sensibility. Good close-ups are lyrical; it is the heart, not the eye, that has perceived them." — Béla Balázs in *Theory of the Film*

> "The position of a mic generally affects the sound much, much more than does the brand of condenser mic you use." — Randy Thom, Sound Designer

Resources

Shut Up and Shoot Documentary Guide: A Down & Dirty DV Production by Anthony Q. Artis (Routledge, 2nd edition, 2014) ignore the dated camera references, the book still provides a solid and readable introduction to production craft.

John Pavlus' article, "Errol Morris's Secret Weapon for Unsettling Interviews: The Interrotron," in Fast Company's *Co.Design*.

"The Fog of War: 13 Questions and Answers on the Documentarymaking of Errol Morris," originally published in *FLM Magazine* (Winter, 2004)