

# Interviewing for Documentaries

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1. **Come (over)prepared:** Know your subject's story so well you could practically answer the questions for him or her. But don't, obviously. It helps to not only write out your questions (divided into categories of questions), but also write out your imagined/ideal answer. Your subject won't necessarily deliver that answer, but it helps sensitize your mind in an empathetic and creative way to the nuances of their story. It will make you a more nimble listener.

2. **Pre-interviewing is key:** Pre-interview thoroughly (and well in advance of the actual interview), but be careful that your taped interview doesn't end up sounding rehearsed. During this pre-interview, allow your subject to really fill you in on logistics, chronology, structural information, names, etc. This will give space in your interview to keep things essential without wasting time explaining the backstory.

3. **You're on the same team as your interviewee:** You want the same thing—the clearest and most compelling articulation of your subject's point of view. There is room for nuance here, such as when you're intentionally challenging your subject with an opposing viewpoint. But even here, it's important to project that your goal is to deeply understand your subject, and to draw out of them their best explanation of their experience and point of view.

4. **Don't forget the obvious:** Know the key structural pieces of information that you need your subject to say. It's tempting to jump to the the "juicy bits" without laying the structural groundwork, but your you'll be screaming at yourself after the interview.

## 5. Ask smart questions

a. Ask your subject to connect the dots for you. Lay out the structural things you understand about their story (A, B, C, D, etc.) and signal where you feel that leads—then ask your subject to connect A to D for you.

b. Try using prompts or statements instead of questions. Such as, "I can't imagine how complicated/hard/bewildering it must have been when you found the crash scene, won the Miss Universe Pageant, or adopted 45 Dalmatians at once."

c. Allow your subject to fill the silence. Prompt/agree non-verbally or you will have an audio mess in post. Allow large (bordering on uncomfortable) silences at the end of each of your subject's answers. They are on camera, not you.

d. Ask two questions at once. For example, "How old are you and tell me a bit about where you come from?" This will help prevent the dreaded one-word-answer, and invite more reflective and authentic responses.

e. Signal difficult questions with empathy. When you have to ask your subject to recount something that may be difficult or painful, say so. I find it useful to place this hard question in context and explain its purpose. For example, "Sitting here in front of me, you seem strong and fine. But I know it took a lot to get here. So, I know this is not a fun question to ask or answer, but can you paint a picture of that low point for me?"

f. If the answer doesn't gel the first time, ask the question again. Re-frame it. Paraphrase back to your subject what they just said, thank them for that, and then say that you can see a clearer arc through that information or that it might be worth starting from a different place. Acknowledge that you're asking them to go through their response again, but do it anyway, with a smile.

**6. Pause the interview toward the end to reflect and review your checklist:** It helps to break camera here to take the media/time pressure off. Look at your categories of questions. Did you cover the ground you needed? Did you get the key structural pieces of information essential to telling this story? Do you want to re-ask any questions, especially the early ones before the interview hit its groove? This is your chance to get what you need, so take it.

**7. Ask your subject if you missed anything:** Open the floor for them to bring to light anything you didn't ask, or didn't know to ask.