

INTERVIEWING

INTERVIEWING BASICS

SET-UP:

GUIDING QUESTION: What makes a great interview question?

TOOLS:

- Audio/Video: Ability to watch and listen to video and audio stories on the internet
- Writing materials: Something to write with and something to write on
- A partner, like a family member or a friend on the phone, if possible

VOCABULARY:

- **Interview starter:** A question or something the interviewer says or does that gets an interesting, compelling, emotional, detailed answer.
- **Interview stopper:** A question or something the interviewer says or does that gets an awkward silence, a one-word answer, or an uninteresting answer.
- **Open-ended question:** A question that can't be answered with just "yes" or "no." Open-ended questions often begin with who, what, when, where, why, or how.
- **Follow-up questions:** The questions you ask after you hear something and you want to know more about what the speaker is telling you. Asking an interviewee a follow-up questions allows them to elaborate or dig deeper on a topic.
- **Annotate:** Add notes to a document to give additional explanations or comments.
- **Transcript:** A written version of an audio story or video.

INTRODUCTION

At its most basic, an interview is about asking great questions and listening closely to the answers. Sounds simple, sure, but being an effective interviewer is a skill that takes practice to develop. In this activity, we'll listen to two radio interviews and identify the kinds of questions we can ask to get interesting (and not so interesting) answers. Then we'll practice by interviewing a partner.

SOUNDBITES ACTIVITY #4

We'll begin by listening to two radio stories. As you listen, write down as many of the interviewer's questions as you can. Then, next to each question, note whether the question was an **Interview Starter** or an **Interview Stopper** and why. By *Interview Starter*, we mean a question (or something the interviewer says or does) that gets an interesting, compelling, emotional, or detailed answer. By *Interview Stopper*, we mean a question that gets an awkward silence, one-word answers, or uninteresting answers.

LISTENING #1: LUKE BURBANK INTERVIEWS SIGUR ROS

Our first example is from a public radio show that never aired. Seattle professional radio personality Luke Burbank is interviewing Sigur Ros, a band from Iceland. **Listen to the first two minutes of the video.** Remember, as you listen, write down each of Luke's questions, and see if you can identify what Luke does well, and what does not work for him. If you would like a **transcript**, there is one on the next page.

[> WATCH: LUKE BURBANK INTERVIEWS SIGUR ROS \(2 min\)](#)

LISTENING #2: CLARE MARTIN INTERVIEWS A STRANGER

Our next example comes from a RadioActive Youth Media workshop. At the beginning of each workshop, RadioActive participants go out to Pike Place Market and interview strangers. This recording is from RadioActive's Clare Martin. It's her first interview ever. She has just walked up to a stranger at Pike Place Market. It was around Valentine's Day, so her questions are about romance. If you'd like a transcript, scroll down two pages.

[> LISTEN: CLARE MARTIN INTERVIEWS A STRANGER \(1 min\)](#)

On the next two pages, you'll find **annotated** transcripts of both audio clips.

SOUNDBITES ACTIVITY #4

LUKE INTERVIEWS SIGUR ROS TRANSCRIPT

Luke: Sigur Ros is Jón Birgisson on guitars and vocals, Kjartan Sveinsson on keyboards, Orri Páll Dýrason on drums, and Georg Hólm on bass. How did I do with those names, guys?

Jón: Pretty good.

Luke: Yeah?

Jón: Yeah, fine.

Yes /no question

Luke: Uh, did you start out playing this kind of music? Or did you start out as a more, people might think "regular" sounding band, and then did you kind of get here as you experimented?

Luke offers an answer for them

Jón: I don't know, I think we probably just started out playing like this.

Luke: I mean, what was the first time that you guys sat down with your instruments and started playing? Did you have this thought that we want to create this very specific kind of music? Because the stuff you make doesn't sound like a lot of other stuff that's out there. Or did you... did you get to that right away?

Open-ended question ("What?")

Long question (or two questions and a statement)

Jón: Yeah, I think we probably did. I don't think we didn't sit down and talk about, oh we want to play this type of music. It just kind of happened naturally.

Luke: And how do you guys create a song?

Open-ended question ("How?")

Kjartan: We just sit down and create a song.

Yes /no question

Luke: Does one person start playing one instrument and then everyone else starts to kind of add in to that?

Kjartan: Yeah, kind of, like that.

Yes /no question

Luke: Did you think you would be the kind of band that sold 2 million records?

Jón: I don't think we, we don't really expect anything, so it's just. Why not?

Luke: What did you guys... I mean, obviously at some point you decided to get in the same room and start playing music with each other. What was the motivation? You just wanted to make music?

Open-ended question ("What?")

Yes /no question

Jón: Yeah, that's basically it. We wanted to make music.

SOUNDBITES ACTIVITY #4

CLARE MARTIN INTERVIEWS A STRANGER TRANSCRIPT

Clare: Excuse me, do you have a minute to talk?

Tish: Uh sure.

Clare: All right, thank you. I'm Clare, I'm an intern at KUOW and we're doing a show on break-ups.

Tish: You're what?

Clare: I'm an intern at KUOW and we're doing a show on break-ups.

Tish: Okay.

Clare: What's your name?

Tish: I'm Tish.

Clare: Can you spell that for me please?

Tish: T-i-s-h.

Yes / no question

Clare: Okay, wonderful. Have you been in a relationship before?

Tish: Yes.

Clare: And so, in a previous relationship, or maybe even a current one, what was the exact moment when you knew your relationship was doomed?

Clear follow-up question

Open-ended question ("What?")

Tish: Uh, when he didn't show up or call me on the date night that he was supposed to.

Clare: What was that date supposed to be?

Open-ended question ("What?")

Tish: Well we were just supposed to meet up for dinner and he never called. And that was like the third time he had done it. So that was it, I was done.

Clare: How long ago was that?

Open-ended question ("How?")

Tish: Last week.

Clare offers empathy

Clare: I'm sorry. So how did you handle this?

Open-ended question ("How?")

Tish: I moved on. I don't worry about it, I just move on to something else. I don't let grass grow under my feet.

Clare: Thank you for talking to me today Tish.

Tish: Thank you.

SOUNDBITES ACTIVITY #4

LISTENING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did you notice while listening to these two examples and writing down each question the interviewer asked?
2. What did you hear that were Interview Starters?
3. What did you hear that were Interview Stoppers?

LISTENING TAKEAWAYS

There are two big interviewing concepts we can take from the listening practice:

1. **Ask open-ended questions.** That means a question that can't be answered just "yes" or "no." Open-ended questions often begin with who, what, when, where, why, or how. However, note that some questions that begin with who, what, when, where, why and how can still lead to one-word answers, like, "When is your birthday?" and "How old are you?"
2. **Listen closely and ask follow-up questions.** Follow-up questions ask your partner to dig deeper or be more specific. Saying something as simple as "Wow, tell me more!" can work great as a follow-up question.

MORE INTERVIEWING DOs AND DON'Ts

INTERVIEWING DOs

- Find out as much as you can about your interviewee and their story ahead of time. Look for news articles, websites, or videos about them or the topic. What have they said before? What has been said about them?
- Make sure your interviewee knows what the interview is for and how it will be used.
- Schedule your interview for a specific time and location – even with friends or family.
- Write your questions down ahead of time.
- Ask simple and direct questions.
- Ask open-ended (not yes/no) questions – what, how and why are best!
- Ask obvious questions – don't be afraid to say "I don't understand."
- Ask questions that relate to emotions and senses.
- Ask for examples, details, and anecdotes (little stories).

SOUNDBITES ACTIVITY #4

INTERVIEWING DOs CONTINUED

- Listen actively and show that you're listening – make eye contact, nod.
- Give your interviewee a chance to respond to criticism that someone else might say.
- Ask them to do something – show you an object, show off a talent, give you a tour.
- Stay open mentally and emotionally to what your subject is saying – you'll only hear what you're open to hearing!
- Know that you have a right to be there asking questions.
- Share something about yourself to get your interviewee to feel more comfortable.
- When all else fails, say "tell me more."
- Ask "who else should I talk to?"
- End your interview with "Do you have anything else to add?"

INTERVIEWING DON'Ts:

- Don't be afraid to look stupid or say "I don't understand."
- Don't make statements.
- Don't ask leading questions (a question that leads your interviewee toward a certain answer, for example, "Don't you hate it when...")
- Don't ask double barreled questions (asking two questions at once)
- Don't ask long, rambling questions.
- Don't interrupt.
- Don't be afraid of silence.
- Don't settle for unjustified accusations.
- Don't feel limited to the questions you wrote ahead of time...
- But don't forget to check your list to make sure you asked the important ones!

SOUNDBITES ACTIVITY #4

PRACTICE: INTERVIEWING A PARTNER

BRAINSTORM INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Now it's your turn! Find a partner - this could be someone in your household, or a friend on the phone. You'll only need 10 minutes. You're invited to interview a partner using this question: **What is a challenge you have faced in your life, and how did you overcome it?**

Before the interview, brainstorm five possible follow-up questions:

1. What else was going on in your life around the time you faced this challenge?
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

CONDUCT YOUR INTERVIEW

- Sit down (virtually or in-person) with your interviewee. Set a timer for five minutes.
- You'll begin the interview by asking your interviewee this question: **What is a challenge you have faced in your life, and how did you overcome it?**
- Listen closely to your interviewee's answer. Continue to ask your interviewee follow-up questions until the timer runs out.
- Challenge yourself to stay on topic and keep asking questions the whole time!
- Follow your curiosity and ask follow-up questions that get at emotion, detail, and stories.
- When five minutes is up, switch roles. Now your partner can interview you!

INTERVIEWING EXTRAS

- If you would like to record your interview, you can use the tips in **SoundBites Activity #2 - Audio Recording with a Smartphone**.
- If you do record your interview, and you want to share it with us, you can email your recording to radioactive@kuow.org with the subject line: SoundBites #4 - Interviewing.
- If you're looking for more great interview questions, check out [The Great Questions List](#) from StoryCorps.

SOUNDBITES ACTIVITY #4

INTERVIEW PRACTICE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What questions worked well to get interesting answers?
2. What was challenging?
3. What other questions do you have about interviewing?
4. What would you do differently next time you did an interview?

MORE ON INTERVIEWING

- [Tips for Effective Interviews](#) (StoryCorps)
- [The Basics](#) (Transom)
- [Before the first question: How to prepare for an audio interview](#) (Transom/NPR Training)