

CHAPTER THREE

Getting the Story Down on Paper

People come into feature writing because they're confident they can write. So, in the beginning at least, most believe they are writers first. If they were just reporters, they would probably work on the news side. But the lesson all these would-be feature writers must learn, and a lesson that is preached over and over again, is that feature writing is nothing without reporting. And what is reporting? It is everything that precedes writing. I have asked the contributors to this section to break the process down in terms of research, interviewing and then organization. Beyond that there is the art of simply hanging around, of being there for the right moment. David Finkel, a writer at the *The Washington Post Magazine*, puts it all together for us, and we see how the best nonfiction writing can't happen without solid reporting.

On Being a Reporter First

David Finkel

One day, long ago, an editor took aside his new feature writer and tried to make a point.

"I just want to tell you, you're some kind of writer," the editor said. "In fact, it's an interesting thing. Whenever there's a hole in one of your stories, you write around it so smoothly that most readers probably aren't even aware a hole is there."

"Thank you," I said, missing the point.

And with that, I was put on the police beat.

"It's time you learned to be a reporter," the editor said. "Some-day, you'll thank me."

Well, I don't know about that, but in the dozen or so years since that day, I have learned two general truths about journalism.

One is that writing, for the most part, isn't a lot of fun. Some people may think otherwise, and that's fine. I have met all kinds of people over the years, including those who think it's fun to mock the injured and razz the dead. In such a world, surely there's a place for those who think writing is a good time. Not me. Writing and I have had our moments, but for the most part I'd rather be reporting.

Truth number two: reporting, for the most part, is fun. Tracking down the arcane, interviewing the reluctant, observing the hidden — all of that can be a joy. And a good thing, too, because in the line of work we've chosen, reporting — hard, solid reporting — is at the center of what we do.

Think about the best journalism you have read, and you'll realize this is true. The best stories may seem to turn on wonderful writing, but if you look closely enough you'll discover the true strength of these stories is that every sentence reports some specific piece of information. Maybe it's a fact that gives context. Maybe it's a quote that establishes tone. Maybe it's a description that defines the background.

Whatever it is, it provides some kind of essential detail, and when all the details are added together, the result is a story that takes a reader to a particular time and makes it so real it's as if the reader is his own witness.

The best stories, in other words, are more than a retelling, they're an experience of the senses. A reader doesn't only learn something from a good feature story, he feels it. He sees it, smells it, hears it. He comes to know it down to its most affecting details. He is there.

That's the reader's end.

The writer's end is to regard feature writing as anything but a soft, comfortable undertaking. Put simply, the best stories require a lot of work. There is no formula for producing these stories, but there is a general process to follow that can be broken down into three broad areas: research, interviewing and observation.

In this process, writing is the translation. Reporting is the key.

Research

A colleague of mine, Jack Reed, knows about research.

One time, tracking down a trail of receipts involving a local sheriff, Reed ended up in a small building in North Carolina. "It was a metal shed, like something you'd put your lawnmower in," he says. "It had a metal door and one window that didn't open. It was hot and filled with boxes of gas-purchase receipts for airplanes. It was right off the end of an airport runway, and when jets took off the noise was deafening."

Reed spent a day and a half in that shed sifting through thousands of receipts and never found what he was looking for. A year and a half later, the miseries of those hours were assuaged when he received a Pulitzer Prize for the things he did find. But to this day, the time in the shed remains fresh in his mind. "I'll never forget it," he says. "It was like hell."

The point is, Reed did it because of the potential to make a good story better, and that, at its most basic, is what research is. It's an essential source that can provide you with all kinds of information, from what you don't know to what you haven't thought of. It's a necessity no matter if you are doing an investigative piece like Reed or a simple feature story.

The wonderful part of research is that the paths it can take you down are almost limitless. There are the obvious sources, such as newspaper and magazine clippings, but I've also gotten information from probate files, divorce files, voters' registration records, the Census Bureau, the Weather Service, old high school yearbooks, even the documentary stamps attached to someone's recorded land deeds.

At the least, research provides names, addresses and other starting points for interviews. At best, it provides the kind of authoritative detail that can set a story apart.

Such was the case when I set out to write about a man named Charles Griffith, who was about to go on trial for first-degree murder. This was the lead I wrote:

MIAMI— He was a distraught man that day, a man who sang lullabies and wept. With one hand, he held a gun. With the other, he stroked the smooth face of his daughter, a 3-year-old existing in limbo between life and death.

An hour before, he had given her what he thought was a fatal dose

of Valium. But here she was, still breathing, her tiny chest rising and falling rhythmically, if ever so slightly.

She was in a crib at Miami Children's Hospital, lying on her back. She had been there for eight months, since the day she nearly suffocated. He leaned over the crib railing and looked at her eyes. They were open.

They stared ahead, mirrored no emotions, saw nothing. It was the same for her other senses. The damage to her brain was total and irreversible, and because of it, she couldn't hear his weeping, and she couldn't feel his last touch goodbye before he aimed the gun at her heart.

He shot her twice. He dropped the gun. He prayed that her suffering was over. He fell into a nurse's arms, cried and said he wanted to die. He said, "Maybe I should get the electric chair to make things even. I killed my daughter. I shot her twice. But I'm glad she has gone to heaven."

What makes that lead worth bringing up is that it was built entirely from documents. Griffith, in jail at the time, would only consent to a brief interview. It was the same for the police and attorneys, and none of the witnesses scheduled to testify would talk at all.

Fortunately, there was a fat court file. At first I went through it for basic information, such as names of nurses and other witnesses to call. Then, when it became apparent that none of them wanted to talk to a reporter, I went through the file again, this time concentrating on sworn statements the witnesses had given attorneys in pre-trial proceedings. Those statements, balanced against each other and bolstered by police and hospital reports, provided every detail in my lead as well as the emotional heart of the rest of the story. Documents, nothing more, allowed me to write of the little girl's life:

She would sleep with her eyes open. She couldn't swallow. She was fed through a tube into her stomach. For the first few months, a bolt was inserted into her head to monitor any swelling in her brain. She was kept from further deterioration only through incredible medical wizardry: Nystatin in her mouth to fight off infection. Lacri-Lube in her eyes when they got too dry. Tylenol as a suppository to control her temperature.

And an entire medicine cabinet fed into her through the gastronomy tube: Pedialyte for nourishment, Colace for constipation, Phenobarbital to control seizures, Bactrim to control infection, Valium to relax her muscles, and more.

Also:

He would dab lemon juice on her lips. He would run a cloth under cool water, lay it on her leg and say, "Joy, this is cold." He would put filters over a flashlight, aim it toward her eyes, and say, "Joy, this is red."

He would say, "This is Daddy. If you can hear me, move your toes. If you love me, blink your eyes."

Admittedly, it's a rare case when documents are so complete. In almost any story, though, a few hours of research will at least provide a solid beginning. It will give you background. It will help you focus an idea. If you start the reporting process by building a foundation of information, it will be easier to move on to the next step, which is going out there to meet your story head on.

Interviewing

COCOA—Behold the fat man. Go ahead. Everybody does. He doesn't mind, honestly. That's how he makes his living. Walk right up to him. Stand there and look.

Stand there and stare. Gape at the layers of fat, the astonishing girth, the incredible bulk. Imagine him in a bathtub. Or better yet, on one of those flimsy antique chairs. Boom! If you're lucky, maybe he'll lift his shirt. If you're real lucky, maybe he'll rub his belly.

Don't be shy. Ask him a question.

"What's your name?"

"T.J. Jackson. Better known as Fat Albert."

"How old are you?"

"Forty-three."

"How much do you weigh?"

"Eight hundred and ninety-one pounds."

"Gawd! How many meals you eat a day?"

"Three."

"What—three cows?"

Now there was an easy interview. For three hours, I stood next to Fat Albert and watched his night on the midway unfold. I was prepared to ask him all kinds of questions, but I didn't have to. The people who came by asked every question I had thought of, and more. They asked him how much he weighed, how much he ate, whether he had a girlfriend, whether he had sex, exactly how he

was able to have sex, and on and on. They asked, and I became a stenographer.

If only it was always that easy. It isn't, though, which is why so many writers worry endlessly over interviews. They worry about the order of their questions. They worry about impressing the person they're interviewing. They worry about whether to come across as tough or sympathetic. They worry about what to wear and whether to use a tape recorder.

I know they worry about these things because I worry about them, too.

In truth, though, I know that interviewing isn't a complicated process. Here's what you do: You think of some questions. You start with the easy ones. And then you let things drift where they might until the interview becomes a conversation. Sometimes it happens right away. More often, it takes several attempts. But it does happen.

I interview the main subjects of a piece two, three, four times, usually over a period of days, until I feel I've gotten a true sense of who they are.

I remind myself that I'm not conducting the interview to impress the person I'm writing about, that my obligation is to readers. In this equation, no question is too trivial or inane if it leads to a clearer, stronger piece.

Finally, I remind myself that lots of things are going to go wrong. Maybe everything.

That's what happened when I interviewed a man named Jack Bowman, whose daughter had been murdered by serial killer Theodore Bundy. For 10 years, Bowman never said anything publicly about the case. Then, two hours after Bundy was executed, Bowman consented to an interview.

This was the lead I wrote for a sidebar to my newspaper's main execution piece:

Jack Bowman was up most of the night. At 6 A.M., when it was clear he couldn't fall back asleep, he got out of bed and walked down the hall toward the kitchen. His wife Runelle already had the coffee on. He said good morning to her. He turned on the radio. He turned on the TV, too, keeping the sound low.

At 7 A.M., the news came on, and Bowman watched intently. The pictures were of the scene at Florida State Prison. The prison itself, a long flat shadow, was in the background. In the foreground was a steady stream of cars, and in the cars were people holding signs. One

of the signs read, "Burn Bundy Burn." Another read, "Roast in peace." Another read, "Chi-O, Chi-O, it's off to hell I go."

At 7:18, the phone rang. It was the Florida Attorney General's Office in Tallahassee. "Mr. Bowman, this is Paul Freeman," the caller said. "This is to let you know that the sentence has been carried out. The execution occurred at 7:07, and he was pronounced dead at 7:16."

In St. Petersburg, Jack Bowman hung up. A sensation of relief spread through him. It was a vague feeling—"flat" is a word he would use to describe it later—but relief nonetheless. Theodore Bundy was dead. At last.

What's instructive about the lead is that it came from an interview that went as badly as one can go. Bowman didn't want to talk at his house so he came to the newspaper where I work. The small room I had reserved for the interview couldn't be used after all, so we ended up in the middle of an auditorium. I decided the best way to begin the interview was to ask Bowman about his daughter; as soon as I did, he began to weep. Things disintegrated from there. My questions were awkward. My pacing was awful.

The saving grace is that Bowman, even in grief, was a decent man who allowed me to ask questions endlessly. And I did. I knew I wanted the story to begin with Bundy's death, and when Bowman wouldn't let me be with him during the time of the execution, I knew I would have to ask the kind of trivial-sounding questions that would allow me to put the reader there anyway.

So for a couple of hours, I asked Bowman what time he got up, what time his wife got up, who made the coffee, who turned on the TV, how many steps it was from the bedroom to the living room. I asked everything I could think of until I had enough material to describe a private, pivotal scene as if I had been in attendance.

The interview never did achieve the level of conversation, and yet it was ultimately successful because it did the most important thing of all. It got the details, and the details are what make a story vivid.

In a good story, in other words, the TV isn't just on, its volume is at a certain level.

In a good story, a paranoid schizophrenic doesn't just hear imaginary voices, he hears them say, "Go kill a policeman," and "You can't tell Aretha Franklin how to sing a song."

In a good story, an 11-year-old girl isn't just trapped in the rubble of the Soviet Armenian earthquake . . . "she was afraid to

open her eyes out of fear of what she might see. She heard a noise and grew more afraid until she realized it was the sound of her own breathing. Only then did she conclude she was alive. She opened her eyes, saw nothing, held her breath and listened, heard nothing, tried to move, couldn't."

Observing

The girl in the rubble was named Ani Gabrielian. I met her a few months after the earthquake when she and her father Simon came to the United States for medical help. Shortly after they returned to Armenia, I traveled there to find them. The result was a series of stories that, for me, reinforced the importance of observation in the reporting process.

To anyone who has written a story, the value of observation is obvious. The most compelling stories are often a succession of pivotal moments, and seeing those moments unfold, rather than trying to re-create them, leads to a stronger, richer narrative.

It's obvious—and yet when I go out on stories, I often get so wrapped up in interviews that I forget to step back and become a passive observer. Lately, to overcome that, I've started doing two things.

When I arrive in a strange town, I don't go immediately to my first interview. Instead, I drive around for a while to get a feel for the landscape, the neighborhood, even the street the person I'm interviewing lives on. Doing this helps me settle down after a plane flight, and it also allows me to have a sense of place in mind when I begin asking questions.

I also try to look at any site that will be the focus of a narrative passage as if I were a photographer. I not only stand near something, I move away for a long view, I crouch down, I move left and right. I try to view it from every angle possible to see what might be revealed.

As you might imagine, I do see different things, all of which end up in my notebook. I fill up lots of notebooks on stories because I tend to write down everything I see, even if it's something like, "2 rocks off to left—sedimentary??—resemble poodle."

My hope is that as the reporting process continues, the significance of my notations will emerge. Usually, that doesn't happen; out of a 50-page notebook, I'll have 5 pages of possibly usable quotes, 10 pages of other possibly usable notes, and 35 pages of hieroglyphics.

Sometimes, though, as with Ani and Simon Gabrielian, it does happen.

If ever a story called for observation, it was Armenia after the earthquake of December 7, 1988. More than 25,000 people were killed in the earthquake, including Ani's mother and four of her seven brothers and sisters. Ani's primary injury was physical: She had a leg amputated. Her father Simon's injury was psychological: He was destroyed when he lost most of his family, and then he was destroyed again when, after seeing how well people in America live, he returned to Armenia where he had no place to live but an old railroad boxcar.

He and Ani spent four months in America. While they were here, I visited them frequently, interviewing them about what their lives had been like and what happened to them when the earthquake began. I also read everything I could find about Armenia, and I conducted dozens of interviews with academicians, geologists, architects, search-and-rescue experts, Soviet officials and Armenian-Americans.

Then, Ani and Simon left for Armenia, and I followed a few weeks later. The interviews and research I'd done helped tremendously, providing context for what I observed. But in the end, I used almost none of it because it was the observations themselves that made Ani and Simon's story at all affecting.

One section in particular demonstrates what I mean. It was the ending to the third day of a four-day series, and it described a private moment in Simon's life that came upon his return to a relative's apartment after he visited the graves of his wife and children:

The day is cool. The window is open. Simon sits in the living room, just sits, until his sister-in-law brings him an album of photographs of his children.

He opens the album and looks at the pictures slowly. After a while, his niece, Irina, comes in and begins playing the piano. She plays a piece by Beethoven, a sonata. Simon stops looking at the photographs, closes his eyes and listens.

In any city, in any place, there are the sounds of a day going by. On this day, in this place, the sounds are of some people whose lives are slowly coming to order.

There are footsteps crunching in the gravel.

There is a hushed conversation, too quiet to really hear.

There is a baby crying, and a car door closing.

There is a sonata being played on a piano.

There is a man beginning to cry.

And, soft as a whisper, there is the sound of someone bringing some photographs to his lips, photographs of some children who have died, the quiet sound of a kiss.

I remember the day that story was published. I was awake before dawn. I waited in bed, listening for the sound of the paper being delivered, and when it arrived, I remember reading those nine paragraphs and thinking that, after 12 years of writing newspaper stories, I finally wrote something I liked.

Six months later, those are some of the only paragraphs I've written that I can reread and feel a sense of accomplishment over, and the reasons are twofold.

First, being with Simon that day was one of those privileged moments that make feature stories worth doing. As I sat with Simon, I learned not only about him, but about people in general and about myself. When measured against the devastation of much of a country, the act of Simon kissing some pictures was a little thing to be sure, but it revealed a universal kind of emotion that helped readers see how deep and prolonged someone's grief can be.

Second, I was able to witness that scene because of preparation. I had done enough research about Armenia to have a basic understanding of its history. I had done enough interviews to understand the severity of the earthquake. And I had spent enough time with Ani and Simon for a rapport to develop. I have had people cry before in interviews, and often, as their tears flow, they look at me to see if I have noticed. It wasn't that way at all with Simon. At that time, he trusted me enough to act as if I wasn't there. I was transparent that day, and he was a grieving man alone. It was the purest of reporting of all.

A Sense of Control

What all of this means is that a good story isn't just a bunch of pretty words. It's a flow of information in which every sentence has something to say. And—as my editor suggested so long ago—it's reporting that allows that to happen.

It's getting to know your subject. It's interviewing for the tiny details. It's watching events unfold.

If you do these things, you'll finish the reporting process in good shape. You'll be able to focus your story. You'll be able to organize your notes. You'll feel like you're in control. You might even feel giddy with success. And then, just when you thought you were having fun, you'll sit down and begin to write.

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Interviewing is an unnatural act. You must sit with notebook and pen in hand, while scribbling notes, perhaps as a tape recorder runs nearby. In the back of your mind you know that accuracy is primary. That means you might have to frame a question several ways until you understand what is being said. At times you will feel a question is embarrassing or dumb, but you must ask it because it is much dumber and more embarrassing to write a story that is incomplete. Fortunately, most people want to talk about themselves. Often they will tell you things they have never said to anyone else. Sometimes an editor will ask you to do a simple interview, let's say with an author passing through town who will give you just an hour on his busy schedule. Then you will want to focus your interview around one theme. It might be as simple as how he came to write his new book. Some magazines have a vitae-like section where you might just have to ask the questions to fit the format. At other times you will be asked to do a full-blown profile, in which case you want to spend as much time with your subject as possible. One interview will probably be less than ideal because you want to dig beneath the veneer to find out what the subject is really made of. No one is better at this digging than Kay Miller of the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis, who can get people to reveal things they normally would reserve only for close friends.

Interviewing Techniques: Get Them to Talk

Kay Miller

I love interviewing. I love preparing to talk to someone I don't yet know. I love sparring with people who don't expect me to know as

much as I do and emerging with a story they never intended to tell me. I love piecing together bits of information from one person to ask the salient question of another. I love spotting quirks of character.

I even love the odd situations interviews put me in: Crawling through the cold muck of an underground cave. Talking with Jewish dissidents in the Soviet Union. Listening to river people dicker with a traveling pearl buyer. Watching a child be born in the filth of Calcutta. Following a homeless family in their search for a clean, well-lighted place to live.

I love packing my beat-up black purse with notebooks, a handful of pens, and my tape recorder. And I love leaving my office, getting in my car, and driving where no one knows how to reach me.

But most of all I love entering another person's life at the time it is most intense: Birth. Death. Discovery. Magnificent failures. Ignominious successes. In such times, philosopher Joseph Campbell would say human beings feel the rapture of what it is to be alive. We don't pick dull times to write about. So we catch people in the drama and paradox of life. At such times people have wisdom to share. And it seems to me that at such times they are more inclined to tell the truth.

During those times a great interviewer is rather like a great psychologist: In his presence people often reveal far more than intended, while the interviewer listens and watches.

Learn to Listen

Not long ago, my friend Martha Sawyer Allen was permitted onto the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota to cover a religious purification rite. Martha didn't want to blunder into asking offensive questions. So before she left, she asked several Indians' advice on the best way to interview people for her story on native American spirituality.

"Don't take notes. Don't take pictures. And above all, don't ask questions," the Indians advised her. "Just watch. And listen."

Watch. And listen. People will *tell* you what's important, often in ways other than words. Once a psychologist told me that only a small part of communication is words. That means that the majority of what we learn about other people comes through their facial expressions, the tone of their voices, the set of their bodies. Sometimes people say more in the silences between words than through all that

they utter. Sometimes they speak most loudly in their choice of words or the themes to which they repeatedly return.

Of course, over the telephone you will get none of this. From face-to-face interviews, you observe how they have arranged the artifacts of their lives. You watch how they interact—or don't—with their kids, wives, neighbors and friends. Over the hours, you have them reconstruct their life histories, recalling the sights, sounds and color of seminal events.

There are stories that can be done on the fly. But my bias is that to do a thorough job of writing requires multiple interviews in as many settings as makes sense.

I have never encountered a person who told me in the first interview everything about his or her life that was crucial to an understanding of the person. There is a paradox in interviewing people: They crave being known and understood. Yet people hide out emotionally from reporters: Perhaps you will spot in them the very thing that they dislike in themselves.

In first interviews, people select their words carefully. They censor stories they wouldn't want to see in print. Their self-description too often sounds like advertising copy. Perhaps unconsciously, people want to know if you will be repulsed or will exploit them if they reveal their true selves.

I think of a 33-year-old woman who two years before had gotten out of prostitution. She was extremely bright: an honors student in English before she dropped out of college.

At first she talked about prostitution in a detached, clinical way, as if she were a sociologist describing someone else's life. But the more we talked, the harder it was for her to distance herself from her experiences. In an emotionally wrenching third interview, she talked about how loathsome she found sex with strangers. For her to survive, it became imperative that she focus on anything but the intrusion on her body. During sex, she silently recited poetry from her college days. She laughed when she told me that the only poem she could recite in its entirety was "Old Ironsides."

Yet, she said her revulsion was so great that after a time, the poetry was insufficient to block her feelings. So she devised a grisly visualization in which she would mutilate a part of herself. With each sexual encounter, she advanced the image, like installments in a serial:

"I would take a knife. And I would slice around my heart. I would slice off pieces of my heart, and I would watch the blood flow. That sounds kind of psychotic. It worked very well. . . .

"Every time I took another layer off, I would say to myself, 'See? This doesn't hurt. See, this doesn't hurt.' And I did that for a long time. Until the image—my HEART—kept getting smaller and smaller. At some point I didn't have to do it anymore. And I was glad. I was real glad because then I knew I didn't feel anything."

Of course, the more time you spend with people the harder it is to write a one-dimensional story. You begin to see your subjects as human beings, with many traits. I usually approach stories with an underlying hope that the people I've chosen to write about will prove to be admirable characters. They aren't always. And their stories aren't always pretty. Human beings are complex, and the more time you spend with them, the harder it is to write stories that are black and white.

Getting the Interview

Unless you're an investigative reporter with a hidden agenda, it's important to be candid about the focus of your story and what your interviewees can contribute. Let them know how much time the interviews will take and whether they can be done over the phone or should be done in person. On sensitive stories, face-to-face interviews are not only reassuring to the person you're talking with, but they are almost always more productive. And many times an interview isn't simply asking a series of questions and getting a series of answers. Many times it's more, even, than a great conversation. It's putting yourself in the sweep of a person's life, so that you understand the context for all those conversations.

On the other hand, if I'm talking with a relatively minor character—someone who's out of town or somebody who will provide a small slice of background for the story, some historical perspective, another portion about a profilee's background—I use the phone. Generally I do not tape-record these conversations. I'm a very fast typist and take computer notes as they talk. When they're going too fast, I say, "Just a second, could you reiterate that last point?"

When I am contacting someone for an in-depth profile, I let them know that most likely this will take multiple interviews. For a profile of a Minnesota politician I interviewed him six times, with

many more calls in between. Each interview lasted at least two hours; some took as long as four. After that long, my mind turns to mush and paralysis sets into my writing hand.

At the close of an interview, I often tell my subject what has been particularly helpful for my story. Then I schedule our next interview.

Invariably during the interview new questions crop up in my mind. If I don't want to interrupt the flow of conversation, I jot them on the inside cover of my reporter's notebook. Other questions occur as I'm reviewing notes or listening to tapes. These I write down in the front of a notebook, ready for our next interview.

For profiles, I might ask to follow the person through a normal day—or sometimes through a unique day that gives me insights into their work—as I did when I followed pearl buyer Nadine Nelson from her tiny shop in Stockholm, Wisconsin, to watch her negotiate for rare pearls found in Mississippi River clams.

Unpredictably, the greatest insights I had about Nelson came during our three-hour drive home in the dark, where conversation was more relaxed than it had been before. I stopped taking notes and simply listened to stories from her life. She told me about growing up rich in Morocco and later living a hand-to-mouth existence with her artist husband. She told me about dirty tricks played on her by some competitors. Good quotes from that drive were lost. But everything else I knew about Nadine Nelson made more sense.

Stay Away From Restaurants

By far the worst places to conduct interviews are restaurants. They are noisy and distracting. If you've ordered something delicious, you're too preoccupied to eat it. Invariably your subject tells you something compelling just as you've picked up a sloppy sandwich and you look like a fool scrambling for a pen.

There are, of course, exceptions that prove the rule. My colleague Bob Ehlert did a stunning profile of playwright August Wilson drawn from interviews conducted in a restaurant where Wilson did much of his writing. The point is to select locations for interviews that will tell you more about the person you're interviewing: If you're profiling a prosecutor, get him in court. If it's a pearl buyer on the river, get her with river people. If it's a clothes buyer, follow her to showrooms.

If you're doing a series of interviews, it makes sense to let your subject choose where he or she will be most comfortable for the first interview — and you do the moving.

If your story also relies on photographs, think about whether the sites you select will provide action shots or boring, static pictures. My original interviews with a doctor who had been exposed to the AIDS virus were in a hospital office and later in his home — neither of which would have produced compelling photographs. Photographer David Brewster joined me in the emergency room with the doctor and got some very dramatic photos.

Preparation

The kind of interview you plan to do will shape your preparation. If you're planning a profile, you'll want to read everything possible about the person. Usually I mentally store away interesting anecdotes, crisis points, controversies, points of heroism or shame that I'd like expanded upon.

If the interview is going to be tense, or time is strictly limited, I prepare a set of questions that follow a logical progression from least threatening to most difficult. My hope is that by the time we reach the tough questions, both the person I'm interviewing and I will be relaxed enough so that I can ask almost anything — and have it be answered. The point is to know — going in — what kind of material you want coming out of the interview. If the interviewee raises a relevant subject, it can be the perfect foil for raising the tough questions.

Once I've grown conversant with a topic, I rarely need prepared questions. I know what gaps I need that person to fill in for me.

Just a word about dress: Whenever possible, I dress according to the expectations of the people I'm interviewing. In 1982, I went to a conference of American Catholic Bishops in Washington, D.C. The first day, my interviews went very smoothly. My notebook was loaded with good material. But the second day, the bishops seemed more standoffish. I sensed a reluctance that hadn't been there the day before. Though I was puzzled, I didn't give it much more thought.

I left the conference directly for the airport. On the plane trip home, I fell into a conversation with a businessman who owned a small but thriving computer company. Tending to the details was

the secret of his success, the man said, and that included such items as requiring all his female salespeople to wear business suits with skirts, not pants.

Bristling at the notion of women working under what constituted a dress code, I pointed to the maroon silk pantsuit I'd been wearing on the final day of the bishops' conference. It made no difference to my interviews whether I wore these slacks or the dress I had on the previous day, I said.

"That may be," the man said skeptically. "But if you came to interview me dressed like that, I would make you work twice as hard for the interview."

Timing

Deciding who to interview and when can be crucial to the success of an interview and your entire story. After a national discussion on banning assault weapons, my editor and I decided I should follow the life of a single gun. I wanted a case that was about two years old, one that already had been adjudicated so I'd have a court record to rely on. I settled on the case of one Browning 9mm Hi-Power semiautomatic. I chose it after a prosecutor recalled that one of the central characters referred to the murder weapon as "my favorite toy."

On this story, I began by interviewing more peripheral characters—police, prosecutors, weapons manufacturers, officers at the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. This I did for tactical reasons: First, I knew that they had no stake in the case and therefore it would cost them nothing to help me. Others might have dozens of reasons not to be interviewed. Second, I am characteristically tongue-tied on unfamiliar topics; I stumble looking for the right terminology. By starting at the outer ring of characters, I learned the language of weapons, as I gathered useful data and gained a foothold on the story. Then I was ready to interview people in the center of the drama.

From police records I got the name of Stephen Petersen, the accountant and sometime-firearms dealer from whom the guns had been stolen. Originally I had no idea how important Petersen would be in the story, so our first interview was over the telephone. As it turned out, Petersen had become obsessed with the theft, spending all his spare time for two years seeking prosecution of the men in-

volved in the theft and sale of his guns. However, when the Browning Hi-Power turned up in the hands of a murderer, the police decided not to tell him:

Not until Petersen was contacted by a reporter did he know that his 9mm Browning had found its way into the hands of an armed robber. Worst of all was the news that the weapon he bought to protect his family was used to murder a man.

"My gun killed a man?" All the bravado in Petersen's voice seeps away. At first Petersen sounds as if he does not want to believe this. Then there is no sound from him at all.

Quietly he tries to make conversation again: "My worst fear's come true.

"Now, I'm not responsible for that man's death. I feel a moral responsibility. But the bottom line is that it could just as well have been another weapon. From that standpoint, if it wasn't mine, it would have been someone else's."

In a flash Petersen switches from morose tones to angry ones in which he talks about the need for longer prison sentences and capital punishment. Then he shifts back to the morose tone again.

"You see what happened? My efforts failed. We *knew* who burglarized the house and failed to put them away. A killing took place 10 months later. *We* failed. I failed because I didn't get the job done. I wanted those guns swept off the street."

Earlier, I talked about starting at the outer ring of characters on a complex story. Waiting to interview principal characters can, however, be risky.

Doing a story on an internecine family feud over an elderly mother's care, I made the tactical error of contacting the family's minister before letting all her adult children know I was doing the story. Within a day, the woman's favorite grandson called me, sputtering with rage, saying that the minister had told him some reporter was snooping around. Not only was this well before I was prepared to talk with the grandson, but he was so angry he refused to participate in the story. And he poisoned the well for me with his mother, aunts and uncles also.

Moral of the story: It's important not to wait too long to contact a principal person in a story, lest the person think you've got sinister intent and resolve not to work with you.

An Ideal Example

For me the structure of my first and subsequent interviews with Mark Dayton, a politician and member of the Dayton-Hudson department store family, comprised a textbook case on how I conduct interviews.

Our first of six interviews was at Dayton's home. He met me at the door, his posture ramrod straight. He was extremely cordial. Yet, even when Dayton smiled, he looked sad. His face seemed drawn down hard around the prominent bones of an aristocratic face. He led me into his living room and left to get coffee and mineral water. I picked a chair at right angles to a sofa. That way I could comfortably look him in the eye, without having to turn my body. There was a coffee table on which to set my tape recorder.

When Dayton returned, we made small talk briefly. Then we agreed to ground rules for the interview.

"Where's a good place for us to begin?" I asked.

Dayton began a detailed, fairly dry monologue that followed a strict chronology from the time he was last in the public eye to present day. From experience, I knew this first interview would lay the foundation for our subsequent meetings. I simply let it take its own course, seldom interrupting. I told Dayton that it is my style to try to put the reader in important scenes and that it would help me if he would describe settings, people, feelings, with as much detail as possible. Those are the elements of story telling. Some people are storytellers and some are not. Dayton was not.

From his word choices, the looks on his face, the falters, I would have to figure out which were the salient scenes to describe and return to for details later. Despite Dayton's clear willingness to please, the entire interview felt oddly stiff and contrived.

Every time I stepped into a tender area, asked a highly personal question, Dayton sidestepped it or declared it off limits:

Were there times in alcoholism treatment that stick out in your mind as particularly powerful?

"It was all powerful. . . ."

What factors contributed to the breakup of your marriage?

"I don't feel it's appropriate to get into. . . ."

Do you remember times in your childhood when growing up that were especially painful?

"I'm not going to get into that here. . . ."

Tell me about the new relationship you had that stopped last spring?

"I'm not going to say anything about that, except for the power of the experience. . . ."

Walls kept going up. I was frustrated.

Impressions

After returning to the office from an important interview, I try to record impressions, as I did for this story: "Has a need to be socially correct . . . So prissy he starts off one slightly off-color story saying, 'This is off the record' . . . Walls go up . . . Clearly knows what he will talk about, what he won't. You'll be getting someplace, then the walls go up . . . Everything about Dayton is controlled, everything planned."

Later my impressions of Dayton changed dramatically as I began to see the depth of his character, warmth and humor. But these notes gave me a reference point.

Dayton had set our first interview in the living room of his home. While comfortable, it is also formal, with implied boundaries. So when he offered to get me coffee during our second interview, I traipsed out to the kitchen behind him, settling myself on a high stool around an island counter, talking while he poured.

That began a modest ritual: Before each interview, we'd talk for half an hour or so about our lives, kids, articles we'd read, other politicians, sports, whatever came to mind. Sometimes Dayton would catch himself saying something unguarded: "Are we off the record?" he'd ask. To which I'd reply, "We are now, but I may want to ask you about it later."

These informal conversations gave Dayton a chance to know me better. It's a scary thing to open yourself up to a reporter. And I believe these talks gave Dayton reason to believe that I wouldn't abuse his trust. Perhaps in stepping over the initial boundary, I unconsciously had broken down some of the psychic distance that Dayton had set up.

Soon he would talk about his family and about how his divorce devastated him. As Dayton described those feelings, both he and I cried. Particularly wrenching was telling his older son that Daddy was moving to another house:

"Just the look of horror on his face. . . ." Dayton's eyes are closed again, and he looks slightly ill. "Even when I think about it now, it's just very moving. I mean he was so small and so innocent and vulnerable. And his world was about to be changed drastically."

Several days later the boy was to spend the night at Dayton's townhouse for the first time. Sensing that it might be rough, Dayton tried to smooth the transition by letting him pick out his own bed, desk and dresser.

That night Dayton read his child a book and put him to bed. Like always.

"I think I'd rather sleep in your bed," his son said. So they trucked down the hall to Dayton's room.

"I tucked him in my bed, and I lay down beside him. After just a couple minutes he said he thought he'd rather go back and sleep in his bed at his house. As I drove him back to our house I didn't blame him. I would've rather been back there too.

"I remember coming back here after that point, just breaking down into tears — the awfulness of the reality of that just driving itself in."

Using a Tape Recorder

I always tape-record important interviews. Invariably there is rich material in my tape recorder that never made it into my notebook. In the five years since I left news side to write for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune's* Sunday magazine, one of the most satisfying feelings is the sense that I am not leaving great material out of stories.

Moreover, people speak in voices that are distinctive to them — their idiom — and the ear is not always quick enough to pick these up. Tapes capture the power and subtlety of human exchange in a way I have found impossible with handwritten notes. In my 14 years of reporting I have yet to meet a reporter whose hearing is so keen and whose hand so quick that he or she can catch every word accurately in sentences to be quoted later. That includes me. Sometimes I'm appalled at the lapses in my own notes.

I use a small tape recorder that fits into my purse with a reporter's notebook. On the slow setting, one tape will record two hours' worth of conversation. I generally keep an extra box of micro-cassettes and a handful of batteries at the bottom of a large, embarrassingly cluttered purse.

Before I turn the recorder on, I make sure that's all right with the person I'm interviewing. "It's a way to keep me honest," I might

quip. "That way I'm not going to quote you saying something you never did."

Not only does that give them some assurance, but when people know you are taping, they are less inclined to later accuse you of inaccuracy or taking things out of context. That may well be, because you're less likely to commit those journalistic sins.

A small tape recorder rapidly becomes unobtrusive in a way that note-taking never is. Taping also frees me to jot down descriptions—of the person, his surroundings, his demeanor—without missing chunks of the discussion. Sometimes I get so excited when people expound on an important idea or are at last telling me the true grit of their emotion, that my hand freezes up. I miss things I know I'll need.

Moreover, as I listen to tapes, I feel as if I'm back in Mark Dayton's living room, sensing his human frailties and strengths. Carrying that feeling into writing brings some unquantifiable, intangible bonus.

All those are taping's rewards. But it carries a steep price: the time involved in transcribing tapes. To limit that amount of time I spend transcribing, I circle material in my notes that I want to retrieve from the tape. Next to quotes that were great, but I couldn't write fast enough to capture entirely, I typically write "get." Or I circle or star seminal ideas. Nevertheless, there's a tremendous temptation to listen to whole tapes and transcribe far more than can ever be incorporated into a piece.

The other downside of taping—and this is far worse—is that machines and tapes and batteries can fail. So can the operator: I've unwittingly taped an interview with explorer Will Steeger right over a key talk with St. Paul school's superintendent William Bennett. I've left the pause button on in an interview with a Canadian woman who helped Vietnam draft dodgers settle in Toronto. I've had a tape-recorder refuse to run during a conversation with AIDS physician Dr. Frank Rhame. It is daunting to think you've got a terrific interview socked away, only to discover that the tape is blank.

Your only salvation is taking good notes so that you don't come up empty.

It's Just Conversation

In many respects interviewing is just conversation with someone you want to know. Think about how you are with a stranger you find

