12

Writing About People

The Interview

Get people talking. Learn to ask questions that will elicit answers about what is most interesting or vivid in their lives. Nothing so animates writing as someone telling what he thinks or what he does—in his own words.

His own words will always be better than your words, even if you are the most elegant stylist in the land. They carry the inflection of his speaking voice and the idiosyncrasies of how he puts a sentence together. They contain the regionalisms of his conversation and the lingo of his trade. They convey his enthusiasms. This is a person talking to the reader directly, not through the filter of a writer. As soon as a writer steps in, everyone else's experience becomes secondhand.

Therefore learn how to conduct an interview. Whatever form of nonfiction you write, it will come alive in proportion to the number of "quotes" you can weave into it as you go along. Often you'll find yourself embarking on an article so apparently lifeless—the history of an institution, or some local issue such as storm sewers—that you will quail at the prospect of keeping your readers, or even yourself, awake.

Take heart. You'll find the solution if you look for the human element. Somewhere in every drab institution are men and women who have a fierce attachment to what they are doing and are rich repositories of lore. Somewhere behind every storm sewer is a politician whose future hangs on getting it installed and a widow who has always lived on the block and is outraged that some damn-fool legislator thinks it will wash away. Find these people to tell your story and it won't be drab.

I've proved this to myself often. Many years ago I was invited to write a small book for the New York Public Library to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its main building on Fifth Avenue. On the surface it seemed to be just the story of a marble building and millions of musty volumes. But behind the facade I found that the library had 19 research divisions, each with a curator supervising a hoard of treasures and oddities, from Washington's handwritten Farewell

Address to 750,000 movie stills. I decided to interview all those curators to learn what was in their collections, what they were adding to keep up with new areas of knowledge, and how their rooms were being used.

I found that the Science & Technology division had a collection of patents second only to that of the United States Patent Office and was therefore a second home to the city's patent lawyers. But it also had a daily stream of men and women who thought they were on the verge of discovering perpetual motion. "Everybody's got something to invent," the curator explained, "but they won't tell us what they're looking for—maybe because they think we'll patent it ourselves." The whole building turned out to be just such a mixture of scholars and searchers and crackpots, and my story, though ostensibly the chronicle of an institution, was really a story about people.

I used the same approach in a long article about Sotheby's, the London auction firm. Sotheby's was also divided into various domains, such as silver and porcelain and art, each with an expert in charge, and, like the Library, it subsisted on the whims of a capricious public. The experts were like department heads in a small college, and all of them had anecdotes that were unique both in substance and in the manner of telling:

> "We just sit here like Micawber waiting for things to come in," said R. S. Timewell, head of the furniture department. "Recently an old lady near Cambridge wrote that she wanted to raise two thousand pounds and asked if I would go through her house and see if her furniture would fetch that much. I did, and there was absolutely nothing of value. As I was about to leave I said, 'Have I seen *every*thing?' She said I had, except for a maid's room that she hadn't bothered to show me. The room had a very fine 18th-century chest that the old lady was using to store blankets in. 'Your worries are over,' I told her, 'if you sell that chest.' She said, 'But that's quite impossible—where will I store my blankets?'"

My worries were over, too. By listening to the quizzical scholars who ran the business and to the men and women who flocked there every morning bearing unloved objects found in British attics ("I'm afraid it *isn't* Queen Anne, madam—much nearer Queen Victoria, unfortunately"), I got as much human detail as a writer could want.

Again, when I was asked in 1966 to write a history of the Book-of-the-Month Club to mark its 40th birthday, I thought I might encounter nothing but inert matter. But I found a peppery human element on both sides of the fence, for the books had always been selected by a panel of strong-minded judges and sent to equally stubborn subscribers, who never hesitated to wrap up a book they didn't like and send it right back. I was given more than a thousand pages of transcribed interviews with the five original judges (Heywood Broun, Henry Seidel Canby, Dorothy Canfield, Christopher Morley and William Allen White), to

which I added my own interviews with the club's founder, Harry Scherman, and with the judges who were then active. The result was four decades' worth of personal memories on how America's reading tastes had changed, and even the books took on a life of their own and became characters in my story:

> "Probably it's difficult for anyone who remembers the prodigious success of *Gone With the Wind*," Dorothy Canfield said, "to think how it would have seemed to people who encountered it simply as a very, very long and detailed book about the Civil War and its aftermath. We had never heard of the author and didn't have anybody else's opinion on it. It was chosen with a little difficulty, because some of the characterization was not very authentic or convincing. But as a narrative it had the quality which the French call *attention:* it made you want to turn over the page to see what happens next. I remember that someone commented, 'Well, people may not like it very much, but nobody can deny that it gives a lot of reading for your money.' Its tremendous success was, I must say, about as surprising to us as to anybody else."

Those three examples are typical of the kind of information that is locked inside people's heads, which a good nonfiction writer must unlock. The best way to practice is to go out and interview people. The interview itself is one of the most popular nonfiction forms, so you should master it early.

How should you start? First, decide what person you want to interview. If you are a college student, don't interview your roommate. With all due respect for what terrific roommates you've got, they probably don't have much to say that the rest of us want to hear. To learn the craft of nonfiction you must push yourself out into the real world—your town or your city or your county—and pretend that you're writing for a real publication. If it helps, decide which publication you are hypothetically writing for. Choose as your subject someone whose job is so important, or so interesting, or so unusual that the average reader would want to read about that person.

That doesn't mean he or she has to be president of the bank. It can be the owner of the local pizza parlor or supermarket or hairdressing academy. It can be the fisherman who puts out to sea every morning, or the Little League manager, or the nurse. It can be the butcher, the baker or—better yet, if you can find him—the candlestick maker. Look for the women in your community who are unraveling the old myths about what the two sexes were foreordained to do. Choose, in short, someone who touches some corner of the reader's life.

Interviewing is one of those skills you can only get better at. You will never again feel so ill at ease as when you try it for the first time, and probably you'll never feel entirely comfortable prodding another person for answers he or she may be too shy or too inarticulate to reveal. But much of the skill is mechanical. The rest is instinct—knowing how to make the other person relax, when to push,

when to listen, when to stop. This can all be learned with experience.

The basic tools for an interview are paper and some well-sharpened pencils. Is that insultingly obvious advice? You'd be surprised how many writers venture forth to stalk their quarry with no pencil, or with one that breaks, or with a pen that doesn't work, and with nothing to write on. "Be prepared" is as apt a motto for the nonfiction writer on his rounds as it is for the Boy Scout.

But keep your notebook out of sight until you need it. There's nothing less likely to relax a person than the arrival of a stranger with a stenographer's pad. Both of you need time to get to know each other. Take a while just to chat, gauging what sort of person you're dealing with, getting him or her to trust you.

Never go into an interview without doing whatever homework you can. If you are interviewing a town official, know his or her voting record. If it's an actress, know what plays or movies she has been in. You will be resented if you inquire about facts you could have learned in advance.

Make a list of likely questions—it will save you the vast embarrassment of going dry in mid-interview. Perhaps you won't need the list; better questions will occur to you, or the people being interviewed will veer off at an angle you couldn't have foreseen. Here you can only go by intuition. If they stray hopelessly off the subject, drag them back. If you like the new direction, follow along and forget the questions you intended to ask.

Many beginning interviewers are inhibited by the fear that they are imposing on other people and have no right to invade their privacy. This fear is almost wholly unfounded. The so-called man in the street is delighted that somebody wants to interview him. Most men and women lead lives, if not of quiet desperation, at least of desperate quietness, and they jump at a chance to talk about their work to an outsider who seems eager to listen.

This doesn't necessarily mean it will go well. Often you will be talking to people who have never been interviewed before, and they will warm to the process awkwardly, self-consciously, perhaps not giving you anything you can use. Come back another day; it will go better. You will both even begin to enjoy it—proof that you aren't forcing your victims to do something they really don't want to do.

Speaking of tools, is it all right (you ask) to use a tape recorder? Why not just take one along, start it going, and forget all that business of pencil and paper?

Obviously the tape recorder is a superb machine for capturing what people have to say—especially people who, for reasons of their culture or temperament, would never get around to writing it down. In such areas as social history and anthropology it's invaluable. I admire the books of Studs Terkel, such as *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, which he "wrote" by recording interviews with ordinary people and patching the results into coherent shape. I also like the question-and-answer interviews, obtained by tape recorder, that are published in certain magazines. They have the sound of spontaneity, the refreshing absence of a writer hovering over the product and burnishing it to a

high gloss.

Strictly, however, this isn't writing. It's a process of asking questions and then pruning and splicing and editing the transcribed answers, and it takes a tremendous amount of time and labor. Educated people who you think have been talking into your tape recorder with linear precision turn out to have been stumbling so aimlessly over the sands of language that they haven't completed a single decent sentence. The ear makes allowances for missing grammar, syntax and transitions that the eye wouldn't tolerate in print. The seemingly simple use of a tape recorder isn't simple; infinite stitchery is required.

But my main reasons for warning you off it are practical. One hazard is that you don't usually have a tape recorder with you; you are more likely to have a pencil. Another is that tape recorders malfunction. Few moments in journalism are as glum as the return of a reporter with "a really great story," followed by his pushing of the PLAY button and silence. But above all, a writer should be able to see his materials. If your interview is on tape you become a listener, forever fussing with the machine, running it backward to find the brilliant remark you can never quite find, running it forward, stopping, starting, driving yourself crazy. Be a writer. Write things down.

I do my interviewing by hand, with a sharp No. 1 pencil. I like the transaction with another person. I like the fact that that person can see me *working*—doing a job, not just sitting there letting a machine do it for me. Only once did I use a tape recorder extensively: for my book, *Mitchell & Ruff*, about the jazz musicians Willie Ruff and Dwike Mitchell. Although I knew both men well, I felt that a white writer who presumes to write about the black experience has an obligation to get the tonalities right. It's not that Ruff and Mitchell speak a different kind of English; they speak good and often eloquent English. But as Southern blacks they use certain words and idioms that are distinctive to their heritage, adding richness and humor to what they say. I didn't want to miss any of those usages. My tape recorder caught them all, and readers of the book can hear that I got the two men right. Consider using a tape recorder in situations where you might violate the cultural integrity of the people you're interviewing.

Taking notes, however, has one big problem: the person you're interviewing often starts talking faster than you can write. You are still scribbling Sentence A when he zooms into Sentence B. You drop Sentence A and pursue him into Sentence B, meanwhile trying to hold the rest of Sentence A in your inner ear and hoping Sentence C will be a dud that you can skip altogether, using the time to catch up. Unfortunately, you now have your subject going at high speed. He is finally saying all the things you have been trying to cajole out of him for an hour, and saying them with what seems to be Churchillian eloquence. Your inner ear is clogging up with sentences you want to grab before they slip away.

Tell him to stop. Just say, "Hold it a minute, please," and write until you catch up. What you are trying to do with your feverish scribbling is to quote him correctly, and nobody wants to be misquoted.

With practice you will write faster and develop some form of shorthand. You'll find yourself devising abbreviations for often-used words and also omitting the small connective syntax. As soon as the interview is over, fill in all the missing words you can remember. Complete the uncompleted sentences. Most of them will still be lingering just within the bounds of recall.

When you get home, type out your notes—probably an almost illegible scrawl—so that you can read them easily. This not only makes the interview accessible, along with the clippings and other materials you have assembled. It enables you to review in tranquillity a torrent of words you wrote in haste, and thereby discover what the person really said.

You'll find that he said much that's not interesting, or not pertinent, or that's repetitive. Single out the sentences that are most important or colorful. You'll be tempted to use all the words that are in your notes because you performed the laborious chore of getting them all down. But that's a self-indulgence—no excuse for putting the reader to the same effort. Your job is to distill the essence.

What about your obligation to the person you interviewed? To what extent can you cut or juggle his words? This question vexes every writer returning from a first interview—and it should. But the answer isn't hard if you keep in mind two standards: brevity and fair play.

Your ethical duty to the person being interviewed is to present his position accurately. If he carefully weighed two sides of an issue and you only quote his views of one side, making him seem to favor that position, you will misrepresent what he told you. Or you might misrepresent him by quoting him out of context, or by choosing only some flashy remark without adding the serious afterthought. You are dealing with a person's honor and reputation—and also with your own.

But after that your duty is to the reader. He or she deserves the tightest package. Most people meander in their conversation, filling it with irrelevant tales and trivia. Much of it is delightful, but it's still trivia. Your interview will be strong to the extent that you get the main points made without waste. Therefore if you find on page 5 of your notes a comment that perfectly amplifies a point on page 2—a point made earlier in the interview—you will do everyone a favor if you link the two thoughts, letting the second sentence follow and illustrate the first. This may violate the truth of how the interview actually progressed, but you will be true to the intent of what was said. Play with the quotes by all means—selecting, rejecting, thinning, transposing their order, saving a good one for the end. Just make sure the play is fair. Don't change any words or let the cutting of a sentence distort the proper context of what remains.

Do I literally mean "don't change any words"? Yes and no. If a speaker chooses his words carefully you should make it a point of professional pride to quote him verbatim. Most interviewers are sloppy about this; they think that if they achieve a rough approximation it's good enough. It's not good enough: nobody wants to see himself in print using words or phrases he would never use. But if the speaker's conversation is ragged—if his sentences trail off, if his

thoughts are disorderly, if his language is so tangled that it would embarrass him—the writer has no choice but to clean up the English and provide the missing links.

Sometimes you can fall into a trap by trying to be too true to the speaker. As you write your article, you type his words exactly as you took them down. You even allow yourself a moment of satisfaction at being such a faithful scribe. Later, editing what you've written, you realize that several of the quotes don't quite make sense. When you first heard them they sounded so felicitous that you didn't give them a second thought. Now, on second thought, there's a hole in the language or the logic. To leave the hole is no favor to the reader or the speaker—and no credit to the writer. Often you only need to add one or two clarifying words. Or you might find another quote in your notes that makes the same point clearly. But also remember that you can call the person you interviewed. Tell him you want to check a few of the things he said. Get him to rephrase his points until you understand them. Don't become the prisoner of your quotes—so lulled by how wonderful they sound that you don't stop to analyze them. Never let anything go out into the world that *you* don't understand.

As for how to organize the interview, the lead should obviously tell the reader why the person is worth reading about. What is his claim to our time and attention? Thereafter, try to achieve a balance between what the subject is saying in *his* words and what you are writing in *your* words. If you quote a person for three or four consecutive paragraphs it becomes monotonous. Quotes are livelier when you break them up, making periodic appearances in your role as guide. You are still the writer—don't relinquish control. But make your appearances useful; don't just insert one of those dreary sentences that shout to the reader that your sole purpose is to break up a string of quotations ("He tapped his pipe on a nearby ashtray and I noticed that his fingers were quite long." "She toyed idly with her arugula salad").

When you use a quotation, start the sentence with it. Don't lead up to it with a vapid phrase saying what the man said.

BAD: Mr. Smith said that he liked to "go downtown once a week and have lunch with some of my old friends."

GOOD: "I usually like to go downtown once a week," Mr. Smith said, "and have lunch with some of my old friends."

The second sentence has vitality, the first one is dead. Nothing is deader than to start a sentence with a "Mr. Smith said" construction—it's where many readers stop reading. If the man said it, let him say it and get the sentence off to a warm, human start.

But be careful where you break the quotation. Do it as soon as you naturally can, so that the reader knows who is talking, but not where the break will destroy the rhythm or the meaning. Notice how the following three variants all

inflict some kind of damage:

"I usually like," Mr. Smith said, "to go downtown once a week and have lunch with some of my old friends."

"I usually like to go downtown," Mr. Smith said, "once a week and have lunch with some of my old friends."

"I usually like to go downtown once a week and have lunch," Mr. Smith said, "with some of my old friends."

Finally, don't strain to find synonyms for "he said." Don't make your man assert, aver and expostulate just to avoid repeating "he said," and please—please!—don't write "he smiled" or "he grinned." I've never heard anybody smile. The reader's eye skips over "he said" anyway, so it's not worth a lot of fuss. If you crave variety, choose synonyms that catch the shifting nature of the conversation. "He pointed out," "he explained," "he replied," "he added"—these all carry a particular meaning. But don't use "he added" if the man is merely averring and not putting a postscript on what he just said.

All these technical skills, however, can take you just so far. Conducting a good interview is finally related to the character and personality of the writer, because the person you're interviewing will always know more about the subject than you do. Some ideas on how to overcome your anxiety in this uneven situation, learning to trust your general intelligence, are offered in Chapter 21, "Enjoyment, Fear and Confidence."

The proper and improper use of quotations has been much in the news, dragged there by some highly visible events. One was the libel and defamation trial of Janet Malcolm, whom a jury found guilty of "fabricating" certain quotes in her *New Yorker* profile of the psychiatrist Jeffrey M. Masson. The other was the revelation by Joe McGinniss that in his biography of Senator Edward M. Kennedy, *The Last Brother*, he had "written certain scenes and described certain events from what I have inferred to be his point of view," though he never interviewed Kennedy himself. Such blurring of fact and fiction is a trend that bothers careful writers of nonfiction—an assault on the craft. Yet even for a conscientious reporter this is uncertain terrain. Let me invoke the work of Joseph Mitchell to suggest some guidelines. The seamless weaving of quotes through his prose was a hallmark of Mitchell's achievement in the brilliant articles he wrote for *The New Yorker* from 1938 to 1965, many of them dealing with people who worked around the New York waterfront. Those articles were hugely influential on nonfiction writers of my generation—a primary textbook.

The six Mitchell pieces that would eventually constitute his book, *The Bottom of the Harbor*, a classic of American nonfiction, ran with maddening infrequency in *The New Yorker* during the late 1940s and early '50s, often several years apart. Sometimes I would ask friends who worked at the magazine when I might expect

a new one, but they never knew or even presumed to guess. This was mosaic work, they reminded me, and the mosaicist was finicky about fitting the pieces together until he got them right. When at last a new article did appear I saw why it had taken so long; it *was* exactly right. I still remember the excitement of reading "Mr. Hunter's Grave," my favorite Mitchell piece. It's about an 87-year-old elder of the African Methodist Church, who was one of the last survivors of a 19th-century village of Negro oystermen on Staten Island called Sandy Ground. With *The Bottom of the Harbor* the past became a major character in Mitchell's work, giving it a tone both elegiac and historical. The old men who were his main subject were custodians of memory, a living link with an earlier New York.

The following paragraph, quoting George H. Hunter on the subject of pokeweed, is typical of many very long quotes in "Mr. Hunter's Grave" in its leisurely accretion of enjoyable detail:

> "In the spring, when it first comes up, the young shoots above the root are good to eat. They taste like asparagus. The old women in Sandy Ground used to believe in eating pokeweed shoots, the old Southern women. They said it renewed your blood. My mother believed it. Every spring she used to send me out in the woods to pick pokeweed shoots. And I believe it. So every spring, if I think about it, I go pick some and cook them. It's not that I like them so much—in fact, they give me gas—but they remind me of the days gone by, they remind me of my mother. Now, away down here in the woods in this part of Staten Island, you might think you were fifteen miles on the other side of nowhere, but just a little ways up Arthur Kill Road, up near Arden Avenue, there's a bend in the road where you can sometimes see the tops of the skyscrapers in New York. Just the tallest skyscrapers, and just the tops of them. It has to be an extremely clear day. Even then, you might be able to see them one moment and the next moment they're gone. Right beside this bend in the road there's a little swamp, and the edge of this swamp is the best place I know to pick pokeweed. I went up there one morning this spring to pick some, but we had a late spring, if you remember, and the pokeweed hadn't come up. The fiddleheads were up, and golden club, and spring beauty, and skunk cabbage, and bluets, but no pokeweed. So I was looking here and looking there, and not noticing where I was stepping, and I made a misstep, and the next thing I knew I was up to my knees in mud. I floundered around in the mud a minute, getting my bearings, and then I happened to raise my head and look up, and suddenly I saw, away off in the distance, miles and miles away, the tops of the skyscrapers in New York shining in the morning sun. I wasn't expecting it, and it was amazing. It was like a vision in the Bible."

Now, nobody thinks Mr. Hunter really said all that in one spurt; Mitchell did a heap of splicing. Yet I have no doubt that Mr. Hunter did say it at one moment or

another—that all the words and turns of phrase are his. It sounds like him; Mitchell didn't write the scene from what he "inferred" to be his subject's point of view. He made a literary arrangement, pretending to have spent one afternoon being shown around the cemetery, whereas I would guess, knowing his famously patient and courteous manner and his lapidary methods, that the article took at least a year of strolling, chatting, writing and rewriting. I've seldom read a piece so rich in texture; Mitchell's "afternoon" has the unhurried quality of an actual afternoon. By the time it's over, Mr. Hunter, reflecting on the history of oyster fishing in New York harbor, on the passing of generations in Sandy Ground, on families and family names, planting and cooking, wildflowers and fruit, birds and trees, churches and funerals, change and decay, has touched on much of what living is all about.

I have no problem calling "Mr. Hunter's Grave" nonfiction. Although Mitchell altered the truth about elapsed time, he used a dramatist's prerogative to compress and focus his story, thereby giving the reader a manageable framework. If he had told the story in real time, strung across all the days and months he did spend on Staten Island, he would have achieved the numbing truth of Andy Warhol's eight-hour film of a man having an eight-hour sleep. By careful manipulation he raised the craft of nonfiction to art. But he never manipulated Mr. Hunter's truth; there has been no "inferring," no "fabricating." He has played fair.

That, finally, is my standard. I know that it's just not possible to write a competent interview without some juggling and eliding of quotes; don't believe any writer who claims he never does it. But many shades of opinion exist on both sides of mine. Purists would say that Joseph Mitchell has taken a novelist's wand to the facts. Progressives would say that Mitchell was a pioneer—that he anticipated by several decades the "new journalism" that writers like Gay Talese and Tom Wolfe were hailed for inventing in the 1960s, using fictional techniques of imagined dialogue and emotion to give narrative flair to works whose facts they had punctiliously researched. Both views are partly right.

What's wrong, I believe, is to fabricate quotes or to surmise what someone might have said. Writing is a public trust. The nonfiction writer's rare privilege is to have the whole wonderful world of real people to write about. When you get people talking, handle what they say as you would handle a valuable gift.