



## Interview Dread No More!

Step-by-step salvation for even the most introverted writers who dread media interviews, yet need to do them to promote their work.

1. Remember: at all times, real is better than perfect!
2. Stop worrying about the wrong things, and start focusing on just one thing – great preparation. Most people who dread interviews worry about the wrong things, then fail to do the necessary preparation. The wrong things include worrying about 'sounding like an idiot', getting tongue-tied, saying 'um' too many times and not being sufficiently credible/knowledgeable/humorous/quick-witted. Great preparation includes doing your research, getting good support if you need it and managing your mindset and state. That is it. Those are the only prerequisites for doing a great interview.
3. Remember – you do not have to do an interview just because someone asks you to.
4. Decide whether you want or need to do the interview – if no, decline the invitation with grace. If yes, do what it takes to make it work. Detailed steps below.
5. If yes, commit to great preparation to make it work. If you don't prepare, then make the decision to accept the outcome.
6. Remember there is a world of difference between the way you experience the interview and the way another person – your audience – will experience it. Seriously, you may not be the best person to judge its merit. Find someone whose opinion you really trust, and get their solid, honest appraisal. If the feedback indicates there are some things to work on, then accept that there is scope to make the next one better.

7. If you feel you need it, get help to develop a mindset that allows you to tolerate being uncomfortable hearing yourself interviewed. Most of us feel pretty uncomfortable hearing ourselves – it is 100% normal to feel anything from discomfort to utter dismay when we realise that that is actually how we sound. Once again, if you believe being interviewed is in your interest, professionally or otherwise, then do what it takes to be OK in the role. Either do it and learn to be OK, or decide that you will simply decline.

8. There is a relationship between preparation and performance – preparation really does make the difference.

### Great preparation

1. **Prepare actively** – great preparation gives you confidence in the content, so you can focus on your state of mind.

2. **Understand the difference between excellence and perfection** and go for excellence.

3. **Understand the differences between preparing the content and preparing your emotional state** for the interview and commit to preparing actively for both.

4. **Understand what you can and can't control. You can control:** what you say, do, think and feel. Includes accepting or declining the invitation; research and content preparation; emotional preparation; research about context and purpose of interview; the intention you set for your own behaviour as interviewee; the amount and type of support you find to do your best; the rapport you establish with the interviewer before and during the interview; your behaviour before, during and after the interview; your degree of co-operation; the persona you project; your beliefs about yourself (including issues of legitimacy, capacity, intelligence, honour, knowledge, wittiness etc.); adequacy of your preparation; decisions about your attitudes to external criticism. **You can't control:** the interviewer's agenda, intention or behaviour, a listener's response, what others say or write about your interview.

5. **Research the interviewer** – their style, their politics, possible agenda/s, typical views, potential traps, their likely intention, their intelligence, their thoroughness (or superficiality). Do this by listening to their archive, listing typical topics, listening for their style of questions, tone of their questioning, gender attitudes, political tendencies, typical attitude towards interviewees. In other words – patterns. As you listen, imagine yourself answering the questions they ask. Write down some of their questions and prepare answers you'd give. As well as writing them down, importantly, speak them out loud. Recording them, then listening back tells you so much (as long as you're not your own worst super-critic, in which case ask a trusted friend or colleague to give you excellent constructive feedback).

6. **Check out the context** within which the interview will take place – will it be used for a 30-second news grab, a three-minute current affairs interview, a seven-minute talks program interview or an hour-long, in-depth piece? Will you be the only person interviewed, or part of a panel?

7. **Check out practicalities** – with whom, when, where will you be interviewed, likely length of interview, media type (radio/web/TV/blog/newspaper/magazine/YouTube); if for audio/video, is it live or pre-recorded? If for print, will an audio version be made available and where? Who else, if anyone, will be interviewed about the topic? If others, how will it work – e.g. live panel interview, separate interviews edited together later?

8. **Understand the differences between live and pre-recorded** – what are the implications for you? If live, considerations include: practicalities (phone/Skype/studio); no second chances – what you say goes straight to air with no editing, which means there may be more energy, a 'special something'. If pre-recorded it may be edited, the original interview may be longer than if live, there may be some chance for rephrasing if you say something that doesn't come out properly.

9. **Insist on receiving clear and unambiguous information** about the purposes for which the interview will be used – e.g. where, specifically will this interview be published and when, what are the demographics of the target audience, to what extent may the original interview be edited and for what purposes?

10. **Ask about your rights** in relation to the interview – e.g. if it is pre-recorded, what access, if any, will you have to it before publication, what (if any) opportunities will you have to prevent publication of all or part of the interview, will there be an opportunity to get a copy of the raw and/or the published interview?

11. **Practise your tone:** alone or with a trusted other, practise the 'settling in' conversation at the start of the interview; answering questions you expect, answering questions that unsettle you, answering questions you can't answer (i.e. how will you respond to a question to which you don't have an answer, that offends you, that seems risky for you, that embarrasses you – or for which you do have an answer, but don't wish to give it).

12. **Create a state of mind/body/emotion.** Spend time precisely imagining an ideal state that would support you being as you would like to be during the interview. Draw on past experiences of when you felt confident/funny/knowledgeable/in control/at ease – whatever the emotional state you would like to hold during the interview. Then imagine the thoughts in your mind, the feelings in your body, the emotions you'd experience in order to support that ideal state. Write down the components of the state and speak them aloud to yourself. Once you know and feel the components of the state, give it a name – e.g. “killer interview state”, “brilliant raconteur / clear, focused and articulate / Michael Parkinson state” – whatever works for you. Then practise getting into and out of this state. Do this as often as possible until you are able to summon it just with a thought. Create an anchor that you link to this state – this might be a posture you adopt (e.g. shoulders back, head up, deep breath); an object (e.g. special pebble you can keep in your pocket and touch just as you're about to start the interview), or an image – an imagined one, or a physical/electronic copy to take with you.

13. **Write down the main points** you want to remember. Make sure to write in large print on cards (not rusty paper). Do an early version, and then before the interview refine the points so there are as few as possible. Avoid writing pages of notes – it is easy to get distracted looking for something that becomes lost in amongst all the writing. It is unlikely you will look at your notes during the interview, but the preparation of the cards is helpful and you get confidence from knowing you have the back-up.

14. **Accept that "ums", pauses and "ahs" are natural speech patterns** and that a listener will not be as conscious of them as you feel when you are wondering what to say next. Prepare yourself so that if you notice yourself using them during the interview you can just say to yourself, "Don't worry – this is normal speech".

15. **Accept that you are not going to fit everything you know or want to say into this short (or even long) interview.** Protect yourself against regret by recognising there is a real limit to what can be fitted into an interview. Even very experienced interviewees experience the sense of disappointment that they didn't get to say everything they wished to say. Accept this in advance; it is normal.

16. **Prepare (emotionally) for the unexpected.** This means deciding to be OK with the unexpected question – you may get one, even despite your excellent preparation. Although you may have checked the focus of the interview, it is quite common and natural for the interview to take its own course. Be prepared for this. Prepare well and then decide to go with the flow. Unless you want to take the next step...

17. **Be prepared to redirect the interview** if for some reason you do not wish it to go in the direction it has headed. This is a particular skill, but the underlying concept here is to understand that you do not have to answer questions that are inappropriate, rude, intrusive or otherwise objectionable. It is worth practising a way that allows you politely and firmly to redirect the interview. You may use humour, a direct statement about your intent, or, as politicians often do, simply answer the question you wish to answer, rather than the one you've been asked. It is valuable to consider how you might handle this situation so you remain in a focused and desirable state if things go differently from your expectations. This is a higher-order skill, so some practice and instruction beforehand may be useful.

18. **Take water.** Even if the interview is by phone, and especially if it is face-to-face and live, have water that you can easily sip during the interview. Take care to place it slightly away from you so that you don't risk knocking it over. (By the way, don't use alcohol or other drugs to 'relax' you before the interview – you really do want to be in full control of your responses).

19. **Breathe!** In the minutes before the interview starts, take at least five and ideally ten or more deep breaths. Breathe in deeply for the count of four, hold for one or two, then breathe out for count of four. This really does help, so plan in advance and really do make time to do the breathing exercise.



## The Interview

1. **Breathe deeply, then exhale slowly.**
2. **Smile** – it influences your relationship with the interviewer, the way you feel and the way your voice sounds.
3. **Sit up straight with your shoulders back** – this allows air to reach low into your lungs. Air in your lungs helps you to live through the interview!
4. **Put your water and notes where you can easily reach them**, slightly to one side.
5. **Resist reading from the notes** while you are speaking. Just glance, then put down the notes and look at the interviewer.
6. **Take your time.** You are allowed some time to consider your answer. You may even say, "Just give me a moment while I consider my response to your question." Truly, this is perfectly acceptable.
7. **Speak SLOWLY!** Try to speak two to three times more slowly than your normal speed. Only then, will you maximise your likelihood of your speech being heard by your audience ... keep in mind that a person listening will have impediments of their own – they may be in a car, have background noise, be running. So clarity is vital.
8. **Think of talking to one, not many.** Rather than thinking of a huge audience of strangers, identify one person to whom you will direct your interview. Ideally this person thinks highly of you already, is unconditionally supportive, understanding and compassionate.
9. **Make no mention of "all of you out there"**. Don't say, "Hello [interviewer] and hello listeners". Radio in particular works very directly. It is an intimate medium and the listener will not necessarily feel that s/he is one of a crowd; will be listening as an individual. Remember, this is not a performance, it is a conversation. An interview works best when it is a conversation like any other.
10. **Listen to the words the interviewer uses**, then begin your response with the same words. This is especially important if the interview is going to be edited and part of it used for a news grab (about 30 seconds max). E.g. Interviewer: "What is the most important aspect of X?" Your response: "The most important aspect of X is ..."

11. **Answer in a form that suits the purpose** of the interview. If the interview is simply to be used for a news grab, then speak in short, fully formed and stand-alone sentences, using one idea/theme per sentence – the journalist will probably only use one sentence and it is better for you to cut yourself short than for the journalist to edit the interview mid-sentence. Even for longer interviews, try to keep the conversation somewhat contained. Insert imaginary full stops frequently. Try to remember to pause when there is an opportunity, and just take a breath. Apart from making your responses sound better when edited, frequent 'full-stops' allow the interviewer to ask you questions. For the listener, a dialogue is much more engaging than a long rave, however interesting you or the subject may be.

12. **Completely ignore your own "ums" and "ahs"**. It is common to become self-conscious about our own speech patterns when we feel under the gun. Make a decision beforehand to accept your natural pattern – people listening are unlikely to notice these little words, as they are simply natural parts of speech. They'll be listening to the content of what you are saying. And realistically, most of them will only be half-listening anyway as they drive, shower, eat, walk or work. They are not there with a scorecard, waiting for you to make some terrible blunder!

13. Unless you have a particular reason for projecting a different persona, **try to be as natural and as much yourself as possible**. People are not listening in order to tear you apart. They will assume you are legitimate, even if you are wondering! They'll be listening for your perspectives, perhaps your tone of voice, your rapport (or not) with the interviewer, your humour, your insight, what you're there to talk about.

14. **Remember, real is better than perfect!!**