No DANGER WITH STRANGERS

Conduct — and prepare for — interviews that will get even the haters to talk

BY **DEAN NELSON**

I love the movie "Almost Famous." It has a compelling story about a kid who wants to write about rock music; it has good acting (Kate Hudson, Billy Crudup, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Francis McDormand, Zooey Deschanel, Jimmy Fallon, and a one-second appearance by Mitch Hedberg); early scenes are shot in my home town of San Diego; it's based on an experience of a local celebrity (Cameron Crowe); it has good music and more.

But one of the main reasons is it's also an instructional movie about interviewing.

Early in the film you see the 15-year-old William Miller character get rejected for the interview he wanted, but he improvises when another band shows up and he sees an opportunity to interview them.

"Hi, I'm a journalist. I write for Creem Magazine," he says, holding a copy of the publication in the air.

"The enemy!" one of the musicians yells. "A rock writer!"

"I'd like to interview you or someone from the band," William says.

One of the band members dismisses the young journalist with a pointed expletive, and they keep walking toward the stage door.

William, however, wasn't just any 15-year-old kid.

"Russell. Jeff. Ed. Larry," William says to the band members, instantly gaining credibility. "I really love your band. I think the song 'Fever Dog' is a big step forward for you guys. I think you guys producing it yourselves, instead of Glyn Johns, was the right thing to do. And the guitar sound was *incendiary*."

The backstage door opens and they pull him in with them.

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For 22 years I have conducted interviews with great writers at the annual Writer's Symposium by the Sea in San Diego. The writers include Dave Eggers, Mary Karr, Amy Tan, Anne Lamott, Ray Bradbury, George Plimpton, Rick Reilly, Garrison Keillor, Barbara Bradley Hagerty, Bill Moyers, Nikki Giovanni, Chris Hedges, Bill McKibben, Michael Eric Dyson, Tracy Kidder and dozens of others.

I have also written for The New York Times, The Boston Globe, USA Today, Voice of San Diego, San Diego Magazine and several other magazines, websites and newspapers, where I have interviewed a lot of people from all walks of life. I have interviewed the famous and obscure; I have interviewed those I admire and those I despise.

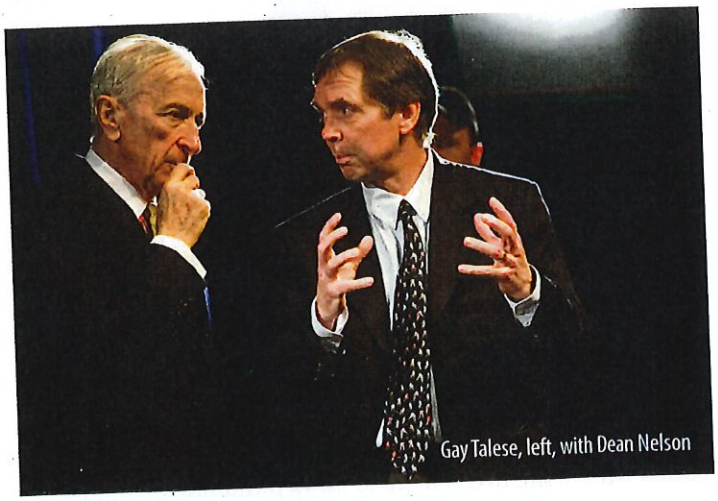
This experience (and watching "Almost Famous" a few times) has helped me reach some conclusions about the process of interviewing. There are reasons why they work and why they don't, why you get a good-spirited conversation and why you get crickets, why you get great quotes and why you get clichés.

Despite the importance of data journalism and all other online methods, there is still a fundamental need to tell stories that involve human beings as sources. Our stories need their analysis, perspective, tone, insight, detail, nuance, color or shared humanity. Regardless of whether our sources are shy or outgoing (and whether we are shy or outgoing), all journalists need to know how to talk to people.

And no matter how many or how few interviews you have conducted, there are some universal points to consider that will make your interviews better. You may even get a source to say to you, as the band member did to William, "Well don't stop there!" even when he had just called you the enemy a few moments before.

IT STARTS IN YOUR HEAD. WHO DO YOU WANT TO INTERVIEW?

When a magazine hired me to write about a contentious race for district attorney in San Diego, I made a list of who I would need to talk to. The incumbent DA and the challenger, of



Gay Talese, left, with Dean Nelson

course. I would need their perspective on their own qualifications and on their opponent. Who were the other stakeholders? People in the DA's office, people who used to work for the DA and the challenger, other attorneys, police officers, the previous DA, local politicians, people who experienced the court system under this DA.

That's a pretty big list, but they all didn't need to be lengthy interviews; only a few did. What made this manageable is that I thought through who I wanted for this story and why I wanted their perspective. When I do big, complicated stories, I cast a wide net, but I know what kind of fish I'm looking for. They all serve a particular purpose to the story.

THEN IT GOES TO YOUR HANDS AND FEET. HOW DO YOU GET THEM TO TALK?

Some people are easy to line up. You appeal to their expertise and tell them the story wouldn't be complete without their perspective. But remember, unless you're talking to a PR person, no one factors time into their day to conduct interviews with reporters. You're always an interruption. So you have to make it worth their while. If that means getting up at 4 a.m. on the West Coast to accommodate a phone interview on the East Coast, then that's what you do.

Sometimes sources are happy to talk to you. Sometimes they do everything they can to avoid you (or their gatekeepers do).

When I heard the science fiction writer Ray Bradbury at a conference years ago, I knew he would be a great person to interview at our annual Writer's Symposium by the Sea. But how do you even get to this guy, I wondered? I stood in line for an hour at the book-signing table just so I could ask him the best way to reach him so I could invite him to the symposium. He wrote a number on a piece of paper. "It's my fax number," he said. "You need but ask!"

Hunter Thompson said that when he needed to interview politicians, he called in the middle of the night, hoping to wake them out of a deep sleep. That way they weren't as prone to lie to him, he said. Hey — you do what you have to do.

Flattery and sleep interruption may not always work, though. I confess that I have, on occasion, resorted to shaming.

In San Diego, a few mayors ago, our city politics were in more disarray than Francis Underwood's in the last season of "House of Cards." The sniping and backstabbing among the different power groups was breathtaking. San Diego Magazine hired me to do a story that was to answer this singular question: Who is running the city?

The city council loathed the city attorney, and the city attorney despised the mayor, and the mayor (our former police chief) was doing some dumb — maybe illegal — things. Each of the three branches believed it was the true power base and presumed it was filling the vacuum left by the other two branches. Business interests were panicking because they didn't know who to approach. No one could get a good grip on whether everyone was stupid, corrupt, inept or brilliant.

For a story like this, everyone wanted to talk to me.

Except the mayor.

I could not get past his gatekeeper, and for weeks I made it clear that it was in the mayor's best interest to talk to me. Apparently this gatekeeper was under the illusion that if he just kept ignoring me, I would go away and there would be no story.

On a day very close to my deadline, I had one more interview in City Hall, and when I was done I got on the elevator headed down to the parking garage. A few floors down, the elevator stopped and a guy got in; we immediately recognized each other. He graduated from the university where I teach,

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and I asked him what he was doing in City Hall.

"I work in the mayor's office," he said.

"Too bad your guy won't talk to me for my story about city politics in San Diego Magazine," I said. "Everyone else was willing to talk. The mayor, though is going to look like he's a coward for avoiding me. Readers will wonder why. "

The elevator door opened and the former student asked for my cell number. I walked to my car and he headed back up. Before I was to my car, my phone rang and the former student said, "The mayor can see you tomorrow at 9 a.m. I assume you can make it?"

THEN YOU DIG

This is what will make or break your interview. If you are prepared, you have a good chance that the interview will go well. If you aren't, it won't.

For interviews that are more than getting eyewitness accounts to events ("What happened? What did you see? What direction did that meteor come from?), preparation matters. When William talked to those band members at the stage door, he knew their music well enough to call them by name, mention an individual song and who produced it, and even describe one musician's guitar licks. THAT'S preparation.

When I lived in Minneapolis in the 1980s and wrote for Mpls/St. Paul Magazine, I was assigned the cover story to profile the new University of Minnesota football coach, Lou Holtz. He was coming from a successful program at the University of Arkansas to a program that hadn't had success since the 1960s. Holtz was the messiah. And when I scheduled my interview with him, his assistant gave me the maximum amount of time: 20 minutes. I knew I needed to make them count.

I talked to everyone I could think of and read everything I could get my hands on. I even found out what his favorite book was a motivational book called "The Magic of Thinking Big" — and I bought it. When I was ushered into his office and we exchanged initial pleasantries, I pulled out that book and set it in front of me on his desk, and my recorder on top of it.

I was giving him two messages: 1) I am ready for you. I have done my homework; and 2) Don't even think about lying to me. I already know the answers to these questions.

It was one of the most fun interviews I've ever done.

THEN YOU PLAN

Interviews have their own trajectory. Putting together a good interview is like putting together a good story. It needs to have an interesting beginning. One question (like paragraphs in a story) should logically follow the next. There should be a culminating question or topic where the interviewee is forced to think seriously about the response. There should be "cool down" questions leading to a conclusion.

This is similar to a story because a story's arc usually goes from an interesting beginning, rising and falling action, then a critical or crisis point (will William get his story published?), then a falling off of the action toward a resolution. Good interviews often follow that same pattern. You don't want to start a story with all of the climactic action. You want to build up to it and create a sense of expectation in the person you are interviewing.

Regardless of your planning, though, it won't always work out perfectly. When I interviewed a Border Patrol supervisor about an incident where an officer standing on the U.S. side shot an 11-year-old boy on the Mexico side for throwing rocks, I didn't start with whether the supervisor felt that shooting the kid was an overreaction. I knew I was going to ask it (and he knew I was going to ask it) — but the time had to be right. I asked several questions about how the officers are trained and finally built up to whether the shooting was justifiable. He leaped across his desk, grabbed my shirt with one hand and a glass ashtray with another and faked like he was going to smash my face with it. "Wouldn't you strike back if someone did that to you?" he screamed. No cool down questions that day.

JUST BEFORE YOU START

But even before the actual interview begins, there are more things to consider. If you are interviewing a person in his or her office, get there early. It might gain you a couple of minutes.

Dress appropriately. If you dress extremely casually, you communicate that you don't take the interview seriously. If you dress extremely formally, you communicate that you've never done this before or that you don't pick up on social cues. Business casual is almost always the best call, even if you're interviewing the person in a surf shop. You want to be seen as a professional.

Where should the interview take place? A person's home, car or office? A coffee shop? When I interviewed Vicente Fox, the former president of Mexico, he seemed stilted and aloof in his office. But when we started walking around his presidential library, or his family ranch, he loosened up considerably. Do enough preparation to know where the person is comfortable.

And this may sound bizarre, but hear me out. I try to make sure I have gone to the bathroom just before I arrive. On big interview days, I usually drink a lot of coffee and get amped up for what I know could be inspiring, combative, adversarial, ugly, fabulous — at any rate, emotional. I know I need to be hyper-aware and quick on my feet. When you have just 20 minutes, you don't want to have to interrupt the interview for a bodily function. Besides, it's tacky.

OK, GO

It may seem obvious, but the best questions are the open-ended ones, where the source has a chance to explain something and even provide an anecdote. If you prepared properly, then you won't need to ask a question like "Where did you serve in World War II?" or, "What is voodoo?"

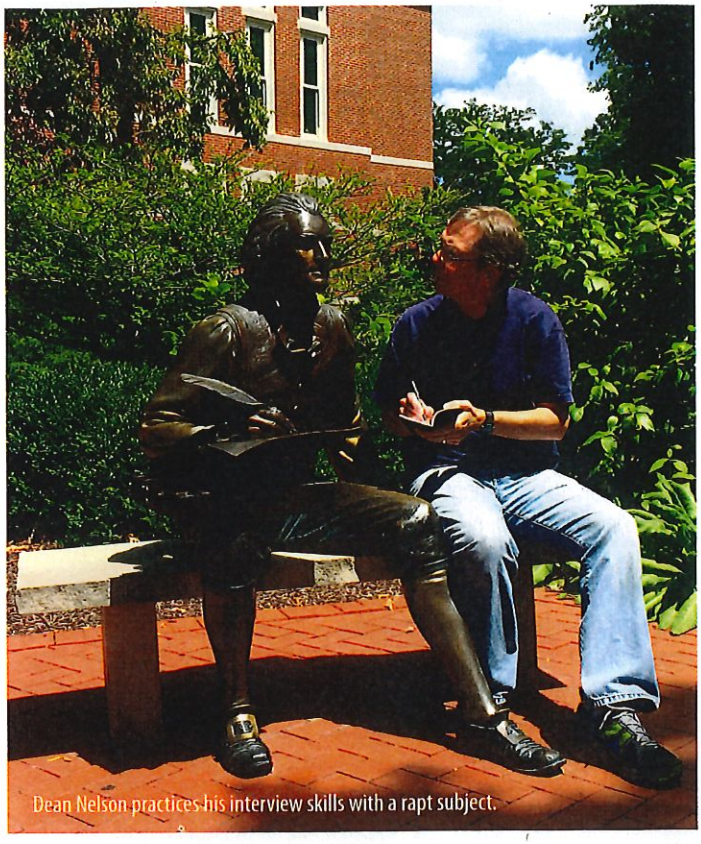
But you don't want to ask questions that are SO open-ended that they paralyze the interviewer into giving meaningless answers. My father was in a weather station on the Arctic Circle for a year during World War II, and if you want to see him hem and haw around awkwardly, ask him a question like, "What was it like being on the Arctic Circle for a year?"

That kind of question won't get much of a response other than something vague, like "Cold." Why? Because NOTHING is like being on the Arctic Circle for a year. Ask it differently. Something like "What did you do for food up there?" Or, "What was the most difficult part about being there?" Or, "What was the most fun part about being there?" "Did you date any of the indigenous women while you were there?" I really did ask him that. He gave me a politically incorrect response. Those kinds of questions will get you into topics such as loneliness, seeing polar bears, trading cigarettes for ivory carvings — something that will provide insight, not just an obvious fact.

Questions that begin with "Why" or "How" will get you farther than "When" or "What" or "Who."

During the interview, pay attention to what the person is saying, not just to your next question.

And pay attention to your body language. Don't be afraid of si-



Dean Nelson practices his interview skills with a rapt subject.

lence. Politely stop the person if he or she is going too fast. Don't be afraid to ask the person to repeat something. If something is unclear, guess what will happen when you write about it?

ASK THE HARD QUESTION(S)

Simply put, you have to ask tough questions. You know that. All journalists should. If you have prepared properly, you should already know the answer, but remember: The reason you are doing the interview is to get the person's perspective, not just the facts.

I had to ask author Tracy Kidder about trusting people's memories. So much of his work depends on people telling him the truth and recalling incidents and personal histories — how does he know these things are accurately recalled? He was expecting the question.

The Border Patrol supervisor knew I was going to ask about whether it was an overreaction by the officer to shoot a kid who had hit him with a rock. He still leaped across his desk and acted as if he was going to hit me, but it wasn't because he was surprised. He was angry and wanted to make a point.

At about the two-thirds point of an interview with a writer recently, I asked one of those "tough but fair" questions, and he stared at me for several seconds. Then he smiled.

"You just warmed the water before drowning the cat," he said. Then he answered the question.

Your sources are expecting you to ask the difficult questions, and so is your audience. It may feel a little awkward, but they know it's coming.

YOU'RE NOT DONE YET

If the interview's purpose is to get information, such as for a hard news story, I always try to ask these three questions at the end. If you do the same, you will be surprised at the responses you'll get:

1) "Can you give me the exact spelling of your name?" One source's name was, I thought, Amy. But when I asked this question, she nearly jumped out of her chair in gratitude. It sounds like Amy, but it is spelled Ami. Believe me, when you see your name misspelled in a story, it makes you mad. It's the most gettable fact in the story, and you didn't get it right? Why should I believe anything else in your story?

2) "Is there anything I should have asked you that I didn't ask?" This one can create a dimension you didn't even know existed.

3) "May I contact you later once I write this in case I need some more information or some clarification?" Leaving the door open with your source will pay off in many ways.

LEARNING LESSONS

William Miller learned some tough lessons in "Almost Famous." He learned the value of preparation. He saw the danger of getting too close to his sources. He saw that he needed to record his interviews. He saw the value of mentors like Lester Bangs. He saw that his obligation was to tell the story he saw, not the one that his sources wanted him to tell. He saw that telling a true story can create enemies. And he saw that the truth will emerge.

For me, the takeaway from "Almost Famous" is that most of the time, people will talk to you when you're prepared, when they trust you and when you listen to them. When you do those things, the interview could even be, as William Miller would note, *incendiary*.

***Dean Nelson's** book on interviewing, "Talk To Me," will be released by Harper Collins in 2019. He is the founder and director of the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, and the founder and director of the annual Writer's Symposium by the Sea. His interviews with writers can be seen at at **deannelson.net**. Email: **deannelson@pointloma.edu**.*

NARRATIVE WRITING

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

This side of the lobby feels a little bit emptier now without his smile.

That's storytelling.

"The reaction to the story was tremendous," McIntyre said. "I got a call that someone wanted to see me in the newspaper lobby. I was a little nervous. It was Rita Hudson, his widow."

McIntyre said Hudson cried, hugged her and told her how much she appreciated the story.

"Then she handed me a plate," McIntyre said. "It was Sammy's favorite dessert. I kept thinking that her husband had just died and she made me a pie."

And then she gave McIntyre the highest tribute a journalist can receive.

"She told me that when she missed her husband she was going to read my story again."