

# It's not an interview – it's a CONVERSATION

Structuring your interviews to  
get compelling quotes and write  
copy that must be read

Kara Petersen

Herff Jones Yearbooks – Northern Virginia

Meghan Percival

Adviser, McLean High School Yearbook, McLean, VA

# Here's what a lot of yearbook copy looks like:

Being an athletic trainer is hard work. This year the athletic trainers at McLean High School were Ms. Summer Johnson and Mr. Bill Allen and the student trainers were senior Ben Smith and junior Lily Fujiyama. Ms. Johnson won the trainer of the year award for the Liberty District. "Our team is like a family, and Ms. Johnson and Mr. Allen are our parents," boys varsity basketball player Tim Brooklyn said.

Many people visited the athletic trainers to get their ankles taped, get ice to treat injuries or a variety of other ailments.

"It's a lot of hard work being an athletic trainer, but it's also very rewarding," Smith said.

Here's a different way:

# FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

Regular series in the Washington Post Magazine

Profile of Debi Corbatto,  
the assistant athletic trainer  
for George Mason University

Interview by Amanda Long

The defining moment of my career is with one of our basketball players, John Vaughan. He started his freshman year, my first as a full-time trainer, in 2004. He was on top of the world, ready to play the next year. The first day of his sophomore year, he caught a ball wrong, came down on his knee and tore his ACL. I spent every single day of that year with him — and it just happened to be the year we went to the Final Four. He was that kid sitting on the sidelines, watching, knowing he likely would have been one of our starters. When you tell an athlete they can't do what defines their identity, you have to recognize that impact. I work quickly to shift the focus. I say: "Look, a few minutes ago, your opponent was the guy from Villanova; now, your opponent is your knee injury. Let's go after that."

That's what I love about working with athletes: the relationship, the motivation and trust they put in their trainers. That's a thread from my old life — the desire to educate and the “momness” of nurturing. On senior night, JV asked me to walk with him. His mom was on one arm, me on the other. He went on to have a successful career, played professionally in Russia.

There's a reason  
yearbook copy  
is so bad.

Here's why yearbook copy is so bad.

## Bad Robot Interview

**Q: "What does the hockey team do?"**

A: "Are you kidding me? The hockey team plays hockey."

**Q: "Are you having a good season?"**

A: "Yes. Are you in a hurry? You keep looking at your watch."

**Q: "I love to swim. I think swimming is the best sport. I swim freestyle and butterfly.**

**How is hockey like swimming?"**

A: "I have been asked a lot of stupid questions, but never this one."



**Q: "What is your record?"**

A: "We are 1-11."

**Q: "What would you say has been the key to your success?"**

A: "That's hard to say. It could be the fortune teller we pay to come to every game."

**Q: "What is your biggest challenge?"**

A: "Finding a space for the pre-game square dance. The players need lots of room."

You know this, but you don't always practice it.

# INTERVIEW BASICS

- **SCHEDULE INTERVIEWS IN ADVANCE**

Show people you value their time and find a date and time that is convenient for them.

- **ALWAYS START WITH THE EASY QUESTIONS**

"How do you spell your name? What grade are you in?"

- **WRITE DOWN EVERYTHING**

Even if you are recording the interview, be sure to take good notes.

- **CONDUCT INTERVIEWS IN PERSON**

Not on Facebook or via email or text message.

# BEFORE

## the interview

- **GO ON A FACT-FINDING MISSION**

Do background interviews to get the facts and find out who else you need to talk to. Talk to adults who are involved with the event.

- **OBSERVE THE ACTUAL EVENT**

Attend the event, **observe the action & record sensory details.**

# BE OBSERVANT

## Special School Crowns a Special King

*Doug Grow, Minneapolis Star & Tribune*

# BE OBSERVANT

## Special School Crowns a Special King

*Doug Grow, Minneapolis Star & Tribune*

It was the grandest victory lap you could imagine.

Michael Young, the homecoming king at Bloomington Jefferson High School, was half walking, half running around the school gym. He was slapping hands with everyone he could reach. His grin was huge.

The king's robe was slipping. His crown was perched at odd angles. It didn't matter. He kept grinning and slapping hands and everyone in the gym was cheering, louder and louder and louder.

Michael Young, 18, is a senior -- and a very special homecoming king at what turns out to be a very special school.

In the language of our times, Michael is "developmentally delayed."

Michael has very limited skills when it comes to academic life. While others take math and literature, he takes courses in life skills.

But there's not a kid more involved in the pulse of the school than Michael. He seldom misses a sporting event. He's a student manager of the basketball team. He goes to sleep each night listening to a CD of the Jefferson High band. And he knows, by name, just about everyone in a school of more than 1,700 students.

He doesn't just know their names. He embraces this horde of friends. He walks the school's halls, spreading joy wherever he goes. And Friday afternoon, Jefferson students said thanks to their special friend by voting him the homecoming king. He accepted the crown from a more traditional king, Tony Brinkhaus, who was a football hero at Jefferson last year and now is a scholarship player at the University of Minnesota.

# BE OBSERVANT

"The story is the people at this school," said the king's mother. "They're so accepting."

It is hard to separate who is most special in the king's story. For example, there's Drew Glowa. He's a senior, the class president and the captain of the hockey team.

It was Glowa who urged Michael to make a run for homecoming king, even though he, too, was among the candidates. Glowa not only went out and got the 75 names on a petition to see that Michael was a candidate, he also campaigned for Michael. "He is the school spirit here," said Glowa, who is among the Jefferson students who accompany Michael to school activities.

Others are quick to say that it's Michael's parents and big sister, Laura, who are special here because they're so positive, so giving, so dogged in opening doors for Michael. They shrug off such praise. "Our family is changed forever by Michael," said Michael's father, John. "He has brought us such closeness."

And there is Michael. He's a sports nut who somehow manages to absorb the sports section each morning before heading off to school. This understanding baffles his father. "He may not be able to add two plus two but he can tell you the statistics of the Twins players," he said.

The king learns names of his fellow students by studying the yearbook. He heads to school each day with a smile on his face because he's going to be with a thousand friends. Friday, his smile was bigger than ever. Recent graduates had come back to Jefferson just to see their pal, Michael, as a member of the homecoming court. Before the big ceremony, he was hugging everybody in sight and laughing.

When friends pinned on his boutonniere, he laughed and clapped his hands and said, "Look at me, I'm beautiful."

# BE OBSERVANT

His parents believed it wouldn't matter to Michael if he were not elected king by his fellow students. In fact, on the way to school he told them he hadn't voted for himself. The parental concern before the program wasn't about winning and losing, it was that their son would stop to help direct the Jefferson band during the formal procession of king and queen candidates.

As it turned out, stopping for the band -- or anything else -- was not the problem.

During the procession, Michael was almost on the run, dragging the formally attired young woman he was to escort to the stage. The same thing happened when he and the queen, Nicole DeLaRosa, were introduced. They were supposed to stroll slowly down the middle of the gym. The king again took off like a shot, the queen hanging on gamely while trying not to trip over her gown.

Then came the wondrous victory lap. Kingly decorum was replaced by joy. The special king rambled around the gym, slapping hands. The crowd roared.

# BEFORE

the interview

## •WRITE GOOD QUESTIONS

### AVOID

Yes or no questions  
Fact-based questions  
Irrelevant questions

### TRY FOR

Questions that elicit "EAR"

EMOTION  
ACTION  
REACTION



## WRITE QUESTIONS THAT WILL ELICIT "EAR"

Q: How does one get elected to the homecoming court?

A: You get 75 signatures on a petition.



NO EAR

Q: What were you thinking about in the moments before Michael walked into the gym?

A: I wasn't worried about whether Michael would win or lose, but I was nervous that he might stop to help direct the band during the formal procession.



EAR

# DURING

the interview

## HAVE A CONVERSATION

People will share more and give you better detail if you have a chat and not an interrogation.

# DURING

the interview

## BE OBSERVANT

When possible, interview subjects in their natural setting.

# BE OBSERVANT

"It [was] hard for me to watch; it's hard for me to talk about," coach Brad Stevens said of the scene, his voice catching and his eyes watering behind his glasses.

"But it's the best part of the story."

"All the people who played in the game think they let us down," Stevens said. "And that's ridiculous."

Stevens stood in that locker room, took it all in and saw the kind of miracle for which coaches strive – collective support in the lowest and rawest of moments. Kids caring about kids. Perspective and purpose on display. It may not get you a clipped net, but that's some kind of championship in itself.

"Hard, hard to put into words," Stevens said, his voice trailing a bit.



# DURING

the interview

## CONDUCT INTERVIEWS IN-PERSON

Facebook, email and text messages  
are not acceptable.

# DURING

the interview

## LISTEN FOR FOLLOW-UPS

EX: "I danced to the most difficult song."

FOLLOW UP:

"What song was that and why was it so difficult?"

# DURING

the interview

## DON'T ACCEPT CLICHÉS

“With hard work and determination, we had a terrific season” doesn’t really tell us anything.

In other words, clichés have no “EAR”

# DURING

the interview

## CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

"What's the best thing about...?"

"What's the worst thing...?"

"Tell me more about..."

"I heard you say.... What did you mean?"

"How?"

"Then what happened?"

"What was it like to..."

"And how did you feel?"



## First Person Singular: Sarah Smith, 17, Oakton High School, Fairfax, volunteer with Best Buddies



The first time I met [my buddy] was in my PE class. He was just running around, and everyone was kind of staring at him. I was just like, *You know what? I'm gonna run around with him and try to get him to talk to me.* We just ran around; we didn't talk. We ran around all year, and then he finally talked to me at the end of the year. It was like the biggest highlight of my life — the fact that we were finally talking about haircuts and dogs, and probably grilled cheese, too. Those are, like, his three favorite things.

# AFTER

the interview

## EVALUATE YOUR MATERIAL

Highlight your best quotes – start to shape your angle.

Do your quotes have EAR? If not, be willing to start again.

## CONDUCT FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS

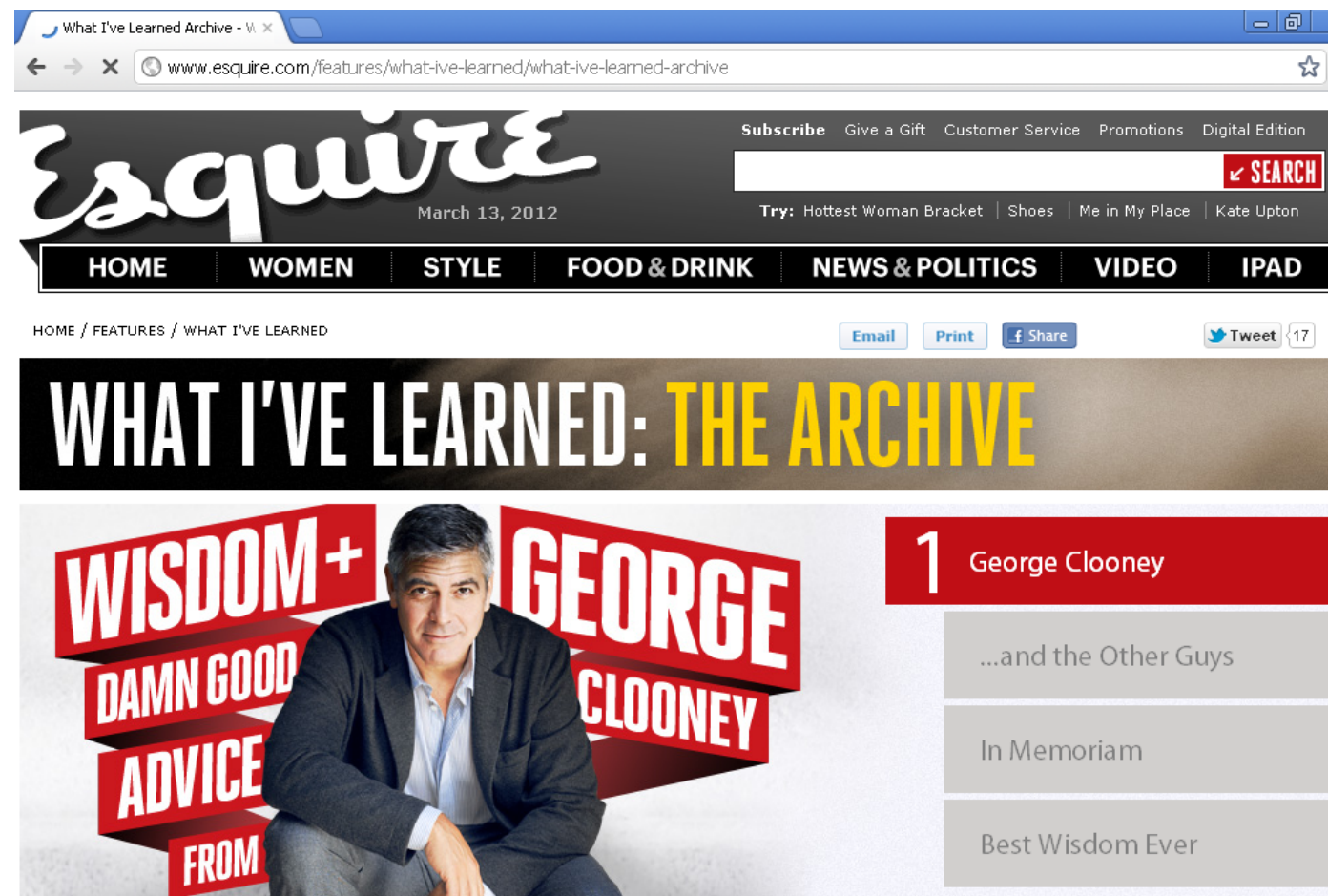
Confirm facts, ask follow-up questions and get more info to support your angle.

## READ GOOD WRITING

Esquire, Vanity Fair, ESPN, Rolling Stone...

# ESQUIRE MAGAZINE

“What I’ve Learned”



So I called and said, "I like Einstein!"

The woman goes, "Well, we don't know if Einstein will like you."

"Well, can I meet with Einstein?"

"Yes, we'll bring him to your house, but if he doesn't like you, he can't stay. We have to have good homes for these dogs." She sounded very serious.

Okay. I have this really long driveway, and I open the gate for them, and I start to panic that Einstein is not going to like me. So I run into the kitchen, where I have these turkey meatballs, and I rub them all over my shoes. This woman opens the door, and who knew Einstein was such a food whore on top of everything? He throws himself at my feet. She says, "I've never seen him react like that, ever!" And she left him with me on the spot. And forever, now, he just thinks of me as the guy with meatball feet. He loves me. I can do no wrong. He follows me everywhere.



# ESQUIRE MAGAZINE

“What I’ve Learned”

## WHAT I’VE LEARNED

# C.J. CHIVERS

WAR REPORTER, 46,  
RHODE ISLAND

INTERVIEWED BY  
**CAL FUSSMAN**  
JUNE 20, 2011

would discipline me, you know?

- > **On 9/11**, my infantry experience and field experience came together with my journalism career. Real fast.
- > **I remember the exhaustion**—almost not sleeping for two weeks at Ground Zero. I remember the confusion.
- > **You can assemble** factual truth brick by brick. But there’s also emotional truth. How people feel may not be rooted in fact, but it can be true to them, and it guides their actions. The first one’s hard, but it’s a lot easier than the second.
- > **I have a heavy stomach** and I can look at things that make most people turn away. That’s not to say I don’t get upset. Sometimes I get angry inside, quietly angry over the things people do to each other. But I don’t have nightmares. When I sleep, I sleep.
- > **I try to get** into a relationship with a good driver. Someone who’s not going to panic. They teach me about local things, and I teach them which way to have the car facing in a dodgy place, where to keep the keys. There are things a driver needs to know.
- > **Sometimes you think about it mechanically**—should I have my passport on me for this walk, or not? You think about how others might react to your passport, and how the thing that could help you can also endanger you. It’s complicated.
- > **I don’t have a lot of trouble** coming back. There are different worlds in this world, and I tend to pass through them pretty easily. It’s like—imagine you put a cat in a sack and then you take the cat to another spot on earth and very quickly lift the sack off. What do you have? A cat. That’s kind of how I am. When I come home, I’m me. I fall right in on the dishes and diapers, tending the garden, working the compost, and chasing the fish.
- > **The golden rule** of fishing is you never leave fish to find fish.
- > **Russia took all the fun** out of drinking for me, as it does for a lot of people. Midway through my Russian tour, I stopped. I just decided it wasn’t fun anymore. That was very valuable. You’d be amazed how much energy you get back when you don’t drink.
- > **I eat locally a lot**, and almost everything that gets offered to me. Once I ate the semidigested clams out of the gut of a freshly shot walrus. The guys who I was with told me they were delicious. And you know what? They were right.
- > **I can move through a firefight** as if it’s almost happening in slow motion and make a record of it, understand it, and on some days even anticipate where it’s going as it’s happening. But I can’t sit through violence to a soundtrack. I can’t watch a war movie.
- > **There’s no TV in my house**. Well, there’s one in my garage that I sometimes have to turn on for news. But I don’t think I’ve turned it on this year. How do my kids respond? They play! They go outside! They use their imaginations! They have childhoods!
- > **I was at the siege of Misratah** in Libya when the guy next to me checked his e-mail off a satellite. He said something like “Holy shit, bin Laden has been killed.” Misratah was being shelled by an army of its own nation and facing a bunch of pressing tactical and humanitarian problems. I think my first reaction was something like “What does that have to do with what we’re doing?”
- > **There may be a day** when the decision gets made for me. I may snap a femur jumping off a rock—and that may decide it. I’m getting near fifty and I’m running around with nineteen- and twenty-two-year-olds. So far, I can keep up.
- > **Friendship** is the most valuable commodity you have out there.
- > **Any time you go out**, the slate is clean. The fact that you’ve survived one thing doesn’t mean you’re gonna survive the next.
- > **There are a lot** of different ways to the exit door.
- > **I don’t think about money** too much beyond the big chunk of it I’m gonna need to send my five kids to college.
- > **The emotional toll** is that sometimes when you stop, a lot of what you’ve absorbed crowds in, and it can be painful. But, you know, maybe one of the secrets to dealing with that is I don’t stop very often. ■

### HIGH- LIGHTS FROM THE CHIVERS DECADE

**9/11/01:** While covering mayoral primary for the Times, sprints to World Trade Center fire. Lives at Ground Zero for two weeks.

**10/01-1/02:** Uzbekistan; Afghanistan. Arrives on the first day of bombing, stays through the fall of the Taliban.

**12/02-4/03:** In Iraq, is one of the first American journalists covering the build-up to and outbreak of war.

**6/04:** Begins four years in Times Moscow bureau, two as bureau chief.

**8/04:** Civil unrest, Georgia.

**2006-07:** In Iraq and Afghanistan, embedded with Marines.

**5/07:** Wins National Magazine Award for Esquire story on school massacre in Beslan, Russia.

**2008-10:** Georgia; Chechnya; Afghanistan (five trips).

**3/11-PRESENT:** In Libya, covering anti-Qaddafi uprising.



# ESQUIRE MAGAZINE

## “What I’ve Learned”

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What's the difference between boring quotes and compelling, story-telling quotes?

**YOU**