**Some Thoughts on Interviews and Dialogue**

Amye Archer’s essay explores how we can write objectively about ourselves as characters. Dinty Moore provided some thoughts on recreating the people in our real lives on the page, so our reader can meet, get to know, and make judgments about those characters in an authentic way. I’d like to offer some brief thoughts on conducting and using interview material.

Much has been written on the ethics of interviews: word-for-word dialogue, the controversial practice of compression (where many interviews are compressed into a single conversation), libel accusations, and a host of other challenges. Those are all important considerations.

In my own science and religion narrative, I had a more nuts-and-bolts problem: How do I conduct these interviews at all? What questions should I ask? And, when it’s over, how do I turn that mass of raw material into a compelling story? Here are a couple of things I learned along the way.

**Prepare, but don’t be too prepared**

If you’re out conducting interviews, you probably have at least a rough idea of what you intend to write about. Maybe you have more than a rough idea. But don’t be too sure. You are there to explore and discover, not to hunt down a canned quote for a predetermined spot in your essay of fully-drawn conclusions.

The goal of creative nonfiction is to ask a question, and to explore that question on the page. The interview process is no different. I think we must cultivate this attitude of exploration all the more in our science and religion narratives, where we are especially prone to unconscious bias and assumptions.

Go in with the questions you *think* you want to ask, but be ready to follow a rabbit trail. There may be something interesting that begs a follow-up question, and you may end up somewhere totally unexpected. Go in expecting a canned quote, and you’re probably going to get it; go in with open ears and an open mind, and you may get something much more.

(Even if you have strict time constraints, be sure to ask a couple of nonessential questions. Something as simple as “What has this day brought you so far?” has the potential to reveal something unique or surprising about your subject.)

**To quote or not to quote**

My TWP essay *Monsters at the Center of the Earth* centers around three separate conversations I had with one current and two former professors of philosophy. These guys could talk—eloquently—for ten or fifteen minutes at a time. After those conversations, I had pages of interesting quotes. How was I to decide what to put in quotation marks, what to summarize, and what to throw away?

The information you glean from interviews will show up in your creative nonfiction narrative in a few different ways, including: exposition, dialogue, and summarization.

**Exposition**

When you interview someone about a past event, use the interview to garner as many details as possible so you can effectively recreate that event on the page. What was the weather like? How did your subject feel? What was unusual about the day? Record details about your subject, too: What are they wearing? What mannerisms make them unique? How do they speak? How do they sit? Listen to Dinty’s lecture on creating authentic characters. How will you recreate your subject on the page?

**Dialogue**

In creative nonfiction, the writer is primarily concerned with telling a *story,* and direct quotes will most often be in the context of a narrative scene, where we can see and hear the speaker talking, usually in dialogue with another person.

Dialogue is a multitasker. It can:

* Move the story forward
* Reveal a character’s personality and voice
* Reveal a character’s opinions and worldview
* Provide credibility to a statement (if the speaker is an expert)
* Break up large paragraphs of exposition
* Speed up or slow down the pace of a scene

Ideally, dialogue should be doing several of these things at once. Dialogue makes your scenes more vivid and relatable; too much makes them unreadable. When dialogue begins to overwhelm the scene, **summarization** can help.

**Summarization**

Summarizing can magically reduce pages of interview transcript into a single sentence. It can turn a massive rabbit trail into a delightful aside. It can provide a little pause in the action, or speed up a scene like a fast-forward button.

When you include yourself as a character, **reflection** is another tool at your disposal. You may not be able to get into anyone else’s head, but you can always get into your own, and reveal your thoughts on the page. Reflection always works to slow down the pace of a scene and give the reader a place to pause and reflect with the writer.

The annotated excerpt this week breaks down the use of dialogue, summary, and reflection in one scene of my essay—a conversation with a professor of epistemology about the nature of faith.