

Shortcuts to Interviewing: A Handbook For Syrian Journalists

“Strike should cut off the head of the snake” Mohamed.
“Who are they going to target with the military operation?” Abu Umar.
“The regime did not respect my basic right to life” Adnan.
“Rockets continue to shell us day and night” Abu Ammar.
“I hope the world will have mercy on us” Abu Ahmad.
“What good are free elections when a country is destroyed?” Baderkhan Ali.
“Free Syrian army not free, nor army” Salih Muslim Mohammed.
“Blame the international community for extremism” Omar Edelby.
“Any dialogue will be interpreted as weakness” Burhan Ghalioun.
“Seceding from Syria has never been a goal of the Kurds” Nasr Eddin Abu Raman.
“Economic sanctions have never overthrown any regime” Samir Aita.
“I am not a supporter of any party or revolution” Michel Kilo.
“Few soldiers believe the regime can win” Syrian army deserter.
“What would happen if bashar...” Khaldoun al-Nabwani.
“The door remains open for a political solution” Faeq al-Mir.
“The fear of extremism is misguided” Bassam Yousef.
“Afterwards we may see sectarian massacres” Monif Mulhem.
“Religious leaders could have a big impact” Tareq Abdulhay.
“Many Alawites have been arrested”
“Minorities are held hostage by the regime” Paolo Dall’Oglio.
“A shallow political ideology” Hazem Nahar.
“Kurds have always been more opposed to the regime” Sarbast Nabi.
“This is still a revolution against tyranny” Thaeer Deeb.
“Long walk towards freedom” Rosa Yassin Hassan.
“The revolution is not sectarian” NK.
“An armed people are never the same again”

<http://www.correspondents.org/sy>

Dear Reader,

We know everything but, at the same time, nothing about the Syrian situation. We are swamped with information – but it is hard to know what to believe. Social networks in particular, overflow with videos, news and images of the conflict and create the impression that events in the region can be followed accurately, in real time. But this material can rarely be verified and it is frequently misused by different parties to the conflict for propaganda purposes. In response to this dilemma, the correspondents.org editorial team has tried to develop a format which:

- a) discloses the relationship between the writer, the source and their position.
- b) does not put local journalists in unnecessary danger.

The result is Interviews From Syria. The concept of Syrian interviewer/Syrian interviewee may sound straightforward but in reality there are a number of challenges. How do we protect our correspondents and their interviewees? How trustworthy are our interviewees? Where is the line between political activism and journalism in today's Syria? Some 40 interviews have been published so far on www.correspondents.org/sy in a bid to discuss answers to Syria's most intractable problems. Interviews are conducted by Syrian journalists based in Syria and overseas, some of them experienced professionals, others absolute beginners.

This publication – Shortcuts to Interviewing: A Handbook For Syrian Journalists – provides solid assistance and advice for interviewers. How should journalists prepare? What tips are there for emailed interviews? To what extent can the spoken word be edited? Are there questions which have to be asked? Are some topics off limits? As well as highlighting the tools of the trade, experienced interviewers, Ali Atassi and Arno Luik, offer insights into the art of conversation.

In terms of questions on interview technique, this publication offers concrete answers to some commonly asked questions. However, in relation to Syria, we hope that there is one question we can stop asking soon – and that is: “how much longer?”

The Editors

Shortcuts to Interviewing:
A Handbook For Syrian Journalists

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Media in Cooperation & Transition MICT gGmbH

Contact:
Media in Cooperation & Transition
Brunnenstraße 9
10119 Berlin
Germany
Phone +49 (0) 30 484 93 02 10
www.mict-international.org

Chief Editors: Koumay al Mulhem / Sven Recker
Design: Gunnar Bauer
Managing Editors: Maral Jekta / Gunnar Maul
Authors: Ulrich Fuchs, Elisabeth Schmidt
Editors: Cathrin Schaer, Jess Smeec
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The Interview

1 / What is an interview?

An interview reproduces an encounter between the journalist and an interview subject, or interviewee, whose opinions and expertise on a certain topic are of interest to readers.

During an interview, information about the person's life, their opinions or their expertise are elicited. The journalist, or interviewer, acts on behalf of the readers, asking questions.

The journalist's own opinions are not relevant during the interview.

2 / When should an interview be used?

There is hardly any kind of story that's easier to write up than an interview. A lot of journalists may prefer it because it seems easier to write up than a typical story. It is basically a series of quotes rather than a whole story. The journalist just needs to write up questions and answers.

But an interview, like any story, should also have a dramatic arc. Another reason interviews are attractive to readers is that they feel they are hearing the interviewee speak to them directly. They may feel as if they are speaking with the interviewee themselves, or they get an idea of what the interviewee thinks about a certain topic or they may get an understanding of what kind of person the interviewee really is. A journalist needs to bear these expectations in mind as they conduct and then write up an interview.

The journalist should also consider the question: Why write an interview rather than a commentary or news report or some other format?

Interviews will be lively, genuine, interesting and informative if they have some of the following qualities:

- + Reflect the conversation as it took place. That is, it conveys the to and fro of a conversation between two people talking about a topic. One asks the questions and the other reacts.
- + The interviewee provides new and interesting information. If, for example, the government is planning a new project or the company's CEO plans a purchase – ask why? If the interview doesn't shed new light on events, it may be best to incorporate quotes from the interview into a story written in a different format, such as a commentary, a background piece or a news report.
- + The interviewee's information is authentic, precise, believable and reflects the truth. This happens, for example, when the interviewee witnessed the event under discussion.

- + The interview provides a more personal impression of the interviewee through the way they speak or what they say, aside from the general information they're giving.
- + The interviewee is a very important person, whose opinions or arguments need to be heard as they were originally spoken. For example, the Prime Minister or President of a country.
- + The interviewee is presenting a counter argument or an unexpected opinion and deserves to have the remark heard in its original format and in context.
- + News media, for the sake of news currency and speed, often want to publish information quickly and accurately and so opt for an interview. In the case of someone like a newly appointed senior politician or company head, it is a way of demonstrating their contacts and prestige.

3 / What kinds of interviews are there?

a) On a certain topic or event: where experts or knowledgeable individuals are asked to provide information on the subject. In this case the interviewee is most often an expert or witness who is explaining certain issues or events to the audience. When approaching this interviewee, the journalist should have done his homework beforehand and should also be relatively well informed about the topic so they can ask questions competently. The journalist should try to avoid getting caught up in technical details or insider terminology and jargon. The journalist should avoid insider language unless it's absolutely necessary or the terminology has been explained or is in common use. The interviewee and their credentials should be introduced somewhere within the story, or on the page. The reader should be made aware as to why this individual is being interviewed.

b) For opinions and analysis: where experts or knowledgeable individuals give their opinions on, or analysis of, certain topics or events. These opinions and analyses may come in for critical scrutiny by the interviewer. The journalist's skill comes in drawing the interviewee into a rational and interesting argument. Their opinions should be questioned. The idea is not to give the interviewee a platform for their own ideas or to allow them to use the interview as a public relations exercise. In these kinds of oppositional interviews it is particularly important to be well prepared so that the journalist can counter arguments and tell if the interviewee is avoiding direct questions.

c) On a more personal basis: where the interviewer questions people who are of interest because of who they are, whether that relates to current affairs, their field of expertise, their talents or for other reasons. These types of interviews offer the reader a portrait of the interviewee. The focus of the interview must be clear though. What makes this person interesting?

What's the latest information on this person? Why is the journalist talking to this person today? What does the reader want to know about this person? What sort of topics can the interviewee be asked about so that the audience gets to know them better? Even if perhaps that topic goes beyond what we might normally expect the interviewee to comment upon. Once again the interviewee and their credentials should be introduced somewhere within the story, or on the page. This means that the journalist can avoid basic background questions such as "what did you study?" It is also important to consider whether the person's responses are interesting or entertaining enough to present them in the form of an interview. They may be better presented in a story.

In practice, the boundaries between the various interview formats are often blurred.

4 / What sorts of questions does an interview involve?

There are a variety of different ways to enter into a conversation with the interviewee and often this will depend on what kind of interview it is or what kind of person the journalist is speaking with. For example, if the topic is controversial or the interviewee is known as tough.

Sometimes it is good to enter into the conversation softly, avoiding controversial questions, in order to avoid conflict early on. At other times it may be good to tackle the tough questions immediately in order to signal one's intentions – that is, that the journalist won't accept press release-style answers. Usually it is up to the journalist, who has done their research about the interviewee and the topic, as to how to approach the conversation.

If it is not possible to ask the most controversial questions at the start of the interview, that's not a problem. The order of questions can be rearranged when the story is printed. If an authorisation is required, the interviewee should be allowed to see the edited version of the interview before it goes to print. Obviously this isn't possible with live TV or radio interviews. Several standard beginnings to an interview can help. These include:

+ *Questions about motivation:*

These help relax the interviewee. For example: "So things must be going pretty well for you...?"

+ *Contextualised questions:*

These develop on facts. For example: "Last year, you left the coalition you had formed. Why did that happen?"

+ *Provocative questions:*

These challenge the interviewee immediately. For example: "Why are you opposed to the idea of making life easier for the citizens of your country?"

+ *Suggestive questions:*

These help to challenge the interviewee but in a more subtle way.

For example: "Just on a personal level, you must have realised by now that this decision was the wrong one?"

During the conversation

Use open-ended questions cautiously. They may serve to warm the interviewee up and allow the journalist to get an idea of where the interviewee stands on a certain subject. For example, a question like: "What are your thoughts on economic development in this country?" But, remember, these questions can also be tricky. The interviewee might seize on an aspect of the topic being discussed that makes them look good, or which suits the message they want to give. Once the interviewee has started talking like this, it can be difficult to get them back onto the subject the journalist wants to discuss. Politicians are particularly good at this kind of thing. They are taught to stay "on message" and "off topic" as it suits their political agenda.

Avoid questions that could be answered with a simple "yes" or "no". The interviewee can give a simple answer but then the journalist must elaborate further. Closed questions like this can be useful though, if what is required is a direct yes or no.

Avoid asking about things the journalist should have already researched.

For instance, leave out background questions like "where did you study?"

Or, "where were you born?"

Try to avoid being overly insistent when the interviewee doesn't answer the questions properly. Being a little persistent is fine – it makes readers feel that the journalist is representing and defending their interests. But too much insistence makes the journalist look like a bully, detracts from the content of the interview and often achieves little.

Keep an objective distance. Avoid questions that overly praise or compliment the interviewee. Such as: "you're well known for your charity work..." Remain critical and objective.

Avoid questions with obvious answers. For example, asking the lottery winner who just received a million dollars whether they are happy.

5 / How is an interview constructed?

Dramatic arc:

Every interview should begin with a short introduction that brings the audience or reader up to date with current events, so that they understand why the news media is interviewing the individual in question. The introduction should also allow the audience or reader to tell whether the interview is going to hold something of interest for them.

An interview should have a clear topic, which will have been written about in the introductory paragraphs.

An interview should begin with a particularly interesting, provocative or important question. As the interview progresses it should continue to provide

interesting or surprising details and it should hold the audience's attention until the end. The end of the interview should round off the conversation with a critical, amusing or thought provoking question or answer.

Questions, answers, headlines:

Questions shouldn't be longer than three or four lines and answers shouldn't be longer than 10 to 15 lines.

Use a particularly intriguing quote from the interviewee as a headline for the interview. Be aware though, that the quote should reflect the content of the interview. If the quote is not reflective of the general nature of the interview, readers will be disappointed.

Content boxes, pictures:

A picture of the interview in progress is valuable because it allows the reader to feel as though they were there.

If possible, a content box featuring the interviewee's biographical information should be included on the page or with the interview. This allows readers to simply and easily see who is being interviewed and whether the interview will be of any interest to them. It also helps them to understand why the interviewee is answering in the way they are and where they are coming from. Some media also publish biographical information about the journalist or interviewer. This can be interesting and it helps the reader appreciate the journalist's background, areas of expertise and their perspective.

6 / In which style is the interview written up?

Depending on what kind of interview is being conducted, the language could range from casual to conversational to professional to being suitable for experts only. The language should not be caustic or cutting but nor should it be too flattering or submissive. Even if the interviewer understands experts' jargon, it needs to be "translated" for the layman. Technical terms, jargon and abbreviations must all be explained. Try and retain the unique figures of speech or characteristics of the interviewee's speech. This gives the interview flavour.

7 / Practical tips for conducting an interview

Preparation:

Coordinate carefully with the interviewee to organise all details ahead of the conversation, for example: Where will the interview be conducted? When? By whom? Where will it be published?

If it is a precondition set by the interviewee, you may have to send questions before the interview by email. Be sure to send only some of the main topics and questions to be discussed. There is no need to detail every single

question. If the journalist does this and the interviewee is too well prepared the journalist may end up missing out on more spontaneous answers and reactions.

The interview:

If the journalist is taking a recording device with them they must tell the interviewee that they are recording the conversation.

Important quotations, dates and facts can be written down by the journalist as the conversation develops – these can then be referenced immediately and easily without need to transcribe the whole conversation first. Some journalists who use recording devices with counters, take note of important quotes and facts so they can refer back quickly afterwards.

At the end of the interview, let the interviewee know when the interview might be published and if they need to authorise it, when they can expect to see it.

Recording the interview, authorisation:

While transcribing the conversation, it is usually possible to shorten and edit the interview. Often there is no point in transcribing every single, little detail. It takes too much time and is not always effective.

If the interview has to be authorised by the interviewee, the journalist should let them know when the authorisation is needed by and what their deadlines are. It is important to clarify that the interviewee is only permitted to check the interview for factual errors. The conversation should not be altered. It is a good idea to take a look at media law on this subject.

Should the interviewee send back a lot of corrections or alterations or complaints, be prepared to negotiate. Be prepared to let the interviewee get their way on passages and quotes that are not as important to the overall interview but press them in order to keep the most important quotes and comments in the interview.

Before publication:

Before sending any interview for authorisation, the answers should be carefully proofed. Always think of the reader, who needs to be able to understand the answers given and who may not comprehend technical or professional jargon. After the interview has been authorised, no further changes should be made.

8 / The e-mailed Interview:

In many cases, it may simply not be possible to get a face-to-face interview with a subject. In this case the e-mailed interview becomes an option. Although it is obviously more difficult to get the feeling of a natural conversation, utilising the following advice can help.

The dramatic arc in an e-mailed interview – which includes such things as the warm up and more confrontational questions as well as cleverly formulated concluding remarks – needs to be carefully thought out. Potential conflicts or differences of opinion need to be anticipated so that the replies and arguments can follow logically.

Because its not possible to interrupt or rephrase questions, as it is in an actual face-to-face conversation, e-mailed questions need to be definite and pointed so that the interviewee cannot avoid answering them properly. Open questions are to be avoided altogether, yes-or-no questions should be used with care. Ask the interviewee to keep answers relatively short and warn them that if their answers are too long, they will be edited down. It is also worth asking the interviewee to be available in case there are any answers that require the journalist to follow up.

When the e-mailed interview has been completed, it is possible to make it feel like a more lively and natural conversation. Be aware that this should happen before any authorisation takes place. For example, questions can be altered to fit the answers and they can also have extra facts or explanations added. When better answers come later in the interview it is also possible to move them forward to improve the dramatic arc of the interview. If the interviewee has rambled, it is also possible to collect all the answers pertaining to one subject together in one part of the interview. Meaningless phrases can be removed and if the interviewee gets off topic, this can be erased or more clarity can be requested from them.

Any authorisation, if required, works the same way as with a face-to-face interview.



Checklist:

- 1 Is the general topic suitably covered by an interview? Or would it be better to use some other story format – for instance, a profile or a feature that includes the interview? In a profile or a feature, it's possible to add more information and more journalistic observations.
- 2 Does the reader understand why this interview is taking place and who the interviewee is?
- 3 As the interview progresses, is the reader being adequately informed about the background and motivation behind questions being asked? What about the answers?
- 4 Will the reader be able to understand any technical language, jargon or expert opinions?
- 5 Has any unnecessary information, verbosity and general, uninformative chatter been removed from the finished interview?
- 6 Were all the relevant, important questions answered? Do the answers correspond to the questions and make sense?
- 7 Is it clear who authorised the interview, and when?

“There are no taboos”

What is the secret of a good interview? What questions can you ask? What questions must you ask? The Syrian journalist and film maker Ali Atassi provides some answers in this interview about interviews.

As well as writing texts, reporting and interviewing, any Syrian journalist requires a skill set beyond that of most international counterparts. Maneuvering, dashing and donning disguises is all part of their everyday work. In this sense, Ali Atassi's work reflects the experiences of many people of his generation whose lives have been dominated by the struggle for freedom. Ali's father, former President of the Syrian Arab Republic Nureddin al-Atassi, spent 22 years detained in a narrow cell without trial and was only released after cancer spread throughout his body. He died in early 1992, one week after arriving in Paris for treatment.

That same year, Ali Atassi decided to go to Paris. He completed his studies at the Sorbonne and returning in early 2000 when he moved between Beirut and Damascus, writing for Beirut newspapers opposed to the Syrian regime. He and his colleagues penned opinion articles and analyses, often published in the Lebanese newspaper 'An-Nahar', a banned and smuggled commodity which were secretly circulated by Syrians. Atassi was known for his bold critical dialogues with Syrian and Arab elites on topics like art, religion, democracy and freedoms.

Over the last decade, Atassi conducted a series of critical interviews with major figures of literature, philosophy and politics, a time that the country was passing from the grip of the old guard onto their children, owners of companies and businesses. These days, some of them have assumed leadership positions in the revolution, including former MP Riad Seif and Italian monk Father Paolo. Others predicted the a big shift but died before witnessing it, such as the late director Omar Amiralay and the late poet Muhammad al-Maghut.

Atassi's most famed work is the two-part interview with 'Syria's Mandela,' Riad al-Turk, who was held in solitary confinement for 18 years, a stint Atassi documented in two documentaries, the first in 2001 and the second ten years later.

Also famed is his interview, created over the course of six years, with the late Nasr Abu Zayd – an Egyptian thinker who was expelled from his country

after Islamists charged him with infidelity. Atassi also directed a documentary about the encounter and published a book.

Today, circumstances are different. A dark cloud enshrouds the country – there are more than 100,000 dead, four million displaced and other shocking statistics. Syria is no longer simply that country ruled by Assad's central authority. It has become the most dangerous place in the world for its nationals as well as for journalists.

Atassi, who is prohibited from entering the country and lives in Beirut, still seizes the opportunity to interview Syrians at home and in exile, mostly via Skype. Armed with a kind of smart innocence and sometimes naivety, he obtains perceptive answers to his very straight-forward questions.

In this interview, Atassi explains to young journalists how to interview in harsh conditions like those of Syria. As well as providing technical advice, he urges them to learn from his own mistakes. It is an interview about interviews.

- Q *Mr. Atassi, how do you start your press interviews? How do you formulate the first question?*
- A A press interview is essentially a moving dynamic between two parties: the journalist and the interviewee. Hence, as in chess, there are rules and two players playing for fun. The possibilities are endless.
- Q *What are those rules?*
- A There is no golden rule in response to the first question. An interview's content depends on the identity of the interviewee, getting a positive start to the conversation, not to mention the goal of the interview. For example, the first question might be provocative and direct if you know the interviewee and what you want to take aim at the target. Otherwise, the first question might be general and serve to kick start the conversation and break the ice with the interviewee. However, in all interviews, I think it is important that the first question does not reveal all the interviewer's cards.
- Q *What makes you interview somebody?*
- A I think that press interviews play a pivotal role, especially in today's Syria. Public and political figures appear every day in the public sphere which has been opened up by recent events. Thus, these figures should make contact with people and their issues. On the other hand, people should be able to hold them accountable and argue with them. There is no better means than an interview to make public figures face up to their responsibility of dealing with public opinion. There is also a need to make room for those who have been marginalized or absent due to the policy of repression and harassment. It is important to allow these people to communicate their message to the widest circles.

- Q *Why do you not write up many of your interviews in the form of reports?*
 A We should first determine what we want to achieve from the press interview. An interview may be part of a reportage to gather testimonies about an event or to complete an investigative report on a particular topic. An interview here is employed to serve the press topic, and therefore the interviewee is not the focus of the actual interview.

Other types of interviews zoom in on the interviewee. The most common example of this is when the interview is the outcome of interaction between two people, like a tango dance that can only innovate when it involves an energy of attraction and repulsion between the two parties. The importance of the interview here is that it should reveal that which is concealed, via the interviewee's own words, personality and attitudes.

- Q *Who is a typical interviewee?*
 A There is no typical interviewee. Rather, every person has something to say. I decide who I want to interview according to the event or the topic I want to highlight in a specific moment, as well as the role of this person and what his/her comments add. Sometimes, a person some consider marginal or simple has a lot to say and contribute, while those with authority or star status just make wooden remarks.

- Q *How do you prepare yourself and what are the first steps you make?*
 A A journalist should be well acquainted with the subject he/she wants to address and familiar with the biography of the interviewee. This needs time and effort. The interviewer needs to read up on what has been previously published on the topic and any previous interviews with the interviewee. This process includes writing many notes and developing many questions. Of course, these questions are useful as reference points during the interview. The dynamic of the ensuing conversation however, quickly generates other questions and spontaneously highlights new points that have not crossed the journalist's mind before. When I edit an interview, I often shorten the text of my questions and delete many intercepting questions, clearing space for the interviewee's words. Sometimes, I rearrange the interviewee's answers and ideas' sequence. I only publish after I show him/her my editorial interventions.

- Q *Are there questions that should not be asked?*
 A As long as the questions respect the interviewee and do not interfere with his privacy, personal life and religious beliefs, there are no taboos. We should adhere to the principle of not cutting short the interviewee's answers or take comments out of context. Of course, interviewers need to take into account any cultural and religious sensitivities as well as customs and traditions. However, no concessions should be made in terms of the journalist's role which is to pose direct, bold

and legitimate questions. In other words, all subjects can be addressed and all questions are possible and permitted, as long as there is a minimum of respect for journalism norms. Only the formulation, or way of asking questions, can be changed.

- Q *What mistakes do you deem 'fatal'?*
 A A major fatal mistake is journalistic dishonesty and manipulation or modification of answers. Of course, there are many mistakes, big or small, which can be committed, such as a journalist's inability to break through the stilted atmosphere that dominates at the beginning of the interview. This needs to be eased to reveal important and new things. Other errors include not giving the interviewee adequate attention or not focusing on what he/she says or making him/her feel that their perspective is not of interest.

- Q *What mistakes have you made?*
 A Sometimes I provoked the interviewee, which caused tension in the interview, making it impossible to complete. I tried once to challenge a well-known peace activist during the revolution. I presented some critical opinions about her to give her a chance to defend herself. I told her that I would play devil's advocate and it started well but suddenly she was overcome and began to cry. I should have respected her tears and delayed the interview for a while. Instead, she withdrew and no longer wanted to complete the interview.

- Q *As a Syrian journalist who lived in France, are interviews published in the Arab press different from their counterparts in the French press?*
 A I do not believe that interviews in the Arab region have different characteristics than those in the rest of the world. But what is different is our region's political and cultural climate, which, in one way or another, imposes itself on our journalistic work. There are many pressures on journalists: The absence of freedoms, a constrained public sphere, a lack of professional and legal protection for journalists, the inability of public political figures to accept criticism and the absence of a culture of equal dialogue. These all affect interviews' quality. However, they might sometimes prompt journalists to initiate, innovate and be bold in their work. In Europe, for example, there are ancient press institutions that support journalists, unions that defend their rights, laws that protect them and a general environment that accepts and understands journalism and how it can be contentious. Unfortunately, in our region, we still have a long way to go in this direction.

- Q *Are you satisfied with Western journalists' interviews with Syrian figures?*
 A Sometimes, some of their questions annoy me, especially when they are full of stereotypes and ignorance of our culture and are dominated by

a Europe-centric attitude. Sometimes I am riled by the collusion, bias and lack of criticism shown by some Western journalists towards some of our personalities who enjoy the West's favour, fame or sympathy.

Q Do you have 'golden tips' for novice reporters working in small media outlets who still cannot get important interviews?

A The most important tips are seriousness, self-confidence and determination to achieve what they want. Without these qualities, they will not be able to convince anyone to be their interviewee.

Q Can you imagine yourself interviewing Bashar al-Assad?

A No I do not want to. I cannot imagine myself interviewing him. What I really dream of is covering the questions the Syrian judiciary will ask the accused Bashar al-Assad behind bars during a public trial for the crimes he has committed against the Syrian people.

“I should have gone even further”

Germany's leading interviewer Arno Luik explains why journalists need to shake up the boring interview format

Q Mr Luik, are you a bit arrogant?

A ... hmmm.

Q You're not answering?

A Of course. I now have to say that I'm not arrogant.

Q But you don't have to say that...

A ... but I'm not snobbish.

Q Ungrateful?

A I don't understand the question.

Q I ask that because you've criticised a journalistic format which has played a crucial role in your success.

A Now I'm curious, go on.

Q “The interview,” you once said, “is a rigid and completely dry form of journalism: Question, answer, question, answer.”

A That's true. I still view it like that – and increasingly so, the more interviews I read. To me the difference between interviews and features is like the gap between theatre plays and novels. Novels grip their readers but the dryness of interviews comes down to their fixed formula: Question, answer, question, answer. That is precisely the challenge: To shake up the approach and make it surprising.

Q In contrast, the Austrian writer Wolf Haas finds the interview format so attractive that he wrote his novel “Das Wetter vor 15 Jahren” (The Weather 15 Years Ago) as one single extended interview. Recently, during an interview, he said: “I like this form: One can jump from one subject to the next. There are apparently questions and answers, but, in reality, the questions tell stories too.”

A I also try and do that with my conversations: To create them so that people can enjoy them, even when the answers aren't so exciting. I aim to convey stories via the questions so that you learn something from them, making them them surprising, or offbeat, or shrill, or funny.

- Q *Why are interviews so rarely like that?*
 A Normally, in my experience, interviews are seen as an easy option: Easier, for example, than a feature. For that reason, interviews are often used as space filler. In newsrooms you frequently hear: 'Who can quickly do an interview.' Journalists often turn up ill-prepared to interviews, knowing little about their interviewee. Then they leave with relatively little.
- Q *The form is not as dry and boring as its contents.*
 A Both are dry and boring. The rigid structure runs the risk of dominating the contents. But when it goes well, it can become a fast-moving exchange of blows, one can move swiftly and step on the gas, more so than in a portrait or other journalistic formats. But to achieve this, you need expertise at the craft of interviews. It is not possible to stick to the motto: 'Avanti Dilettanti' (go ahead amateurs!).
- Q *Well, Mr Luik, can you describe the tricks of the trade of "Germany's leading interviewer," as the renowned German daily tageszeitung labelled you. What makes a good interview?*
 A It is difficult. In my experience, the more thought out the questions: the better the answers. The basic prerequisite is to make your preparation meticulous, or in my case, practically manic. Initially this work is fuelled by fear of failure. That drives me to get increasingly better prepared for these conversations.
- Q *Fear of failure?*
 A An interview is a very precarious thing. Whether it works out or not hinges on many factors. One walks into the room. Already there are vibes: Is my interviewee friendly or not? What sort of a mood is he in? Did he lose an important football match yesterday, or maybe fire 10,000 workers? Was his wife unfaithful to him? Those things are out of my control but will influence the conversation.
- Q *But that is still the case when you are perfectly prepared.*
 A I can never completely suppress the risk that a conversation flops – but I can minimise that danger. To avoid things getting out of control, I get very well prepared. The idea is to leave as little as possible to chance. I carefully consider my first question, and also the answers which I may get and how the conversation may develop. I dig out quotes or references which could encourage, provoke or, at times, calm my interviewee. I also prepare jokes because I want this question/answer game to be fun.
- Q *So it is as if you are the person drawing up the profile of a criminal in a thriller, trying to get a sense of your target, pinning a picture on the wall, annotating it...*
 A ...yes...

- Q *Asking his friends about him...*
 A yes, of course, that too, whenever possible.
- Q *How much time does your preparation take?*
 A It can last a few hours or two or three weeks. It bears no relation to how long the conversation should last, but rather depends on the topic and the person.
- Q *For example, how did you prepare to interview Angela Merkel?*
 A When I met Angela Merkel she was not yet the German Chancellor but had recently become the Chairperson of the CDU party. I did extensive research. I even travelled to the former East Germany to probe whether or not she had been in the FDJ...
- Q *The Free German Youth, the communist youth movement.*
 A I tried to meet people from her student days. I asked about Mrs Merkel among people who used to be in the PDS, the successor of the SED, the former ruling party of East Germany. I discovered what it meant to be a member of the Academy of Sciences in the GDR, as Mrs Merkel was. I looked into whether you needed close links to the regime, or even more. It was a lot of work.
- Q *So after your research you spend your days with a photo of your interviewee on the wall, firing questions at your counterpart: "Mr Weidmann, do other citizens have to suffer in order to safeguard my pension?"*
 A Basically, yes. You do need to view the interview a bit like an exam. I learn the questions I plan to ask, the quotes I want to throw at my conversation partner. Remarks which later come across as quick-witted are often simply learnt off by heart. Of course, I was also very well prepared for my meeting with Jens Weidmann, the President of the German Bundesbank, a very powerful man who rarely faces dissenting voices in his proximity. And he certainly not from people like me, who he probably views as a subordinate, or simply just as bothersome.
- Q *When you turn up at the appointment, do you have an idea or a theory about who the interviewee really is – or an impression about what you want to communicate to the reader about this person?*
 A I don't necessarily want to prove a previously drawn-up theory. But I do certainly start off with an idea in my head. With Jens Weidmann, for example, I was aware I was meeting someone whose work influences the life of millions of people, or even hundreds of millions – and he is someone who has done the wrong thing. I saw myself as a representative for people who aren't able to speak to him for themselves. I wanted to ask the questions important to those who have suffered because of his actions. But although those conversations often turn into a heated duel, I don't necessarily want to win. For me that is not a relevant consideration. I want readers to get new insights, in as entertaining a way as possible, and even to learn something.

- Q *I find that hard to accept.*
A Counter argument is allowed, but pointless.
- Q *I still can't accept that.*
A Why not?
- Q *Because during your interviews, I get the impression that you are not bothered about the contents of the conversation but rather seek to show people up by launching a polemic attack on them.*
A For example?
- Q *When you reproached the former international footballer and current soccer trainer Lothar Matthäus about the age of his various girlfriends.*
A That is a totally normal question when there are 26 years separating Matthäus and his wife.
- Q *But that isn't a normal question, it's just rehashed pub banter.*
A I think I could even mathematically demonstrate how Matthäus' women are getting younger, the older he gets. For that reason, it is fair to ask if his next lover will be even younger.
- Q *Mr Luik, in whose name are you posing that question?*
A For myself. I want to be entertained too.
- Q *Isn't it something for a reader of the Bild newspaper?*
A You mention me in the same breath as German's biggest tabloid. With respect, that is polemic a la Arno Luik.
- Q *You are trying to dodge this with a joke...*
A ... I try to ask what interests me. And I don't claim that all my questions are philosophical and worthy.
- Q *But what on earth interested you that the – former – union leader Franz Steinkühler always wore smart suits? Did you think he should have cut his deals with bosses wearing workers overalls?*
A With Steinkühler I found that interesting because I knew he once snapped at a young worker: "If you don't dress properly, you won't become anyone in my organisation."
- Q *Then you should have asked him about that particular case, rather than criticising his tailored suits. It's ok if a Union man is well dressed, right?*
A His answer was great. He said that for him these suits were a means to be on an equal footing with the bosses, who own and move millions. His answer shows that clothing doesn't just create a person but also can also bolster them

when they are negotiating pay. I could add, ironically: in the context of the class struggle. So a question you view as dumb provoked a very clever answer.

- Q *Nicely put, but I could add a phrase which you like to drop into interviews: Objection, Mr Luik...*
A ... yes.
- Q *The author Martin Walser blocked the publication of a nine-hour conversation with you. Instead, in a unique move, he then invented a dialogue with you which was printed as an essay by Germany's leading news magazine Der Spiegel. In response to your accusation "You are in the right-wing camp" he responds with the clever sentence: "To reject such a claim is to validate it."*
A But that sounds nice.
- Q *No, that is not nice. Rather it reveals how polemic accusations can pose an awkward dilemma for interviewees.*
A Martin Walser is a person who likes to be on a pedestal, to be revered and loved. No one should taint his position as a cultural landmark and so for that reason he doesn't want to be bothered with troublesome or challenging things. He only wants to face questions which enshrine his legendary status. He wants to be the Pope and decide what questions he will be asked.
- Q *Even if that were the case, his objection is right. If he answered what he saw as a completely ludicrous accusation, he would turn it into a topic for discussion. As Francis Bacon said, something will always stick.*
A Of course something always sticks. But I truly saw Walser as someone who had moved towards the right. From protesting Vietnam he became a guest speaker for the (Bavarian conservative party) CSU convention in Wildbad Kreuth. He is someone who now identifies himself with the nation, a position he would have mocked in the past. He has undergone a substantial political shift. At the same time, he doesn't want to be pinned down and says childish sentences like: Nothing is true without its opposite.
- Q *The man is a philosopher...*
A ... half philosopher. Above all, this sentence reveals to me the truth of someone who wants to control what they are asked. That is similar to Joschka Fischer, who as German Foreign Minister, didn't allow certain journalists to question him because he deemed them too critical, too rebellious. Today interviews are often impossible with the truly powerful – and you can't even access so-called stars.
- Q *But you can't accuse Martin Walser of that sort of behaviour – after all, he spoke to you for a solid nine hours.*
A Which suggests that the conversation, which was planned to last for one and a half hours, was also of interest to him.

- Q *Mr Luik you realise that i'm trying to cross examine you like interviewer Luik cross examines his delinquents...*
- A ... I don't know whether cross examinations are really so good and entertaining. I aim to avoid boredom despite the narrow formal constraints. I don't want to cheat anyone.
- Q *At the same time you don't shy away from cornering your interviewees until they feel completely baffled...*
- A ... no, no, no. I see what I do as an attempt at political question and response; a discourse, not the fluffy talk you hear so often these days. Rather I attempt a changing interplay between confrontation, encouragement, stroking and hitting. I don't want to make anyone look a fool, it is a transparent duel. People are able to answer back – and I urge them to do so, whether they respond in a way that is – intelligent, affectionate or hurt.
- Q *"I want to do the impossible, the ideal scenario would be to know more about my interviewee than he knows about himself;" you said once. To me, that sounds less like an open exchange and more like a fantasy of wielding power over someone else.*
- A For me this phrasing is simply a variation on Goethe's sentence: "One only sees, what one knows." When I meet someone and hardly know anything about him, how can I spot the hairline fractures in his argumentation? How can I peer behind the facades when I have no idea what is hidden there?
- Q *So you were always ok with yourself and your often provocative interview questions?*
- A Well I have, on occasion, stopped to ask myself if I went too far.
- Q *For example?*
- A When I interviewed Inge Jens ...
- Q *... the wife of Walter Jens, a renowned German intellectual who is suffering from severe dementia...*
- A ... and said: "You are the widow of a man who is still alive." But overall, I frequently think that I should have gone further with my questioning.
- Q *On the subject of Mrs Jens, alongside your interviews with celebrities, stars and bosses, who we could dub "winners," you held your, in my opinion, most striking interviews with, in inverted commas, "losers": with a young man who was terribly disfigured during a fire, with Inge Jens, with the fatally ill artist Gerd Löffler...*
- A ... There you touch on a fundamental problem. Sometimes I have the feeling that I have hit the end of the road. Conversations with celebrities are simply not interesting. Not any more. These celebrities increasingly exercise control

and are controlled. Honest and open exchanges are hardly possible anymore. A chancellor will not speak about her fears and the German President will not admit self doubt, if he has it. Masks are firmly in place and the traits which could make these people seem human, are carefully hidden. For that reason, interviews with those in power tend to be cold and without empathy. Conversations with victims, or the injured – people who are supposedly on the losing side – have a completely different quality and intensity, assuming the interviewer has empathy and knows how to steer such a conversation.

- Q *I find that these very personal conversations reveal that, at heart, you are an old leftie.*
- A Why's that?
- Q *"History is always a history of the victors," wrote the philosopher Walter Benjamin, who in 1940 killed himself while fleeing the Nazis. Critical thinkers, Benjamin inferred, need to scour history to unearth facts which were left behind. I think you are doing exactly that when you hold conversations with those who are not winners in history. I think these conversations show how you are an old leftie, more so than the argument with the bank boss.*
- A It is also important to me to confront bankers with things that they do not usually have to face, like critics' arguments or quotes from Karl Marx, so that demonstrators sit in front of his bank and fire burns and people protest against him and his politics. Whether I speak to the Bundesbank President or a chronically ill person, I want to discover unexpected, surprising and unknown stuff.
- Q *Is giving a voice to the voiceless perhaps one of the primary functions of interviews?*
- A I aim to do that. But that task is increasingly difficult in today's media circus. Many years ago. Many years ago I had a conversation with the Swiss publisher and journalist Roger Köppel. He wanted me to write interviews for his then newspaper and he asked me: "Do you have good contacts in Hollywood?" I replied: "Hollywood doesn't interest me" and that remark abruptly ended his enthusiasm to recruit me as an interviewer.
- Q *Mr Luik, this conversation has touched on an underlying dilemma: Your interviews, even the critical ones, are only printed to satisfy the voyeuristic urges of sensation-hungry readers. You are not meant to effect change, you are just meant to satisfy demand.*
- A But now you need to make a distinction between my intentions and those of the media industry.
- Q *You work for the media industry.*
- A Sure, but it isn't homogeneous. It isn't a single shop. There are always possibilities...

- Q ... You are trying to wriggle out of this again...
- A ... no, not at all. After all, I know what I've done in my life and what I do. I know that because of my name with Stern ...
- Q ... Germany's second-biggest weekly magazine after Spiegel ...
- A ... In Stern I can broach topics that others wouldn't publish.
- Q "There is no true life in falsehood," wrote Theodor W. Adorno, a philosopher who in his younger days was admired by sections of the German left-wing scene. Don't you sometimes have doubts?
- A That is a totalitarian theory, meaning you might as well sit down and fold your hands in your lap...
- Q ... It is not a totalitarian theory, but rather a theory which aims to explain totalitarian tendencies in the supposedly free society...
- A That is an ominous theory.
- Q It is – to shorten a long explanation – the summary of a theory which, among other points, says the ruthlessness of modern society is how it absorbs the opposition into itself. One could also say opposition is integrated into the entertainment business – and there we could refer to a selection of your interviews as a wonderful example.
- A This repressive tolerance...
- Q ... a term which Herbert Marcuse, another proponent of this theory, used to describe how modern society incorporates the opposition, rendering it ineffective...
- A ... there is something to that. But this repressive tolerance can be taken advantage of. I believe that one can use it. I can try to be rebellious, get to the bottom of things. Maybe 99 percent of my readers just see my interviews and stories as a bit of entertainment. But perhaps they trigger something more in one or two of my readers, persuading them to get something in gear, affecting them. I think there is the possibility to transport something 'right' along the 'wrong' route.
- Q The gentlemen who developed this theory also didn't give up – instead they wrote up their ideas in many books.
- A My bookshelf contains Bloch's three-tome "The Hope Principle," which I can relate to more as a theoretical approach. For example, I believe it had more impact and created more change than going to demonstrations or writing political articles. As the then young tennis star Boris Becker told me in an interview in 1989, he felt he had "something in common" with the left-wing radical squatter scene in Hamburg's Hafenstraße, "more than with many people in my world."

- Q Mr Luik, you spoke to the author Martin Walser for nine hours, the star cook Vincent Klink received you sitting naked in a tub...
- A ... while dunking bread in olive oil and eating it...
- Q ... the sex educator Oswald Kolle spoke to you while fiddling with a dildo in his hand, and you brought Kati Witt, the beautiful ice skater, to tears with questions about her GDR history. Did you ever have a moment when you thought, I can't take this anymore, bye, I'm off?
- A Only once and then I walked away. It was a conversation with Angelika Schrobsdorf, the former bestseller author who is now old and depressive...
- Q ... and who wants to kill herself but doesn't do it.
- A Exactly. I actually asked her: "Shall I kill you?" And she said: "Yes, please." I couldn't continue and had to leave.
- Q Before you leave this interview, a penultimate question: If you had the opportunity, would you interview Bashar al-Assad?
- A Why not?
- Q What would you ask him?
- A I don't know. I just know that the questions would have to prompt him to unmask himself through his answers or, more than that, he should finish himself off with his answers.

Arno Luik, born 1955, studied American Studies and Sport in Tübingen/Bangor, Wales and Politics in Amherst College in Massachusetts, USA. He trained at the Schwäbischen Tagblatt and became well known for his interviews for the Sports magazine. Other jobs included working as a reporter for the Wochenpost, Editor in Chief at the tageszeitung and a writer at Geo and tagesspiegel. Since 2000 he has written for the Stern magazine. His interviews have been frequently translated and some have been published in a book.

Ulrich Fuchs, born 1956, completed a degree in Literary Studies and Politics in Freiburg and then worked as a freelance journalist and football reporter for the Badische Zeitung the Süddeutsche Zeitung, die tageszeitung and die Zeit. He later worked as head of sports and then Editor in Chief at the Freiburger Zeitung zum Sonntag. Since 2001 he works as a copy-writer and author.

