

responses could be: "What a *terrific* story—got any more like that?" She might have others, including some more closely related to journalistic interviewing technique. But can the interview be salvaged at this point? Of course. It needs only to review the purpose, perhaps with a remark such as this: "I *love* that story. May I take a moment to explain what I hope to get out of our conversation?"

**5. Absence of enthusiasm.** To cite a subtle point, the dialogue reveals a distinct lack of interviewer enthusiasm for the subject. He probably didn't intend to project that attitude. The classroom setting and the barriers that mounted through the misunderstanding of purpose seemed to put the interview on a stiff and formal plane—almost the opposite of the barefooted-women technique and certainly the antithesis of a creative interview. They seem to have one another at arm's length. Most experienced interviewers try to get closer. Some have learned to carry enthusiasm to the point of not-so-subtle flattery. Flattery seldom fails to enhance the interview rapport: "What an *incredible* set of adventures you must have had on that job! Have you considered writing a novel? . . . Where can I get your book?"

On the other hand, it's unflattering to have run out of questions at Q-20. It suggests that she's not terribly interesting or worthwhile. People tend to clam up when they're not appreciated. The problem plagues interviewers who have prepared written questions and can't seem to continue the conversation after asking the last one on the list. A skilled interviewer, by contrast, listens carefully to the answers and develops new questions on the spot. The "gittin' off the land" story could surely prompt a dozen follow-up questions: "Did you learn anything about interviewing [or about people] from that experience? . . . [If not] What were some of the experiences on the job that taught you the most about interviewing? . . . Have you learned any techniques to sense danger before you get into trouble?"

**6. Absence of organization.** The interview lacks organization, a problem enhanced by the unclear purpose. Some questions seem to be almost random shots in the dark. We as readers know what should have been the purpose and can therefore see a slight relevance, but Margaret is entirely in the dark, and as a result the rest of us are deprived of Margaret Laine's wisdom in providing useful ideas about interviewing under difficult conditions. We'll never know. She was never asked.

This kind of exploratory interviewing resembles walking into a black cave with an armload of unlighted candles. Each candle represents a question to be ignited by the answer, which then sheds light on a tiny part of the cave. One question leads to another, and eventually a whole section of the cave becomes visible. A well-organized set of questions, especially the ones prompted by earlier answers, can systematically lead to a visible reality, to truth. Too often interviewers light random candles anywhere and everywhere so that only random fragments of reality become known. Most times, fragmented reality is no better than abject darkness.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Questions

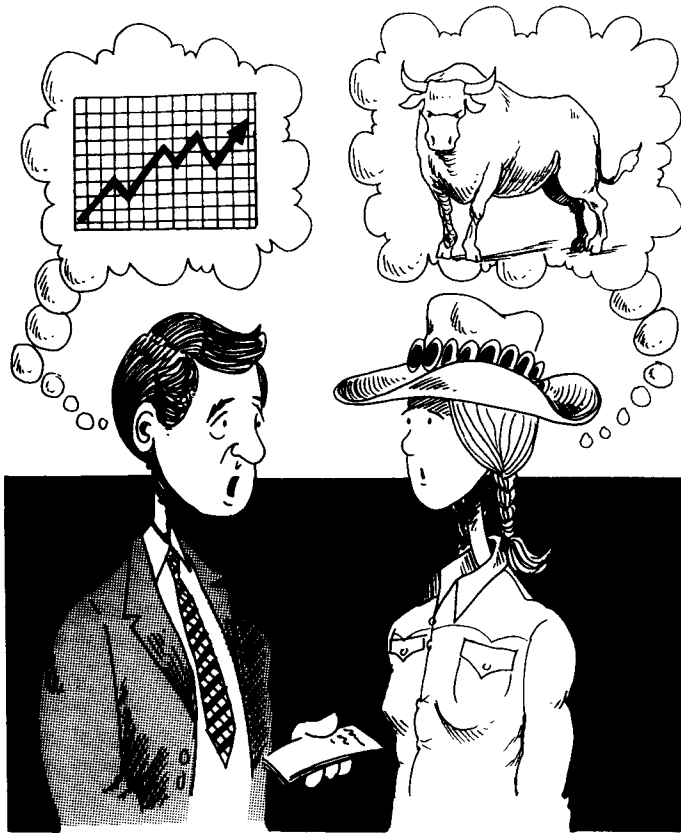
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- Q. Princess, if it's not too personal, can you tell me why you never married? Are you just not interested in men, or what?
- A. *Not interested?* I'll have you know that I've had no fewer than thirty-three lovers in the past twenty years!
- Q. Ah . . . [blushes]
- A. So! You didn't expect such candor, I see. It seems they didn't teach you in journalism school to cope with real life!

Samuel Johnson, the great eighteenth-century English writer, insisted that curiosity is one of the permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous mind. Nowhere is this more evident than in the journalistic interview. Here the vigorous mind, eager to seek out the essence of any subject under discussion, uses the question as the conduit to a richer, more rewarding intellectual life—or at least to get the details of an event for the six o'clock news.

This means the human curiosity behind the specific question is a more powerful force than any individual question can be. Sources tend to respond more to what they perceive to be the curiosity than to the question itself. Still, the way you ask is important.

## PHRASE YOUR QUESTIONS CLEARLY



"How do you feel about the upturn in the 'stock' market?"

Questions should be short, unbiased, and clear. Examine this dialogue between a reporter and a weather forecaster.

- Q. Is it going to rain tomorrow?  
 A. No.  
 Q. So we'll have good weather?  
 A. Depends what you mean by "good."  
 Q. Sunny?  
 A. No.  
 Q. What, then?  
 A. Snow.  
 Q. Well, why didn't you say so?  
 A. You didn't ask.

A clumsy dialogue. By asking about rain, the reporter closed out all other possibilities. Had the reporter asked, "What's your prediction for tomorrow's weather?" the answer would have been easy: snow. It may be that the forecaster was playing games by literally answering the questions asked (instead of the questions *meant*), but the lesson remains clear: ask what you really mean. Many bureaucrats take advantage of that kind of verbal fuzziness to evade your questions.

So make them clear and direct. If the point seems obvious, you need only to listen to the way people ask questions in everyday conversation. Note, for example, how they display personal biases through their questions. "I don't feel well," says Jim, and his friend, Bill, responds, "Is that because you drank too much last night?" Bill is not asking a question; he's expressing a subtle opinion about Jim's drinking. A more objective question would have been, "What's wrong?" or "How come you don't feel well?"

People often ask convoluted, overdefined questions. A college student once asked a police officer who visited the class:

- Q. Sergeant, have you ever had to use your gun, I mean, more than just target practice, like, for example, shooting at a fleeing robber, or maybe a hostage situation, or maybe like so many police officers I've read about, you've never actually used your gun in anger, so to speak, and then again maybe . . . .

The student seemed unable to let loose of the question. What's wrong with making it simple? Use follow-up questions if the answer is not sufficiently detailed.

- Q. Sergeant, have you ever had to fire your gun? [Note the change from "use" to "fire" to avoid ambiguity.]

## OPEN VERSUS CLOSED QUESTIONS

Questions come in two broad categories: open and closed. Open questions are general and allow plenty of leeway for the answer. Closed questions are specific and call for a specific answer.

Examples of the open question:

"What can you tell me about yourself?"

"Miss Manley, after seven broken marriages, what have you concluded about the institution of marriage?"

"Mr. President, how can we keep inflation in check while at the same time providing full employment?"

Examples of closed questions:

"Governor, do you plan to veto the legislature's tax-increase package?"

"Sergeant, what type of weapon was used to kill the victim?"

"Admiral, where will the battle fleet be sent next?"

As the examples suggest, both types have their place in the journalistic interview. Sometimes inexperienced interviewers jump too quickly into the closed question. A reporter approaches a witness to an auto accident and asks, "Was the driver of the green car drunk?" Not only does the question suggest a bias, but it calls for a conclusion that the witness is not able to make. Even if the driver was staggering as though drunk, other explanations are possible, an injury perhaps. A more objective question would be, "What did you see?"

Some questions straddle the two categories: "Senator Fogg, I understand you had a big argument with the president last night over foreign aid. What happened?" Is that open or closed? Perhaps more closed than open, but a little of both.

### SEQUENCING OF QUESTIONS: THE FUNNEL

Journalistic questions usually come in sequence, either from specific to general or from general to specific. Comments that emerge from general questions will logically lead to a request for details. The reverse is also true. The interviewer, hearing a source cite several specifics, will then search for a generalization or principle that suggests what the specifics mean. Here are hypothetical examples of both. First, the general to specific, sometimes called the funnel. Note how the closed questions follow the open.

Q. Coach Meyers, as your football team moves into the first game of the season, do you see any major problems ahead?

A. I'd say injuries are gonna slow us down quite a bit in the first week or two.

Q. Oh, you've had some injuries among your players?

A. You bet.

Q. Who?

A. Well, Charlie Rice for one. He's the guy we'd originally planned to start at quarterback.

Q. Rice is out? What happened to him?

A. Sprained an ankle in practice yesterday . . . .

The reporter will ferret out the additional specifics about what happened to this and other members of the team. A specific-to-general sequence (the reverse funnel) looks like this:

Q. Coach Meyers, I notice Charlie Rice is on crutches—what happened?

A. [Gives details.]

Q. How is his absence going to affect your opening game next week?

A. It's gonna slow us down quite a bit the first week or two...[and so forth].

### OPENING QUESTIONS

Many journalists consider an interview's first questions "throwaways," intended merely to get the interview under way. And so they are. Yet they do help to start the interview on the right track. Imagine the television interview where an articulate but nervous guest stumbles over the first question, something unexpected or loaded perhaps. This proves so embarrassing that the guest never recovers. Better to throw away an initial innocuous question or two than to throw away an entire interview. Opening questions come in two categories, icebreakers and first moves.

#### Icebreakers

Earlier we suggested some icebreaking comments upon first meeting your respondent: commenting on personal effects or the office scene or reviewing mutual acquaintances or topics in which you share an interest such as fishing or art. Here are some additional thoughts.

**1. Prepare your openers.** If the source is a business manager, a quick reading of the *Wall Street Journal* can yield enough material to serve as the topic of a preliminary conversation. Read an art magazine before interviewing an artist, a law enforcement magazine before talking to the police chief. Learn the issues in which *they* have an interest. This becomes easier with experience. If you're talking to a lawyer, the fact that you once interviewed, say, a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, gives you an opener (but one to be used deftly lest it appear arrogant).

**2. Use the respondent's name.** Most people like to hear their names pronounced properly. One reporter succeeded in interviewing an infamous British wife murderer where others failed. His name was Sleyghter, and most called it Slay-ter. The successful reporter had learned the correct pronunciation: Slick-ter.

**3. Use subtle provocations: good-natured kidding or banter.** Human nature dictates that conversation goes better with laughter and amiable repartee as lubricants. Some people put fun and sparkle into the conversations, and they receive the same in return. Think of the quotable remarks that fun and sparkle can inspire. Some amiable journalists seem to be able to get away with anything. A male journalist tells a feminist that he likes her legs; a female journalist tells the macho football coach that she "hates" the cowboy hat he wears to games—but both do so in an obviously jocular manner.

What happens if your provocation misfires and your source becomes angry? You slug it out and/or apologize, thus clearing the air. You achieve a mutual understanding, and the interview proceeds, often with no loss of rapport, sometimes with a gain. It's one of those tiny human ironies that defy

simple explanations, a little like gaining rapport by clumsily spilling your coffee. Perhaps it has to do with revealing vulnerability. You tried a corny wisecrack and it fell flat. You thereby gain a touch of human sympathy. Maybe. Journalists who read people—their sense of humor or lack of it—perform best in these conversational subtleties.

### First Moves

These are your first serious questions, though they need not be grimly serious. They might even drop logically from the amiable icebreaker repartee that preceded it. A certain logic resides in the woman interviewer suggesting to the football coach that her wisecrack about the cowboy hat leads to the topic of her interview—a feature story, let's suppose, about the demeanor of coaches during games. Her observations have suggested that coaches pace and curse and kick the water bucket—well, is the cowboy hat part of the act, too?

Whatever the first moves, they should have four qualities.

1. They should be easy to answer, particularly for a broadcast interview. Indeed, they should be questions you're pretty sure the respondent will relish answering.
2. They should reinforce the respondent's self-esteem. Save touchy questions for later.
3. They should demonstrate that the interviewer has prepared for the conversation.
4. They should follow logically from the interviewer's announced statement of purpose.

### FILTER QUESTIONS

Filter questions establish a respondent's qualifications to answer subsequent questions. You arrive at the scene of a tragedy and ask "what happened?" You're told lots of details, only to learn that the person answering didn't really see it. You're receiving second-hand information that the "witness" has picked up from others. A simple filter question—"Where were you when the tornado struck?"—would have avoided the wasted effort.

A filter question proves useful whenever you're interviewing a person with unknown credentials. For a story about runaway kids, you approach a police officer you don't know personally. So you ask a filter question: "Sergeant, how much experience have you had dealing with runaway kids?"

Filter questions enhance conversational rapport with highly qualified sources and weaken it with poorly qualified. Questions that qualify you as an authority reinforce your ego. Those that expose a lack of knowledge can be humiliating. Remember, though, that celebrated people resent questions that advance preparation could easily answer. Don't ask Sally Field if she's had much acting experience.

### PROBE (FOLLOW-UP) QUESTIONS

The probe represents the heart of the interview. It encourages the source to explain or elaborate on something already said. Probes range from silence to repeating something just said. Imagine the response to the hypothetical dialogue at the head of this chapter. The reporter has asked about the princess's unmarried status, and she replies that she's had thirty-three lovers in twenty years. The interviewer blushes and doesn't know what to say next. Blushing is a probe of sorts, a nonverbal response that encourages further comment, not a helpful comment in this instance. Here are the typical kinds of probes designed to encourage elaboration.

**1. Passive probe.** "Hmmm . . . I see . . ." It's probably accompanied by a deadpan expression. This kind of passiveness suggests that the interviewer is prepared to listen further.

**2. Responsive.** "Really! . . . How interesting! . . ." Probably accompanied by more animated facial expression—nod, smile, eye contact, raised eyebrow—no doubt these should be practiced in front of a mirror before any public debut. Avoid judgmental responses: "What a fickle woman you are!"

**3. Mirroring.** Mirroring means repeating pertinent examples of the source's own words. It's used effectively by counseling interviewers working with psychologically troubled patients. "Thirty-three lovers . . ." followed by a pause tends to encourage elaboration as the respondent hastens to supply the missing details.

**4. Silent.** A "silent" response might seem like no response at all and thus an ineffective probe. Experience suggests otherwise. An expectant kind of silence, accompanied by the appropriate nonverbal signals, asks the speaker to continue. Often silence is useful in allowing the speaker time to collect her thoughts, perhaps think through the kind of elaboration that should follow.

**5. Developing.** "Tell me more about the men in your life . . . Why so many? . . . Are you bragging or complaining? . . . Tell me about the best and worst of them . . . Whom do you have in mind for number thirty-four?"

**6. Clarifying.** "That's one and a half lovers a year, on the average; do you have affairs in sequence or concurrently? . . . Do these men know about each other?"

**7. Diverging.** "And yet you claim to be in the forefront of the feminist movement—do you see any conflict in that? . . . Do you also know men merely as friends?"

8. *Changing.* "I'd like to move along now to another topic if you don't mind—tell me about your interest in Renoir paintings." (This assumes you have no interest in pursuing the topic.)

Perhaps it's less important to learn the various types of probes than to let your curiosity guide you toward the heart of the subject under discussion. The best probe may be the question, "Why?" It's also the best question to ask when you can't think of any other. "Why? Why do you say that?" Even the most outrageous comments—especially the most outrageous—should be followed by that question. (See Conceptually Defining Questions, later in this chapter.)

### FACTUAL QUESTIONS: THE 5 W'S

Use of the *Who*, *What*, *Where*, *When*, *Why*, and *How* has already been described (Chapter 2) as a means of obtaining information for the event-oriented news story, such as a story on the train wreck or the governor's veto of the capital punishment bill. *Who?* (the governor), *What?* (vetoed the tax bill), and so on. Five of the six questions allow you to form a sense of the story's dimensions. One of them—the *Why*—is something of an intellectual renegade, to be discussed in a later section of this chapter. Note, meanwhile, that your questioning may focus more on one of the elements than the others. The governor's reasons for veto of the tax bill deserve more attention than the details of how and when. But you can imagine other circumstances that will cause you to focus on, say, the *how* (how burglars cleverly tunneled their way into the bank vault) or the *when* (just minutes before the scheduled execution the prisoner received a pardon).

The five W's and H are particularly valuable to lay a foundation of knowledge before you can proceed with more complex questions. You encounter a group of people picketing at City Hall. The event seems worthy of an item on the six o'clock news, but you haven't the faintest idea what it's all about. What now? You put your Five W's to work. *Who's* in charge? When you find this person you ask foundation-laying questions. *What's* going on? *Who* are these people, and *Why* are they here? And so on.

### CONCEPTUALLY DEFINING QUESTIONS

You use a conceptually defining question to seek out the underlying causes or principles behind any event or situation. Sometimes it is a one-word question: *Why?* At least that's how you try to discover the conceptual principles involved in any situation. Sounds simple. The question, however, implies trying to understand the answer, and *that* can be complex indeed. Not only is the answer possibly complicated, but you're never sure it's true. Truth comes at many levels. So do coverups. The real reason behind any commentary may

lie deep below successive layers of political, sociological, economic, or even psychological complexities. You are tinkering with the fundamentals of human motivation, the stuff novelists and therapists deal with every day. Who can say the real reason behind the prison riot or the deterioration of a city's downtown core?

To understand the problem, consider a personal example. You ask your neighbor, Mr. Jones, why he bought the new Oldsmobile. "Because I like Oldsmobiles better than Buicks," he replies. True enough. You can settle for that superficial answer, or you can peel away successive psychological layers to get somewhere close to reality: Perhaps he is a timid man who hopes through the purchase of a powerful and expensive car to gain self-confidence, the admiration of friends and neighbors, and the respect of his family. Jones may deny such a motivation should you ask, and who's to say he's wrong? He was merely trying to keep up with the neighbors, he says.

Understanding the conceptual underpinnings beneath the superficial events is less a matter of questioning technique than a complex pattern of learning and understanding. Tracking down concepts sometimes requires dogged pursuit; thus:

- Q. Governor, why did you veto the capital punishment bill?  
 A. Because it was a bad bill.  
 Q. What was bad about it?  
 A. Everything!  
 Q. Well, what would be an example of one bad element?  
 A. In the first place, it's in conflict with the state constitution.  
 Q. How so? [And so on, until you get to the heart of the governor's attitudes about capital punishment and her reasons for the veto.]

One pattern for this conceptual level of interviewing has been suggested by Gilleland (1971). It's called GOSS, an acronym for four stages of questioning.

Goals  
 Obstacle  
 Solutions  
 Start

GOSS draws on the principle that most of life—that of bureaucratic agencies as well as humans—involves reaching for goals, not all of them within grasp. If you ask about goals and get realistic answers, then you already have some notion of concepts behind a respondent's actions or commentary. You invariably find obstacles blocking access to those goals. But possible solutions exist, either in fact or in theory. The final S suggests that understanding concepts comes more easily if you return to the beginning of any event or situation. How (and why) did it all begin?

You can apply GOSS to interviews ranging from simple news event queries to full-fledged biographical profiles. The governor's goals upon entering office can be discussed by journalists at any stage. ("Governor, what are you trying to accomplish in the field of prison reform? What kinds of problems or obstacles stand in the way? How have you worked—or will you—to remove those obstacles? How did your interest in prison reform begin?")

You could add two letters to GOSS, at least for the type of interview requiring conceptual depth.

E for Evaluation  
Y for "Why"

That makes it GOSSEY, still an easily remembered pattern. Evaluation suggests asking a source for a kind of historical overview of the subject under discussion: "Governor, please tell me how you evaluate the controversy between you and the legislature over prison reform—where do we stand and where are we going?" And the Y for Why is just a reminder to press for a complete understanding: Why does the governor feel so strongly about capital punishment or prison reform?

The GOSS pattern, like any attempt to reduce human relations to simple formulas, is fraught with peril. It works almost too well. It can be a crutch for lazy interviewers who don't do their homework.

## NUMBER QUESTIONS

How many? By what percentage has population increased over the last decade? Answers to number questions give a sense of definition and precision to the topic under discussion. Vague is dull; specifics can be interesting, even dramatic when used properly. Numbers and statistics seem to dominate sports reporting—the .314 batting average, the coach's won-lost-tied record. Other people accumulate statistical records, too, though the numbers may not be so easily accessible as they are in sports, business, the economy, and the census. Yet a mountain climber could be asked to total his lifetime record of 122 peaks climbed, 383 glacier traverses, or whatever. One reporter, interviewing a call girl, was astonished to find that she kept statistical records on her clients, who averaged forty-one years old with forty percent of them white, middle-class businessmen. She'd even separated them into twelve categories, including "freaks," "lovers," and "those wanting talk and sex therapy."

Such detail is concrete and dramatic and accessible to the interviewer who asks. You may want to carry a small hand calculator when you ask number questions. A reformed alcoholic, for instance, used a reporter's calculator to determine that he'd consumed an estimated 2,000 gallons of booze during his bout with alcoholism. He figured that he'd consumed two bottles of wine or a six-pack of beer every day for fifteen years.

The questions used to discover such drama are simple. How many? How many miles did the retiring postman walk during his forty-year career? To make it truly dramatic, you can use comparisons. He walked 120,000 miles, a distance equal to almost five times around the world at the equator.

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Reflective questions are not really questions, but comments on some point the interviewer would like to see addressed. They are largely conjectural comments, usually delivered in a casual and ego-reinforcing manner.

"You seem to enjoy teaching, Ms. Johnston."

"I notice, Senator, that you chuckle every time I bring up the subject of the federal budget deficit."

"I have a hunch, Ms. Celebrity, that your fan mail must include a lot of oddball items such as proposals of marriage or requests for money."

Such comments are more conversational and less threatening. They allow the respondent to choose the direction of the reply. You frequently receive a counterpoint reply along these lines:

Q. You seem to enjoy teaching, Ms. Johnston.

A. Oh, I do—at least eighty-nine point three percent of the time.

Q. I see—the other, uh, ten point seven percent sounds ominously troublesome.

A. Well, it's just that when you try harder to make sure your students learn what they ought to know, you put more pressure both on your students and on yourself. You run the risk of misunderstanding, and pretty soon delegations of parents come to see the principal. That part I don't enjoy.

Q. But apparently those delegations have not weakened your resolve—[and so on].

Not all such comments must massage the ego, of course. Negative comments, preferably attributed to someone else, can encourage lively responses.

Q. Some students tell me that they avoid your classes because you're so demanding.

A. Yes, and some teachers resent the fact that the very best students register for my advanced English classes, but I want to point out that I also teach remedial English . . .

## CREATIVE QUESTIONS

The creative question has already been defined as one that emerges when you tread forward beyond the limits of present knowledge. You form questions based on what you already know about the topic through documentary re-

search, previous interviews, and general knowledge. Where, you ask, might the trail lead once you have left the known? You devise questions to find out. To illustrate, you see the star quarterback on crutches (the known aspect), and so you call the football coach to find out what happened and what implications it might have for next week's game (the unknown).

That definition confirmed, let us acknowledge that some reporters are more creative than others in devising questions. Their minds are adept at sifting through conversational minutiae for bits of information that seem to combine into new and possibly novel revelations. Some of the pieces are not even verbal.

Why, for example, does the senator avoid your eyes whenever you ask her about foreign policy? She won't talk about military problems except to ramble almost incoherently about arms buildup and American fleet movements. And last week a newspaper quoted her as saying, "I have more questions than answers about American foreign policy." How does *that* fit in? As these and similar items accumulate in an interviewer's mind, they may form a pattern, a possible meaning to explain all the fragments. You form a hypothesis—a possible explanation—and drop it into the conversation.

Q. Senator, several things you've said today suggest that you may be considering a sharp departure from your support of the president's foreign policy, particularly with regard to military buildup.

A. Good heavens! How did you reach *that* conclusion? [A typical reaction.]

Q. Just things you said.

A. Well, you're right! How perceptive! Yes, it's true; I feel the president is deviating from his previously announced policy . . . .

If she denies your hypothesis, you've lost nothing. Perhaps you will have gained some other explanation for the pattern of reactions that puzzles you. But when a respondent confirms such a creative hypothesis, the conversation spirals upward with renewed energy. That's because the respondent may be viewing you with new respect, seeing you as the brilliant and perceptive observer that you truly are.

This further definition of the creative question is really an extension of the previous definition. The interviewer supplies a more detailed and perceptive array of clues to develop a question based on the kind of trifling details that the legendary Sherlock Holmes could enjoy. That's creative interviewing at its finest.

## LEADING AND LOADED QUESTIONS

Journalists may find limited use for these two final question types. Although they have tarnished reputations, they can add spirit and drama to some kinds of interviews, particularly live broadcast interviews.

## Leading Questions

As noted, the leading question telegraphs its expected answer: "You really do love sunsets, don't you?" Should such a question be used in a journalistic interview? Generally no, not if you want candid and truthful answers or unless, in a live broadcast interview, you want to shake up a lethargic respondent with questions calculated to achieve a lively response. Imagine this question asked of a city official who has dedicated his life to developing parks and playgrounds: "Mr. Mayor, don't you really think the city would benefit if some of those parks were converted into business properties? I mean, think of the tax income and the economic benefits to the city." The interviewer doesn't think for a minute that the provocative question will mislead the mayor into saying yes; it may, however, stimulate a spirited response.

## Loaded Questions

If the leading question can stimulate spirited response, the loaded question poses an even greater provocation. "Mr. Mayor, isn't there something almost criminally wrong with city government when police officers harass citizens almost to the point of brutality, when taxes run sky-high, when the firefighters take thirty minutes to get to a fire?" Questions like that suggest the reason many officials and business executives attend workshops on how to be interviewed. The questions and responses represent "news theater" more than information gathering.