

JESSICA MITFORD

Jessica Mitford was born in 1917, the daughter of an English nobleman. The activities of her family, one brother and six sisters (including the famous writer Nancy Mitford), gained considerable notoriety; more recently, they became the subject of a public broadcasting television series. Her first major publication was her autobiography, *Daughters and Rebels* (1960). But she soon turned her attention to more public and controversial subjects: for instance, *The American Way of Death* (1963), an exposé of the funeral industry; *The Trial of Dr. Spock* (1969), an inquiry into the prosecution of Dr. Spock for aiding draft resisters; and *Kind and Usual Punishment* (1973), an analysis of the American prison system; and *Grace Had an English Heart* (1988), an examination of a sea disaster. "How to Conduct an Interview" is excerpted from *Poison Penmanship: The Gentle Art of Muckraking* (1979), a book journalist Carl Bernstein has called the best "primer on reporting I've read." In the essay, Mitford explains how to prepare for, conduct, and evaluate what appears to be a fairly simply process—asking someone else a few questions.

How to Conduct an Interview

Interviewing is where the fun really begins, and where you may uncover information that is accessible in no other way. There may be some delightful surprises in store as you pursue your quarry. Over the years, I have found through trial and sometimes painful error that the following methods are useful.

The individuals to be interviewed will generally fall into two categories: Friendly Witnesses, those who are sympathetic to your point of view, such as the victim of a racket you are investigating, or an expert who is clarifying for you technical matters within his field of knowledge; and Unfriendly, whose interests may be threatened by your investigation and who therefore will be prone to conceal rather than reveal the information you are seeking.

While your approach to each of these will differ, some general rules hold for *all* interviews. Prepare your approach as a lawyer would for an important cross-examination. Take time to think through exactly what it is that you want to learn from the interview; I write out and number in order the questions I intend to ask. That way I can number the answer, keyed to the number of the question, without interrupting the flow of conversation, and if the sequence is disturbed (which it probably will be, in the course of the interchange), I have no problem reconstructing the Q. and A. as they occurred. Naturally other questions may arise that I had not foreseen, but I will still have my own outline as a guide to the absolute essentials.

Immediately after the interview, I type up the Q.s and A.s before my notes get cold. If, in the course of doing this, I discover that I have missed something, or another question occurs to me, I call up the person immediately while the subject is still freshly in mind.

In the case of the Friendly Witness, it often helps to send him a typescript of the interview for correction or elaboration. I did this to good effect after interviews with defense lawyers from whom I was seeking information about the conspiracy law for *The Trial of Dr. Spock*, and with Dr. Margen and other physicians who revealed the nature of drug experiments on prisoners for *Kind and Usual Punishment*. In each case the expert whom I had consulted not only saved me from egregious error but in correcting my transcription of the interview enriched and strengthened the points to be made.

For Unfriendly Witnesses—which in my experience have included undertakers, prosecutors, prison administrators, Fa-

mous Writers—I list the questions in graduated form from Kind to Cruel. Kind questions are designed to lull your quarry into a conversational mood: “How did you first get interested in funeral directing as a career?” “Could you suggest any reading material that might help me to understand more about problems of Corrections?” and so on. By the time you get to the Cruel questions—“What is the wholesale cost of your casket retailing for three thousand dollars?” “How do you justify censoring a prisoner’s correspondence with his lawyer in violation of the California law?”—your interlocutor will find it hard to duck and may blurt out a quotable nugget.

While some potentially Unfriendly Witnesses are more or less bound to grant interviews because they are public officials, or industry spokesmen, there are others—corporate executives, presidents of television networks, prosecutors—who will refuse, and routinely refer the inquiring reporter to their public relations departments. Occasionally it may be possible to break through this reticence. When I was doing research for *The Trial of Dr. Spock*, I chanced upon a most enlightening exchange with just such a witness.

Having interviewed most of the Friendly Witnesses (defense lawyers and defendants) and learned from them the circumstances leading up to the indictment of Spock and four others on charges of “conspiring to aid, counsel and abet” draft resisters, I was anxious to confront the prosecutors and hear their version. But my legal friends assured me that this would be impossible—“The prosecutors won’t talk to you, why should they? They’ll say they can’t comment on a pending case.” Nevertheless I called up the Justice Department whose press chief, Cliff Sessions, told me substantially the same thing: “We can mail you copies of our briefs and press handouts,” he said, “but you won’t be able to talk to the prosecutors while the case is in court.” I was going to be in Washington anyway, I said, so I would drop round to his office to pick up the material.

I arrived in Washington on the day Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, and that night the town went up in flames. There were burning buildings a block from the house

where I was staying with friends. In the morning I picked my way through the rubble to the Justice Department where I inquired for Cliff Sessions. His secretary told me he had flown to Memphis at 6 A.M. with the Attorney General. "Oh—well, he said *something* about me being able to see the Spock trial prosecutors," I said (which was, after all, perfectly true). She answered that the prosecutors were there, and phoned down to John Van de Kamp, chief of the special unit set up to prosecute draft law violators. He readily agreed to see me—in fact seemed glad of the opportunity to chat. I gathered he was feeling a bit bored and neglected; the eyes of the nation were on the King tragedy, his colleagues were off investigating the ghetto uprisings, nobody was interested in draft prosecutions that day.

We talked about some of his earlier experiences in prosecutorial work—at one point, in Los Angeles, he had been involved in the prosecution of some undertakers for antitrust violations and in this connection had found *The American Way of Death* a useful source of information. "How lovely! You're a fan, then." Yes, indeed. We were soon on thoroughly cozy terms and I steered cautiously into the matter at hand. Had he read Dr. Spock's famous baby book? Yes, and thought it was very good. Was he a Spock-raised baby? No, he was born a few years too soon.

Now to the point: "Who ordered the prosecution, and why? Did L.B.J. initiate it?" Van de Kamp explained: There had been a recent altercation between the Justice Department and General Hershey (then head of Selective Service), who had just been publicly rebuked by the Department for overstepping his authority in sending an injudicious letter to the 4,081 local draft boards. "The prosecution of these five came about as a result of our flap with Hershey. It was thought to be a good way out—it was done to provide a graceful way out for General Hershey." "What made you pick out Dr. Spock and his four co-defendants from the tens of thousands protesting the draft?" I asked. "Because of their names and personalities," answered Van de Kamp. "We managed to subpoena a large amount of television newsreel footage of their activities. We wouldn't have indicted them except

for the fact there was so much evidence available on film. They made no great secret of what they were doing."

So that was it: Dr. Spock and the others were offered up in unabashed response to political pressure, as a sacrificial offering to placate an irascible old man who had become an embarrassment to the Administration. And the sole evidence of their "conspiracy" was contained in newsreels of press conferences and protest rallies that took place in a blaze of television publicity. The defense had suspected such grubby machinations, but confirmation from the chief prosecutor was an unexpected bonanza.

A good example of how *not* to conduct an interview was furnished by one of my Yale students, a seventeen-year-old freshman. He was investigating a publication called *Who's Who in American High Schools*, sold to proud parents of the listed high-school seniors for \$16.95 a copy. The volume looks something like a telephone directory and the purchaser may need a magnifying glass to find the distinguished scholar's name, followed by a reference to the accomplishment that merited his or her inclusion as: "Smith, Susan, chr. ldr." My student had done an assiduous and imaginative job of preliminary research: he had consulted reference librarians who attested to the book's worthlessness; he had turned up several dissatisfied purchasers of *Who's Who in American High Schools*.

He had arrived at the stage in his investigation where he was ready to call the publisher, who lived in Illinois, and attempt to interview him by telephone. I suggested that he should start off with some general questions about reference books: their usefulness to researchers, the number of libraries that carry *Who's Who in American High Schools*.

We listed half a dozen Kind questions along these lines before proceeding to the Cruels: "Have you ever been sued by the Marquis people for breach of their trademark of the title 'Who's Who'?" "How much profit do you realize from each sale to a high-school senior?" "Do you make many multiple sales for the same honoree—one for Auntie, one for Grandma?"

But somehow when my student had the publisher on the

line he got flustered and, skipping over the first series of questions, waded precipitately into the Cruel ones. "Well, I don't think I want to discuss these matters on the telephone," the publisher said mildly. "Oh, so you won't talk?" said the student belligerently, to which the publisher replied, "That's right, I'm hanging up the phone." Which he did, leaving my poor student bristling with impotent indignation.

There came a time when I regretted having imparted this particular secret of my trade. When *A Fine Old Conflict* was published, Knopf sent me on a publicity tour of various cities including Boston, where one of my favorite Yale students, now graduated, had a job on the *Globe*. He managed to wangle an assignment to interview me for the "Living" section, and came up to meet me in my room in the Ritz-Carlton hotel. I was delighted to see him all grown up and a working journalist; there was much gossip and giggling over the old days at Yale—only a year before, but it seemed to him like a lifetime.

"Actually, knowing you as well as I do, I could write up this interview without even talking to you," he said. "But I suppose I should ask a few questions." He pulled out his notebook. How are you enjoying the tour? he asked. Which cities have you visited so far? How is the book selling? And then: "Oh, by the way, somebody once told me that one should list one's questions in order from Kind to Cruel, so here comes the Cruel one: How does a person of your alleged radical persuasion square her conscience living it up in this super-posh hotel?" Covered with confusion, I hedged and glugged, finally managing to get out the lame response "Well, my publisher is paying for it."

For Study and Discussion

QUESTIONS FOR RESPONSE

1. Have you ever been interviewed or had to interview somebody else? What emotions did you feel before, during, and after the experience?

2. Where would you probably see the kind of interview style Mitford recommends, "60 Minutes" or "The Tonight Show"? Explain your answer.

QUESTIONS ABOUT PURPOSE

1. According to Mitford, what is the primary purpose for conducting an interview?
2. Although Mitford admits that each situation will be different, she says some general rules apply to all interviews. Why does she suggest that even these rules should be regarded as flexible?

QUESTIONS ABOUT AUDIENCE

1. Who is the "you" Mitford addresses in the first sentence of this essay? What specific group of people does she assume is reading her analysis?
2. Does Mitford really think she is "imparting secrets of my trade" to her readers, or is she merely reminding them to use decent manners and common sense? Explain your answer.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRATEGIES

1. How does Mitford suggest you plan your interview? How does she suggest you prepare for the unexpected changes in your plan?
2. How does she use the experience of one of her students to illustrate how *not* to conduct an interview?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does Mitford's concluding example illustrate that she has been an effective teacher? How does she answer her student's "Cruel one"?
2. The subtitle *Poison Penmanship is The Gentle Art of Muckraking*. What does the word *muckraking* mean? Why does Mitford call it a "gentle art"?