

One day a freelance writer approached me and asked, "How do I interview someone about information he might be reluctant to discuss?"

Making the cross into sensitive territory can be a delicate process. You know you need the information, but find it difficult to broach the subject. Without losing the interviewee's confidence, the tenuous path to sensitive information can only be traveled with patience and subtlety.

Each writer will find his or her own methods of dealing with each reluctant interviewee. But there are a few tried-and-true methods that will work in many situations.

You could blame the question on someone else, such as asking an allegedly corrupt politician: "There are those who claim you do some creative accounting with the budget. Since you've heard these allegations, would you like to respond to your critics?"

A playful approach such as, "Let me play devil's advocate" can often place the question in a framework that makes it easier for your subject to answer. Prefacing a sensitive question with praise for your interviewee can cushion the blow and make him or her more responsive.

Imply that you know more about a situation than you do, and the interviewee may discuss the topic as if he or she is only filling you in on details. For example: If you want a government employee to admit he or she had awarded a contract to a company in which he or she owned 25% interest

ask, " When did you obtain one-fourth of the Qed Corporation?"

If he or she actually owned the share of the business, this could result in his or her denial. Asking a question in a straightforward, matter-of-fact way--no matter how sensitive--may elicit a response. When all else fails, if the interviewee still does not respond, point out the gap in information. Tell him or her that in the eyes of the reader silence can be more damaging. Since it can lead to speculation on the answer, the manner in which you cover material can influence how much information the interviewee will give you.

Hayes Jacobs, veteran writer and author of Writing and Selling Nonfiction says, "If you manage to extract a gem that has been under lock and key, don't pounce at your notes. Act as if you'd just captured the enemy's general. Such lack of restraint can cause your subject to say something like, 'Oh, but uh maybe!' You'd better not print that. Just show normal interest not wild delight. That would distract, worry or even frighten your subject."