

5 PREPARATION

Some interviewers, like Barbara Walters, prepare down to the very last detail. Others, like Larry King and Craig Ferguson, barely prepare at all. When starting out, I highly recommend that you fully prepare. You'll be glad you did.

For my first interview with Richard Kline, I studied everything I could get my hands on. I knew his background, education, family life, theater work, and TV and film appearances. I read interviews and even went to the Museum of Television and Radio in Beverly Hills to find obscure clips of his work—anything and everything I could find. I had so much material going into that interview that we could've talked for six hours. As it turns out, he was hilarious and most of my prep wasn't even needed. But it was vital that I had done the work. **That preparation allowed me to be *in the moment* and confident.**

HOW SHOULD YOU DRESS

Avoid suspenders. Unless you're Larry King. Seriously, this is one of the most common questions I get asked. You should wear what feels right for you. I like a suit and tie because it shows that the interview is important to me, and it puts me in a frame of mind to get down to business. When I interviewed kid celebrities, I wore sport jackets that were orange, yellow, and other bright colors along with jeans and Chuck Taylors; that made me feel comfortable and ready for anything, including green slime. Someone like Joe Rogan wears graphic T-shirts, which works well for him on his podcast. Throughout his career, David Letterman wore a sports jacket, shirt, tie, and then chinos and loafers. That style worked for him as a contrast to the impeccable suits and shoes worn by Johnny Carson.

It may sound obvious, but how people and characters dress for television is important. For example, the creators of *Seinfeld* decided that Jerry would always wear solid-colored shirts because his character is "solid." George, on the other hand, would wear plaid shirts, as his character was more chaotic.

Someone like Wolf Blitzer would look ridiculous in a black leather jacket, but for Howard Stern, it's perfect. Experiment to find what feels right for you.

I believe it serves you to dress clean, no matter what your style. It's difficult to command respect if your clothes are wrinkled or dirty. Even Jerry Springer wears a nice jacket.

SHOW ME THE TALENT!

It's a thrill for audiences to witness what made your celebrity famous; the more unique the skill, the better. Find ways to inject their talent into the interview.

Edson Arantes do Nascimento was once the world's greatest soccer player. What he could do with a soccer ball was breathtaking. It was more art than sport. Better known as Pele, each time he was introduced for an interview he entered kicking a soccer ball. He knew that's what people wanted to see. As interesting as his life stories were, at some point during the interview, it was time to grab the soccer ball and show off his skills—and he got roars.

Whether as Lou Grant on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* or the old man in the Disney/Pixar® film, *UP*, Ed Asner has always been one of America's great comedic actors. During our interview, I did a scene with him to show off his incredible timing and acting. It was thrilling! You could see why he won seven Primetime Emmy Awards®. Ed had such an enjoyable time, he came back for a second interview.



Ed Asner showcasing his exceptional comic timing. Photo by Lucie Aleks.

If my guest is a well-known scream queen from horror movies, you can be sure she'll be screaming during the interview. If it's a YouTuber who unboxes toys, at some point, rest assured I'll have them open a box. If I interview a martial arts star, bodybuilder, professional wrestler, game show host, or dancer, you can bet the audience will see what made them famous—as long as it doesn't involve me being in tights. Actually, come to think of it, I've done that.

This is why James Corden's signature segment, *Carpool Karaoke*, works so well on *The Late Late Show*. You see a famous singer doing what they do best in an everyday setting, without all the bells and whistles of a concert performance. It's an opportunity for them to display their raw talent in a **compelling** way that people are drawn to.

When preparing for an interview, remember Pele and the soccer ball...and show them the talent!

TALK BIG TIP

When interviewing someone, and as long as they're physically capable, ask them to demonstrate a skill they're known for. It's often a source of great pride and they'll be happy to share it with you.

MY SECRET PREPARATION

The beauty of preparation is that people don't see it. It's the power you have to make whatever you're working on as artful as possible.

In an interview with Tom Synder, Jerry Lewis talked about a scene from his movie *The Patsy*, where a vase falls from a table and Jerry catches it, just in the nick of time. It's a quick, funny moment yet Jerry says he worked on it for three weeks and broke about four hundred vases until he got it right. That's preparation!

Your preparation can be creative. For my interview with Elliott Gould, I studied his professional life and watched his movies, from classics like *M*A*S*H*, *The Long Goodbye*, and *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice*, to his newer works like *Ocean's Eleven*. I studied his personal life, including his marriage and subsequent divorce from Barbra Streisand. I watched all his interviews, including one where he told Johnny Carson that his biggest complaint is when people think they know him based solely on his films and public life. That stayed with me. With one day left before our interview, I thought, "How can I get a sense of the real Elliott Gould?"

So I took a road trip to his house. You heard me right! My show's coordinator told me he wouldn't be there as he was on set for the TV sitcom *Friends*, where he had a recurring role as Jack Geller, the father of David Schwimmer's character, Ross. Outside his home, I walked the grass paths he walked, I saw where he parked his car, I said, "Hello" to his mailman, looked at the trees he saw, and heard the birds he heard. I even picked up a small rock, which I kept in my pocket through show day.

Crazy?

Maybe.

However, the next day when I interviewed him, I felt mentally prepared. I knew details outside of his films and public life. And that helped me. Before the interview even started, I felt *connected* to him. It was my secret preparation.



The Actor's Actor Elliott Gould never knew how I secretly prepared for this interview. Photo by George Kritikos.

THERE IS NO PERFECTION

When I started interviewing celebrities, I prepared like a madman. Do you know what it's like to watch every episode of *Baywatch*? Maybe you do. Striving for perfection is impossible. Even if you think you've achieved it, chances are the finished product will have no spontaneity and the interview will be a failure anyway.

I loved watching Johnny Carson, yet I remember that down to the week of his retirement, after thirty years he was *still* making mistakes. He was still adjusting to different interview situations, and that's the way it should be. If you're interviewing Kylie Jenner and you ask her

to tell a joke, what's more interesting, if she tells the joke perfectly or if she completely screws it up? That's right, embrace disaster!

TALK BIG TIP

Don't aim for perfection. Audiences enjoy interviews that show a side of the celebrity they don't get to see in their movies or TV shows.

Back in the day, the movie studios prohibited their stars from doing television interviews because it risked shattering whatever image they had created. For example, I once read that when the great 1940s movie star Greer Garson appeared on *The Tonight Show*, she arrived on set with the entire interview written out like a script, which she had completely memorized. She was striving for perfection and equated her television interview with one of her film roles.

A celebrity interview should be revealing, and a little risky. I love unpredictability. I've interviewed the actress Sean Young (*Blade Runner*, *Dune*, *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*) multiple times, and each time, I never know what she's going to do. I don't know what mood she'll be in or what our dynamic will be, and that's **compelling**. She gives a great interview. Once again, there is no perfection. A good celebrity interview should be a little messy.



My third interview with the wonderfully unpredictable, Sean Young. Photo by George Kritikos.

TALK BIG TIP

Be engaging and a little bit unpredictable when meeting new people. Once while attending a wedding, I asked the bride for her autograph. It was a simple way to honor her, and she loved it! I remember she wrote, *"Thanks for making me feel like a star on the most important day of my life."*

CELEBRITY AUTOBIOGRAPHIES ARE GIFTS FROM THE GODS

If a celebrity has written an autobiography, or a writer has published their authorized biography, see it as a gift from the Gods. I recommend reading them voraciously. These can be the best sources for preparation, and you'll be praised because most interviewers don't read them.

TALK BIG TIP

When a celebrity knows you've read their life story, it immediately creates a *connection*. In their eyes, you're now more respected than most of the other interviewers who didn't take the time to read it.

Another benefit of reading their book is your questions will be better. And you can use direct quotes to dive deeper into other areas of their life.

I once had the good fortune to interview Louis Gossett Jr., the Oscar-winning actor from the film *An Officer and a Gentleman*. In his book, *An Actor and a Gentleman*, he writes about his friendship with Marilyn Monroe.

I asked him about this, and he said, "Actually, she wanted to have sex with me. But I said 'No.'"

I said, "I can't believe you turned down Marilyn Monroe. Why?"

He said, "Because back then, Marilyn was the biggest star in the world, and if the public found out that she had sex with a black man, I would've been lynched."

I followed up with, “Do you regret your decision?”

He said, “Actually, yes. If I could go back in time, I would take the gamble.”

The audience loved this, and he was an outstanding guest. I don’t think he would have discussed any of that with me had I not read his book.

Once again, there is no greater gift for an interviewer than a subject who has written an autobiography or given their blessing to a biographer.



An engaging moment with an officer *and* a gentleman, Louis Gossett, Jr.
Photo by George Kritikos.

TALK BIG TIP

Many people have written blogs or extended entries on their social media pages. Read them and then refer to them when you meet. Often-times, you’ll make them feel special and establish a real *connection*.

EVEN TARANTINO AND LETTERMAN PREPARE

Director Quentin Tarantino also writes movie reviews, and they're some of the best I've seen since Pauline Kael, who wrote for *The New Yorker* from 1968 to 1991. They're modestly posted on his revival theater site, TheNewBev.com. In 2020, he wrote a review for *Deliverance*, the classic 1972 John Boorman film starring Burt Reynolds. For his review, Tarantino read the novel, *Deliverance*, by James Dickey, and it was obvious he'd seen the film numerous times. He studied it from every angle. That preparation, along with his own writing and directing career, gave him the right to not only show his deep appreciation for this landmark film, but to give his opinion on how it could've been better. Just as Tarantino has earned that right, in order for you to ask a celebrity the questions you've always dreamed of, you must earn the right through preparation.

Before interviewing actor John Savage, I thought, "Who the hell am I to ask 'acting questions' to a supreme thespian who starred opposite Robert De Niro in *The Deer Hunter*, the mesmerizing James Woods in *The Onion Field*, and who starred in the film version of *Hair*, as well as over two hundred other films?"

Well, I'll tell you what gave me that right: Preparation. After the interview, Mr. Savage told my producer, "I thought he was going to make fun of my clothing or something. I had no idea he would be so well-versed in my career. It made me want to do well for him."

When I watch a celebrity interview, I can usually tell within one minute if the interviewer is prepared.

I was invited to an industry taping of *My Next Guest Needs No Introduction* with David Letterman, where David interviewed actor/comedian

Zach Galifianakis. In preparation for this interview, David had seen every single episode of *Between Two Ferns* twice, and even watched Zach's most obscure films. Not only was Zach impressed, but so was the audience of television professionals in attendance. Could Letterman have decided to "wing it" and still conduct a strong interview? After thirty years of interviewing celebrities, of course! But David is an artist who wants to do his highest level of work, and wisely understands the value of preparation.



Interviewing acclaimed actor John Savage. Photo by Lucie Aleks.

MILES DAVIS & THE HUMAN TRUMPET

Questions are the lifeblood of an interview. They may be pre-written, follow-up, spontaneous, and even audience questions.

The power of a good, simple question cannot be overstated. In an interview with Miles Davis, Harry Reasoner asked, "Of all instruments, why do you play the trumpet?"

That's a good, simple question.

Miles Davis replied, "Because I can make the trumpet sound like a human voice."

He then picked up his trumpet and demonstrated. It really *did* sound human.

He added, "And this trumpet speaks for me when I can't explain myself in life."

That answer had a profound effect on me. You see, in *my* life, I'm able to best express myself when interviewing. That's when I feel the most free.

I'll give you an example. When my mother died, she wanted to be cremated, so I honored her wish. I then put her ashes inside a wooden box.

Since then, that box has been with me on every celebrity interview. Most of the time, it's in the bookcase behind my desk.

During one interview, an actor asked, "What's in that box?"

After I told him, my staff was in complete shock. All this time, they thought it was just for decoration. Something so personal which I was reluctant to share with my own staff, I was able to discuss freely in front of a nationwide audience.

The revelation I had after hearing Miles Davis answer Harry Reasoner's question was that, for me, interviews are *my* trumpet. That interview took place in 1989, and the first time I saw it, both Miles Davis and Harry Reasoner had passed away. Just another reminder how your questions can resonate well beyond the shelf life of your interviews.



Interviewing the late, great actor Robert Forster, while mom has my back. (Bottom shelf, center box.) *Photo by Lucie Aleks.*

WHY I HATE NOTES

In my opinion, even though many television interviewers use them, notes are a detriment. They force you to read in front of the celebrity, indicating you're not genuinely talking with them. It's hard to build rapport that way, and more than likely, your questions will receive stock answers.

Imagine being on a first date, and in the middle of dinner you start asking questions from a clipboard.

"What's your favorite movie?"

"Do you like spicy food?"

"Tell me about your first pet."

How would that go over? And no, three-by-five cards don't work any better.

Notes, pads, laptops, and cell phones are all crutches. At a 2020 movie premiere, I saw an interviewer on the red carpet asking questions directly from his iPhone. It looked terrible, and instead of following up with questions based on the celebrity's answers, he just read the next random question from his list. I was half-expecting him to ask, "Do you like strawberry ice cream?"

TALK BIG TIP

Before spending time with family or friends, write out some questions beforehand based on topics you think would be fun to talk about. Then, without using notes, introduce them into the conversation. Magically, you'll be viewed as a great conversationalist.

In 2012, I interviewed the legendary comedian Jonathan Winters at his palatial home in Montecito, California. Halfway through, I excused myself to use the restroom just so I could privately go over my notes and make sure I covered everything. I didn't want to break the illusion of the natural conversation we were having. After the interview, Jonathan said he appreciated the fact that I didn't have prepared questions and he liked how the interview flowed. To further make his point, he said, "I think a lot of the talk show hosts rely too much on prepared questions and answers as opposed to just talking."

That's the impression you want to give.



Interviewing comedy legend Jonathan Winters at his home in Montecito, CA.
Photo by Lucie Aleks.

One of the most dramatic moments in the film *Frost/Nixon* is when David Frost throws down his notepad, looks Richard Nixon in the eye, and asks him a question from the heart.

Former CBS talk show host Craig Ferguson used to rip up a card of questions before each interview to ensure spontaneity.

Don't get me wrong, you probably will need notes to some degree. Especially in the beginning. But as soon as you reach a certain comfort level, I recommend you ween yourself from relying on them. The goal is to cut them out completely. Remember, if an interview is going well, each question should lead to a follow-up question. By actively staying in the moment, your interview will come alive and flow organically.

MEETING CELEBRITIES BACKSTAGE

Going into an interview, don't try to be funny. The last thing a celebrity wants is to feel obligated to laugh at one of your jokes. I've done this before, and it was a disaster. The silence still rings in my ears. The celebrity just looked at me like, "Oh great! *You* want to be the funny one. That's dynamite! Hey, maybe after I bust a gut laughing, you can do a soliloquy from *Hamlet* to prove that you're a better actor too!"

Okay, maybe they weren't thinking that exactly, but it probably wasn't far off.

TALK BIG TIP

When you first meet, your goal is to make the guest feel *comfortable*. Put them at ease so they get a sense you genuinely care about making them look good in the interview.

If the setting is appropriate, offer them coffee or tea, and ask if they need anything else. Check to make sure others are treating them well, too. On a professional level, sometimes I'll tell them that if something's said during the interview that they later regret, just let me know and I'll take it out. Those are the kinds of things that help the guest relax and start trusting you.

USE A PERSON'S CORRECT TITLE

One way to create *comfort* is by getting a person's job title or status correct. This includes:

- Politicians
- Members of the clergy
- Military officers
- Doctors
- Judges
- Royalty

To name a few. They worked very hard (or paid off a lot of people) to get that title, so respect it! If you're not sure of their title, even though you prepared, ask them in a sincere manner how they'd like to be addressed.

When first meeting Ben Kingsley, I said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Kingsley."

He glared at me and said, "It's Sir Ben!"

After absorbing that, I replied, "My apologies, Sir Ben. Feel free to call me Idiot John."

It felt like mountains were being moved as he cracked a smile. (I resisted the urge to ask if his niece called him Uncle Ben.)

DON'T PREPARE IN A VACUUM

Despite all of my research, sometimes I'll tell people about a celebrity I'm interviewing, and they'll provide a better question than anything I've prepared. In preparation, you sometimes miss the obvious things people want to know about the star.

Many times, the celebrity is involved in some project that means little to you but is very important to other people.

Previous to interviewing Michael Jai White, I studied his performances in *Spawn*, *Tyson*, and *Kill Bill 2* (his scene was deleted). On the day of the interview, I kept hearing people talk about something called *Black Dynamite*. Turns out, Michael was the star of that show, which was a hit animated series I'd glossed over in my research. More people were interested in *Black Dynamite* than anything else I'd prepared. From that day on, I started talking with everyone I could prior to my interviews to learn what *they* found most interesting about the celebrity.



I first interviewed Michael Jai White for a magazine profile and that went so well, he joined me as a guest on my talk show. A 7-time black belt, you don't want to tangle with *him*! Photo by Lucie Aleks.

EXCEPTIONS TO PREPARING

There are exceptions to everything, including preparation. On *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, I always thought Jay's best interviews were with comedians. While he might have been less at ease talking with Meryl Streep, he was confident with comics, because he was one of them and understood their life and art. He could relate to with them, tease them, ask inside questions, riff with them, and even call them out when they were reworking old jokes. Sometimes he even managed to get to the heart of who they really were, a rarity on late night talk shows. He was so familiar with the world of comedy that he didn't need to prepare—his preparation for those interviews came from decades of working the road and hundreds of TV appearances. This gave him the gravitas to be fully confident and free when talking with stand-ups. For those interviews, Jay needed no preparation.

You may be friends with a celebrity and because of that, the interview will be rich with comradery. The danger with “friendship interviews” is that sometimes they can get “too inside” and leave the audience feeling left out. But generally speaking, it's a huge advantage to personally know a celebrity before interviewing them. When you have that rare relationship, your understanding of each other and shared experiences becomes the preparation. Because what could be more **compelling** than that level of **comfort** and **connection**?

I remember being so excited when Eddie Murphy appeared on *The Arsenio Hall Show*. Arsenio and Eddie's friendship led to an on-air kinship rarely seen.

Exceptions aside, preparation enables you to be ready, willing, and able to interview anyone.

THE MANY BENEFITS OF FOCUS GROUPS

If you really want to up your game, take your preparation a step further and put together a focus group.

When I did my kids' television show, I'd always ask the five-to eleven-year-olds in the studio audience, "Next week my guests are so and so. What should I ask them?" This led to 150 kids yelling out suggestions. And their questions were fantastic! They were far better than anything I could come up with because they were the target audience for those celebrities. Those girls and boys became amazing focus groups.

Be inventive when initiating your focus group. Let's say you have a podcast and two hundred fans follow you. Right there you have a potential focus group. You can reach out to them and ask, "I'm interviewing YouTube star, Pamela Swing. What would you like to know about her?" In addition to engaging the audience, you can be sure they'll tune in to your podcast to hear if their questions will be asked.

TALK BIG TIP

Join online fan clubs for the celebrity and ask its members for questions, so long as they're also in your show or podcast's demographic.

"Fan" questions can get a little tricky. If I'm interviewing a hockey star, I may not want questions from hardcore hockey fans because they'll be too technical—the kind of questions you'd hear on a sports podcast. I want to know what the people watching my show want to know about that hockey player.

Prepping to interview Kathy Griffin, my focus group consisted of everyone who followed me on social media and watched my show.

“What should I ask Kathy Griffin?”

I wanted to hear everything—what they liked and didn’t like about her. I wanted to know what projects of hers excited them as opposed to those that didn’t resonate. One thing I found out was that, like me, many of my viewers loved Quentin Tarantino films. Kathy dated Quentin during the filming of *Pulp Fiction*, and she even had a small part in that movie. When I reached out to my focus group, I got over a hundred questions about Kathy in *Pulp Fiction*. If not for them, I probably would’ve asked just one question on that subject, then moved on. Conversely, I’d written a whole bunch of questions about her TV show *Suddenly Susan*, but my focus group told me that they weren’t as interested in that. So I cut those questions out.

Another thing I found out was my viewers didn’t like it when she was too gossipy. So before the interview, I asked Kathy if she could refrain from attacking celebrities, and she said, “Of course. If you don’t go there, I won’t go there.”



Interviewing the inherently funny Kathy Griffin. Photo by George Kritikos.

She totally kept her word. She was extremely funny, yet very respectful, and the feedback from my audience was that of all the Kathy Griffin interviews, mine was their favorite. That came as no surprise, as the interview was tailored especially for them.

TALK BIG TIP

A focus group should not replace your research on the celebrity, only add to it. Remember, their questions should consist of what *your* audience would want to know about the celebrity. That, coupled with what *you* want to know, will lead to the best possible interview.

When prepping for an interview you're like Sherlock Holmes studying a murder suspect. You want to know all you can about them. Don't just go on Wikipedia and write up ten questions. For one, Wikipedia is often full of errors, and the celebrity will probably call you out, making you look like a bad interviewer.

Prepare thoroughly and go the extra mile by cultivating focus groups. If you ever feel like skipping past the research, remind yourself that this is your dream job, and the grunt work is a small price to pay.