

**INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES FOR INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISTS**  
With Julian Sher

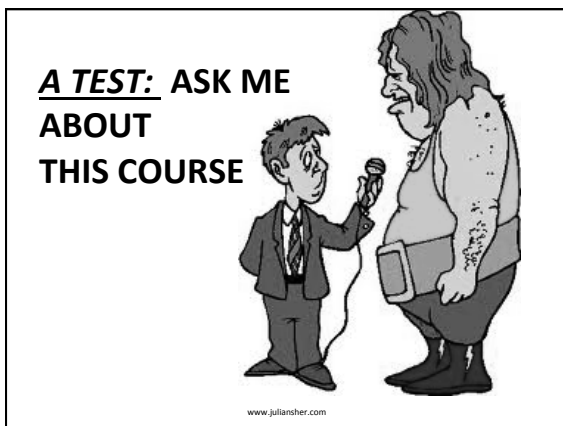
**the fifth estate**

www.juliansher.com  
twitter: @juliansher  
julian.sher@cbc.ca  
647.633.6943



**THE MAIN TAKE-AWAY LESSONS:**

- **THREE DIFFERENT TYPES OF INTERVIEWS**
- **THE FOUR C'S**
- **FIVE RULES OF GOOD INTERVIEWS**  
(AND HOW TO BREAK THEM)
- **PLANNING YOUR ATTACK**



**The Three Types of Interviews**

**ACCOUNTABILITY**  
How guilty did you feel that you were drunk at the wheel in the crash that killed her?

**EMOTION**  
What did her loss mean to you?

**INFORMATION**  
When did you first learn your daughter was killed in the car accident?

**GOOD INTERVIEWS MUST FOLLOW THE SAME RULES AS GOOD STORY-TELLING**


**The 4 C's:**

- » **Character**  
*The protagonist: hero or villain*
- » **Context**  
*What you need to know  
Why you should care*
- » **Conflict**  
*The guts of the story*
- » **Conclusion**  
*What happens next*



**Five Basic Rules for Good Interviews**



www.juliansher.com



**You get the answers you deserve**

- Don't blame the interviewee
- Ask a stupid question, you get a stupid answer


*So how can we ask smarter questions?*

www.juliansher.com

**1. ASK OPEN-ENDED NOT CLOSED QUESTIONS:**

- ASK - WHAT, WHO? HOW? WHY? WHEN?
- AVOID YES/NO ANSWERS




www.juliansher.com

**THE KID WHO NEARLY DIED FROM E COLI**




www.juliansher.com

**2. DON'T GIVE PEOPLE EASY ESCAPE ROUTES:**



- AVOID THE DOUBLE-BARRELLED QUESTION
- THREE WAYS TO LET THEM OFF THE HOOK:
- DIRECT WAY OUT – TWO CHOICES
- UNNEEDED ADJECTIVE OR PHRASE
- UNNEEDED FACT



www.juliansher.com

Obama escapes question on Michelle...



- KROFT: **Did you have to suppress the urge to tell someone?** Did you wanna tell somebody? Did you wanna tell Michelle? Did you tell Michelle?

www.juliansher.com

Why won't Obama arm Syrian rebels?  
We'll never know with this question that gives him an escape



**3. BASIC IS BEAUTIFUL - KEEP IT CLEAN AND SIMPLE**


AVOID LOADED OR CONTROVERSIAL WORDS...



www.juliansher.com

**4. THE WORST QUESTION IS NOT ASKING ONE**

- **AVOID MAKING STATEMENTS, OPINIONS OR GETTING INTO A DEBATE\***



**\*UNLESS IT'S PART OF A WELL-PLANNED STRATEGY**

**STATEMENTS CAN GET YOU INTO NEEDLESS ARGUMENTS...**

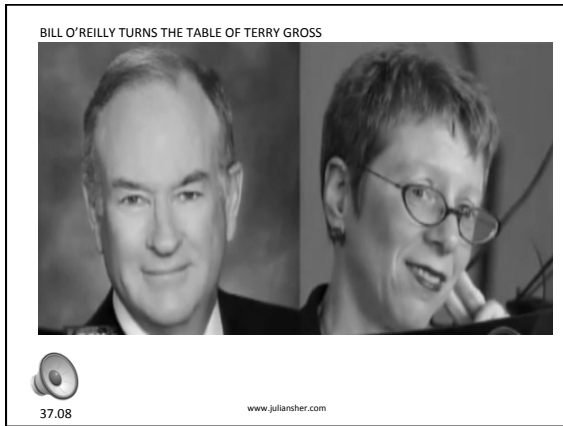


www.juliansher.com

Football star challenges a sports reporter




www.juliansher.com



### Five Basic Rules of Interviews

- 1. ASK OPEN-ENDED NOT CLOSED QUESTIONS
- 2. DON'T GIVE PEOPLE ANY EASY ESCAPE ROUTES
- 3. BASIC IS BEAUTIFUL - KEEP IT CLEAN AND SIMPLE
- 4. THE WORST QUESTION IS NOT ASKING ONE
- 5. LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN



www.juliansher.com

### ONCE YOU KNOW THE RULES, KNOW WHEN AND HOW TO BREAK THEM



www.juliansher.com

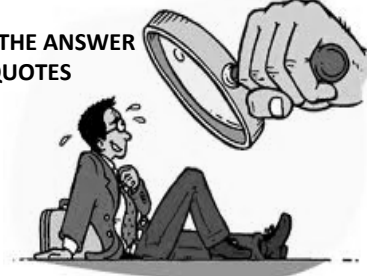
### FORCING A YES/NO ANSWER



www.juliansher.com

### DELIBERATELY USING TRIGGER WORDS TO FORCE A CERTAIN ANSWER

- o EITHER/OR
- o MASSAGING THE ANSWER
- o REPEATING QUOTES



www.juliansher.com

### SOMETIMES A CAREFULLY-CRAFTED STATEMENT WORKS



www.juliansher.com

### SOMETIMES SARCASM AND CAREFULLY CHOSEN WORDS WORK...




IS ANYONE UP



www.juliansher.com

**WHAT TO DO  
WHEN THE SUBJECT REFUSES  
TO ANSWER THE DARN QUESTION!**




www.juliansher.com

Piers Morgan stands his ground ... but does he have all the ammunition he needs?




www.juliansher.com

Keep asking the SAME question:  
Katie Couric pushes Palin on what papers she reads



www.juliansher.com

Really, really keep asking the same question...  
BBC's Jeremy Paxman takes on a reluctant minister



www.juliansher.com

**STRATEGY AND PLANNING –  
PREPARING THE INTERVIEW**



www.juliansher.com

**WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE  
NO INTERVIEW ??????**




www.juliansher.com



**WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE NO INTERVIEW ??????**

- ◆ Be open, forthright. Don't lie or sweet talk
- ◆ Build the ladder of allegations, giving the subject more and more reasons to worry about your investigation
- ◆ Surround the subject (getting to friends, colleagues, enemies)
- ◆ Make it clear the story is quite strong without him/her




www.juliansher.com

**STRATEGY AND PLANNING – PREPARING THE INTERVIEW**

- **DECIDE WHAT TYPE OF INTERVIEW IT WILL BE:**
  - - INFORMATION
  - - EMOTION
  - - ACCOUNTABILITY
- **DECIDE WHEN TO DO THE INTERVIEW:**
- **COCOONING** – EYE CONTACT, CREATING A SAFE SPACE
- **'SPYING'** – WHAT CAN YOU OBSERVE ON THE DESK, WALLS, HOME THAT YOU CAN USE TO DIG DEEPER INTO WHO THAT PERSON IS
- **STORY TELLING:** MAKE YOUR INTERVIEWS PART OF YOUR STORY TELLING STRUCTURE

www.juliansher.com

**Decide What Type of Interview**  
and what percentage for the three kinds of questions




www.juliansher.com

When to trip the wire?  
When do you notify your target... and how?




www.juliansher.com

Get rid of the notepad!




www.juliansher.com

The answers are in the eyes,  
not on your notepad



www.juliansher.com

**Double record  
(always have a back-up)**



A digital recorder... And the iPhone Voice Memo app

www.juliansher.com

**OUTSIDE CRITICS**

THE CRITICS SAY FIRE INVESTIGATORS LIKE YOU LEARNED THEIR STUFF FROM OTHER OLD TIMERS, PASSED FOLKLORE ALONG

HOW UPSET AT YOU AT THESE 'OUTSIDE' CRITICS? ARMCHAIR?

Fogg calls Beyler an "armchair quarterback" and riles at the accusation that Corsicana and state detectives used nothing more than folklore to come to their conclusions.

"A lot of this stuff (in Beyler's report) is misspoken or misinterpreted," Fogg said.

OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, THE WILLINGHAM CASE HAS BEEN REVIEWED BY NINE OF THE NATION'S TOP FIRE SCIENTISTS, ALL CONCLUDED THAT THE ORIGINAL INVESTIGATORS RELIED ON OUTDATED THEORIES AND FOLKLORE TO JUSTIFY THE DETERMINATION OF ARSON.

THEY HAVE NOT BEEN KIND:

"characteristic of mystics or psychics..."

"... wholly without any realistic understanding of fires and how fire injuries are created"

HOW DO YOU REACT TO THAT?

DISPARAGING? INSULTING?

"(Beyler) thought we were total idiots," Fogg said.

**"SPY" ON YOUR INTERVIEW SUBJECT:  
BE ATTENTIVE – LOOK FOR CLUES**



www.juliansher.com

**A GOOD INTERVIEW IS A BATTLE ON MULTIPLE  
FRONTS... AND THE BEST ANSWERS AREN'T  
ALWAYS COMING THROUGH THE LIPS**



www.juliansher.com

**STRATEGY AND PLANNING:  
MAKE THE INTERVIEW PART OF YOUR  
STORY TELLING AND STRUCTURE**



www.juliansher.com

**We are born story-tellers**



- Until daily news reporting began killing the art of story-telling

www.juliansher.com





## The Biblical Times

**God Creates Universe**


After six days of grueling work creating the universe, God rested on the seventh day, telling the *Biblical Times* "it was very good" and now it was up to Adam and Eve.




THE FIRST BOOK OF MOSES, CALLED GENESIS.

HEAP. 1. 17 And God set the lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light, and to divide the night from the day: and God saw that it was good. And the seventh day is the seventh day of the week.



www.juliansher.com



## The Rebel Daily

**Skywalker Shocker!!!**

In a shocking and disturbing revelation, Rebel alliance hero Luke Skywalker has discovered that Galactic Empire leader Darth Vader is his father, *The Rebel Daily* has learned.

www.juliansher.com



**Or we get "Fake" Story-telling**

### THE DAILY SNOOPER


Six-year-old Mary Jane coughs all night and cannot sleep.



She is one of thousands of children impacted by toxic pollution in classrooms, an 18-month investigation by *The Daily Snooper* has found.

And now we will hit you with our research, interspersed with some personal anecdotes to lighten the load and endless legal qualifications so we don't get sued...


www.juliansher.com



## The intrepid reporter

*We need to be both*

## The interpretive story-teller



www.juliansher.com





## Being the intrepid reporter

**TAKES 90% OF OUR TIME**



**WE SPEND ONLY 10% OF OUR TIME Being the interpretive story-teller**



TV investigations:

14 - 25 days of shooting

**12 weeks of editing**

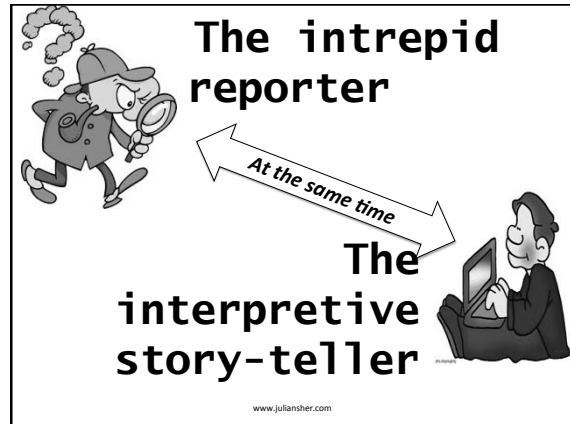
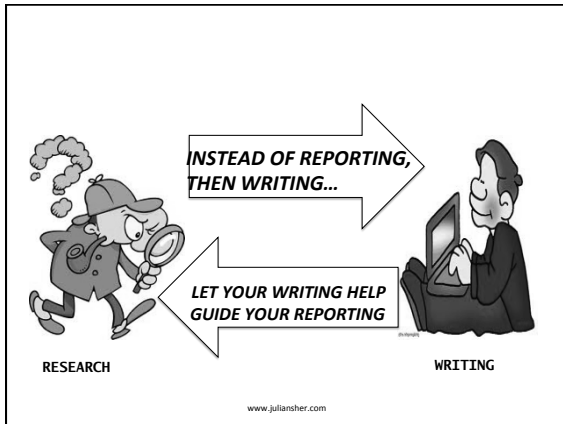
Hollywood stories:

60-70 days of shooting


**One year of editing**

www.juliansher.com



**REMEMBER:**

- **THREE DIFFERENT TYPES :**
  - > INFORMATION
  - > EMOTION
  - > ACCOUNTABILITY
- **THE FOUR C'S**
- **5 BASIC RULES – AND WHEN TO BREAK THEM**



www.juliansher.com

**INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES FOR INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISTS**  
With Julian Sher



www.juliansher.com  
twitter: @juliansher  
julian.sher@cbc.ca  
647.633.6943