

Listening

“A lot of times we beat ourselves,” says Pat Stith, a former News and Observer investigative reporter. “We don’t listen. We don’t ask simple, direct, follow-up questions. We just talk, and we talk, and we talk. We forget why we’re there.”

- Ask a question and then stop. Don’t apologize for asking it. And don’t be afraid to ask the question again and again.
- Using a tape recorder, as I have for the last 15 years, has taught me my most important lesson of interviewing: to shut up.
- It was a painful learning experience, having to listen to myself stepping on people’s words and then cutting them off just as they were getting enthusiastic or were about to make a revealing statement. There were far too many times I heard myself asking overly long and leading questions instead of simply saying, “Why?” or “How did it happen?” or “When did this all begin?” or “What do you mean?” I learned to close my mouth and let people answer.
- Body language can make or break an interview. Make eye contact. People don’t trust reporters who won’t look them in the eye. Nodding and leaning forward suggests that you’re interested in what your subject says. Saying “I see,” or “If I understand you, you feel this way,” encourages people to keep talking.