

Survey: Interviewing an Author: Don't Be Left Speechless

Edited by Jenny Wilson Joyce Carol Oates. Langston Hughes. Anne Sexton. F. Scott Fitzgerald. Nikki Giovanni. The names of authors (dead and alive) can go on and on. But I'll let you have first pick!

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You are in a room with some of your favorite authors. About ten of them. However, you are only allowed to invite one of them to Starbucks for a couple of chocolate mochas. Just you and your favorite author. It doesn't matter if the writer is deceased—use your imagination! After all, you're a writer, right?

Oh dear, who shall it be? Should it be William Shakespeare with his purple pantaloons; Sylvia Plath who now vows to use an electric oven instead of gas; or should it be Maya Angelou and old playmates from her broken-hearted brothel?

Finally, you have selected an author.

You take him (or her) to Starbucks. You order the mochas. You sit down. As you open your mouth to ask the author questions nothing useful comes out.

What's the problem?

Often times we'll chance upon moments when we can interview an author. And, with technology nowadays, methods of research and brainstorming have changed slightly.

1. Research the Author

Ask yourself, "Is the author self-published or published in a traditional publishing house?"

Actually, does it really matter?! No. Why? Because you're going to need to treat all authors the same—with much respect. Be laid back, and in turn, the interviewee will become comfortable and open-up to you.

After all, whether published or not, we're all human. Before the interview, however, use your investigative reporting skills and attempt to discover as much as you can about the author. Surf the Internet for any hidden agendas internet-published writings the writer may have. Not only do you want to know about the author's book, but the personal life as well. Find out what makes the author tick.

2. Research their genre and subject matter

Does the author write poetry? Historical nonfiction? Dramatic nonfiction? Children's literature? Discover how easy or difficult it is to publish in that particular area of writing. Before you meet up with the author, you must know their genre, as well as the basic themes. If the author writes only historical nonfiction—what's their subject matter? Pre-civil war? Early African Slave Trade? Cuban artwork? Compare and contrast authors in similar subject matters. Learn as much as you can while you can. And, at the same time, be sure to formulate an opinion about the subject matter, whether it be pro or con. This will allow you to ask more in depth questions.

3. Don't Interrupt

Remember to ask your question then shut up. This isn't a time for you to reminisce of your (waning) writing skills. This is moment for the author to be in the spotlight. Listen to their responses, and make sure that you have a rebuttal question prepared in the back of your head.

After you are away from that particular topic, be sure to go to your next question. Though you may have your list of questions—it's okay to ask the questions out-of-order. Actually, I highly recommend to adlib the questions. This will make the questions seem a bit more unforced. In short, treat your interview as if it's just a regular discussion amongst friends.

Above all, I highly recommend to record the interview. Before you display your trusty hand-held recorder, ask the interviewee for permission to record them. Keep and label all used tapes with the author's name, date and location of the interview. You never know when that once self-published novelist will become the next Best Seller.

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