

# Ten Tips for Prompting Sources to Open Up

by Katherine J. Wu

Good interviews are key to just about any story in journalism. But to truly make a piece stand out, reporters often need to encourage their sources to really open up—go deep on a complex topic; delve into a fiery controversy; maybe even share a personal story that’s never been coaxed out on the record before. Here are some ways to nudge conversations below the surface, based on The Open Notebook’s many [resources on interviewing skills](#).

## 1. Be transparent.

Sources often respond well to being told that a journalist wants to get a more in-depth, accurate version of an oft-told story. Plus, it’s an asset to start a conversation where everyone is on the same page about the level of detail the questions might get into.

## 2. Build up to the trickiest questions.

First, build trust with stage-setting questions, and try to respond in ways that can reassure the source you’re listening and internalizing what they’re saying before delving into the tougher topics and probing questions.

## 3. Personalize.

Verifying facts and double-checking understanding is useful as always. But try to reserve the bulk of your interviewing time for questions tailor-made for your source. After the *what*, *when*, and *where*, interrogate the *why*, *how*, and *how did that make you feel?*

## 5. Don’t be afraid to press for more.

When you sense there’s more to a story than a source is offering, nudge them—gently and politely!—to share more. A simple, “Wow, that must have been so overwhelming. Can you tell me a little bit more about how that made you feel?” may do the trick.

## 4. Construct scenes.

The best stories chart a lived experience for the reader through vivid details that engage many senses at once (sights and sounds especially, but why not go for smells, tastes, and touches?). Ask sources to recall vivid memories, and reverse engineer follow up questions to chase down more sensory details.

## 6. Don’t forget to be human.

Yes, you’re a journalist, acting in a professional capacity. But you’re also a human, having a conversation. Laugh at jokes. Gasp when you’re shocked. Express sympathy when sources share something difficult. Reactions make sources feel listened to and, often, willing to share more.

## 7. Open up, too.

Occasionally sharing details about yourself, pertinent to the topic at hand, can keep a sluggish conversation moving. Opening up a bit as the journalist can also give shy or inexperienced sources examples of the types of personal details you’re after—a casual mention of parents’ expectations of a career; a nod to the antics of a beloved family pet.

## 9. Maintain boundaries.

Longstanding journalist-source relationships can often be so genial that they approach the very edge of friendship—a key way to get scoops that other journalists might never land. But remember your objectivity and independence: Never cross a line that would create a conflict of interest, and be honest with your sources about what you can and cannot do.

## 8. Embrace silence.

When sources pause, don’t always assume they’re done talking. Sometimes, they’re deciding what more they’d like to share. Video calls can be especially helpful for gauging pauses, but in any situation, avoiding rushing the conversation can encourage interviewees to speak more freely.

## 10. Break the ice as needed.

Warm, friendly small-talk at the start of an interview can encourage a comfortable conversation. But don’t be afraid to venture back into more lighthearted territory if the interview hits a lull or sticky point midway. These deviations can be about the truly inconsequential (the weather, an upcoming holiday), or something relevant to the interview that’s an easier lift.