

# Interviewing

The Oregon Method

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**SECOND EDITION**

*By faculty and friends  
of the University of Oregon  
School of Journalism and Communication*

## SEVEN **How to Interview Somebody Who's Lying**

*Tips include doing your homework, avoiding confrontation  
and paying attention to the medium*

TODD MILBOURN

“You lying scum!” is probably not the right response when a reporter knows a newsmaker is not responding to questions with the truth. As a reporter, Todd Milbourn developed easy-to-use techniques for teasing honest answers out of interviewees.

If you want advice about how to interview somebody who's lying, there are few people better to ask than Stephanie McCrummen. McCrummen is a veteran reporter for the *Washington Post*. She's filed stories from Kenya, Egypt, Iraq and Mexico. But the most remarkable interview of her career took place in a little Greek restaurant in suburban Virginia on a Wednesday afternoon in November 2017.

Weeks earlier, McCrummen had published a front-page story documenting sexual assault allegations against Roy Moore, a U.S. Senate candidate in Alabama. Since then, McCrummen and her reporting team had been inundated with emails and phone calls about additional potential victims. One of the tipsters was a woman with an especially harrowing story. She gave her name as Jaime Phillips.

Phillips told the *Post* that Moore impregnated her when she was 15 and

convinced her to have an abortion. She said she was interested in possibly taking her story public and wanted to meet with McCrummen in person during an upcoming visit to the Washington, D.C., area.

In the days leading up to the interview, *Post* researchers fact-checked the details of Phillips' account. But unlike the accounts from other women, several aspects of Phillips' story seemed strange. She'd been calling from New York, not Alabama, and used an encrypted text messaging service. The place where she claimed to work had no record of her employment. Most suspiciously, a *Post* researcher uncovered an Internet message on a GoFundMe page in which Phillips asked friends to help finance a move to New York, so she could take a job combating "the lies and deceit" of the mainstream media.

By the time McCrummen entered the restaurant and sat down across the table from Phillips, she was "99 percent sure" the woman's story wasn't just inconsistent—but a fabrication.

"I was walking into a situation where, barring some crazy coincidence or fluke, we were pretty sure that she was a fake, but we didn't know who she was working for," McCrummen told me in an interview.

Let's pause and think about this situation for a moment. *What would you do?* Let's say you're McCrummen. You have credible information that suggests a source is not telling the truth about an extremely serious matter, and you've just pulled out your notebook and recorder for an interview. What questions would you ask? What tone would you take? Would you confront the source directly or hang back and see what she says?

These are critical questions that many reporters face but aren't always prepared for. While the circumstances of McCrummen's interview are certainly extreme—Phillips turned out to be involved in a sting operation to trick the *Post* into reporting a false story—interviewing people who lie is a regular hazard of the job. It might even be more common in an era when political and business leaders seem to face few consequences for not telling the truth.

I've been there myself. As a newspaper reporter in California, I once interviewed a mattress store owner who used more than a dozen aliases as part of an elaborate fraud scheme, and I confronted a high-profile real

estate CEO who lied about everything from where he attended college to his involvement in a multimillion-dollar housing swindle.

The cloak-and-dagger nature of lie-detection can be exciting, alluring and downright exhilarating. But it can also be confusing and full of pitfalls.

One common myth is that you can tell people are lying by their body language. While sources might sweat, wiggle in their chairs or fail to make eye contact, that's usually just a sign they're nervous or anxious, according to Robert Feldman, a psychology professor at University of Massachusetts-Amherst and the author of the book *The Liar in Your Life*. What's more, he told me that the physical "tells" people often give off are unique to them, so you have to spend years with somebody before you're able to reliably discern if that person is lying.

So how then can you tell if your sources are lying? And if you're confident they are, in fact, lying, how should you approach those interactions? Here are seven tips to make sure you enter your interview poised, prepared and well-positioned to pursue the truth.

#### STRATEGY #1: BEGIN WITH BACKGROUND

Uncovering lies begins long before the interview—with thorough and rigorous reporting. If you're suspicious of a source—and frankly, even if you're not—you should conduct a deep background check before your interview. That means going beyond a simple Google search. Run your source through LexisNexis. Check for lawsuits, criminal histories and bankruptcies. Examine property records and licenses. Talk to associates. Dig up that GoFundMe page.

Doing so won't just familiarize you with your source's personal history, it'll provide ammunition for questions. You can use this information to test a source's truthfulness. Envision yourself as the prosecutor who asks questions but already knows the answers.

When I walked into company headquarters for my interview with the crooked real estate CEO, I already knew his entire work and education

history. So when he started saying things that contradicted the record, I was prepared to dig deeper. “You say you played baseball at Arizona State? That’s interesting. I didn’t know that. Tell me more?”

### STRATEGY #2: DON’T PLAY YOUR CARDS RIGHT AWAY

If you catch sources in a lie, your impulse will be to call them out. Don’t—at least not right away. Your goal should be to keep sources talking until they’ve shared all the relevant details. That’s because the moment you confront them, they’ll likely get defensive. They might even shut down entirely and leave the interview. At that point the source is no longer helpful for your reporting.

A much better strategy is to ask short, open-ended questions that politely challenge the source. Save any confrontation for the end.

McCrummen is a master at this. Her interview with Phillips, which later went viral, is filled with simple, probing questions, such as: “Can you explain this? ... I just want to understand.”

“If you just come in like gangbusters, that you’re sure of everything, then it’s going to be off-putting to the person,” McCrummen said. “I wanted her to stay and answer my questions as much as possible.”

Remember: as a reporter, your job isn’t ultimately to expose people who lie—it’s to get at the truth. That’s a subtle, but important distinction. It means that liars can, at times, be valuable sources. Somebody who’s lying still has a story to tell, and that story—if corroborated—can point you toward deeper understanding.

So be skeptical. But see where they go.

### STRATEGY #3: BE CURIOUS, NOT CONFRONTATIONAL

Even in contentious situations, it’s a good idea to lead with your curiosity. That can be hard to do, especially when you’re confident somebody is B.S.-ing you. It’s human nature to feel angry and under attack. Set aside those feelings. Don’t take lying personally.

In McCrummen's case, she came to suspect that Phillips' end goal was to harm her professional reputation and that of the *Post*. The deception also sought to cast doubt on the verified stories of the women who were credibly accusing Moore.

Yet during the 20-minute interview, McCrummen stayed focused on the story and showed commitment to following all the threads.

"As the interview went on, I became increasingly curious, genuinely curious," McCrummen said. "I was interested to hear how she came to be sitting here. I really wanted her to tell me the real story. How do you come to have this job where you're trying to trick reporters? What's that about?"

#### STRATEGY #4: SILENCE IS YOUR FRIEND

If a moment of awkward silence falls upon your interview, resist the urge to jump in. Instead, give the floor to your source, who might come forth with something unexpected and revealing. Humans are social creatures, after all. You never know what your source might say to break an anxious pause.

"You want to know what the other person is going to fill the silence with. You want them to step into the breach, because you're trying to understand their thinking," McCrummen said.

#### STRATEGY #5: GET FACE-TO-FACE

The best venue for interviewing a potential liar is face-to-face. Feldman, the psychology professor, said people are less likely to lie when you're talking in person. There's a measure of accountability that comes with one-on-one interaction.

If you do conduct an over-the-phone interview, make sure to record the conversation. Recording interviews improves accuracy and offers you a layer of protection in the event your source later claims you got something wrong. Various apps exist to record conversations, but I'm old-school. I've found that plugging a \$14 Olympus TP-8 ear microphone into

a standard audio recorder works great. You just put your phone up to your ear, hit record and it captures both voices.

Different states have different rules for recording phone conversations, so be sure you understand the legal restrictions. Whenever I record a phone interview, I always begin with a short, non-threatening disclosure: "I'm going to record this just so I make sure I capture everything accurately. That okay?"

If the interview gets heated and the source hangs up on you, my advice is to call back immediately. As always, be polite, but persistent. "I'm sorry. I think we got disconnected."

#### STRATEGY #6: MIND YOUR MEDIUM

Television interviews, especially live television interviews, have unique characteristics. Yet in my experience as a local TV news producer, many of the same strategies apply. Ask punchy, precise questions. Avoid the lengthy, look-at-me-I-know-it-all preambles. Instead, be original. Be surprising.

In televised press conferences, reporters often ask questions that they think make them look good to colleagues in the briefing room. But it's much more revealing to ask a question that would be interesting to somebody who isn't already following the story.

That's what John Dickerson did during a press conference with President George W. Bush in 2006. While other veteran White House reporters peppered Bush with predictable Beltway-insider questions, Dickerson, now a CBS *This Morning* co-host, asked the kind of question a normal person would ask midway through a presidency: "What would you say is the biggest mistake you've made during your presidency, and what have you learned from it?"

The question seemed to catch Bush off-guard.

"I wish you would have given me this question ahead of time, so I could plan for it," said Bush, before launching into a vague, rambling non-answer that provided viewers valuable insight into the president's capacity for introspection.

For extended TV interviews, it's good practice to stay on topic. Sources who want to avoid the truth like to skip from one subject to the next. It's much better to probe deeply into one matter and come at that topic from different angles.

Finally, TV producers and executives must be extremely careful in deciding whether to book a person with a history of truth-bending for a live television interview. It's true that a correspondent will have an opportunity to challenge the source's answers, but the audience hears the misleading statement first, and that first statement often leaves a lasting impression.

A good way to protect the integrity of your news station's airwaves is to record the interview and use it as a foundation for a reported video package that includes the source's comments but also provides enough context to give viewers a full picture.

#### STRATEGY #7: BE HUMBLE

No matter how well-prepared you are for an interview, there are always things you don't know. You might be confident you've uncovered a deception and have public records to back you up. But there's still a chance you're not seeing the whole picture.

That's why McCrummen stresses the importance of humility.

"Even if it's a half-of-a-percent chance or whatever, you always have to leave room for the idea that you've gotten something wrong. I think that keeps you from taking that self-righteous tone, which is not good anyway," said McCrummen, who later shared a Pulitzer Prize for her reporting on Phillips and her connections to a covert journalistic sting operation called Project Veritas.

Make sure you're following your own ethical compass, as well. Always identify yourself as a reporter. Don't misrepresent what you're doing. Be mindful of the power you wield as a journalist, and treat sources—especially those who aren't familiar with the workings of the press—with respect. If you end up breaking a big story, the last thing you want is for your methods to come under scrutiny and distract from the larger issue.

Above all, you must keep in mind that even through the wildest of interview situations, journalism isn't about the journalist.

"It's not about you. It's not about judging people. It's not about embarrassing people or scoring points," McCrummen said. "It's about understanding. It's about eliciting information. It's about revealing something."

That something is truth.