On Interviewing | Thoughts and Resources from Jeff South & Mary Ann Owens

Eric Nalder, Pulitzer-winning journalist: Loosening Lips: The Art of the Interview
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/expose/2008/12/loosening-lips-the-art-of-the.html

TV journalist Charles Gibson’s interview with Sarah Palin
Gibson was handpicked by McCain/Palin staff for Palin’s first national interview based on his reputation for being a nice guy. But during the interview, his looming body language let Palin know immediately that the cutesy BS routine was not going to cut it. To push Palin for exact answers, Gibson mixed close questions (such as at 3:30) with open questions (5:10 and 7:00).
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ALsjhDDdaA

Multiple ways to do interviews
Email, phone and in-person: Each has advantages and disadvantages. Weakest form of interview is email because no answers are spontaneous. Some questions are ignored. Format puts the source in charge.

Importance of preparation
Background your subject and the issue
Find all you can from authoritative sources (so you don’t waste time during the interview asking questions with obvious answers).

Plan questions in advance
Keep questions short and direct; avoid vagueness; no long lead-ins
Shape questions to fit the subject (children, public officials)
Frame your questions carefully: closed vs. open
Avoid confrontations but seek truth. When you ask uncomfortable questions, “blame” somebody else: “The Democrats have criticized your bill as … What would you say to them?”
Or: “On Twitter, some people are saying … How would you respond to that?”
Put questions in order
Know which question to ask if you can ask only one question

During the interview
Be on time
Approach people confidently
Have an elevator pitch -- who you are, why you want to interview the person
“Can you help me?”
Empathize (“I know this has been a difficult time for you …”)
Appeal to the subject’s ego (“I really need the perspective of an expert like you …”)
Find common ground (“You and I would both agree this is information the public needs …”)
Practice judo: “You’re in a hurry? That’s OK -- I can walk with you to the next committee meeting and interview you on the way.”
Always be polite, even when you get turned down
Look for a personal connection; be engaging during the interview
Know the difference between listening and hearing
Observe both the subject and surroundings. Inventory the room, the person’s desk, what the subject is wearing.
In a phone interview, listen to the background – and ask the subject about the setting:
the room, the weather, who is with the person.
Be nonjudgmental and neutral to what the subject says
Nod, say “mmmm,” be silent; tilt your head; lean forward; pause; encourage the subject to continue talking
When source is searching for next word or shutting down, repeat last word source said to reignite engagement
Make reasonable eye contact
Get on the subject’s level (kneel or crouch when interviewing children)
Mix closed and open questions. Use closed questions to get a subject who has gone off on a tangent back on track.
Occasionally, summarize or echo what the subject has said (for clarity, to slow down the interview, or to elicit more information)
Be flexible. Ask new questions on the fly, based on what the subject says.
Ask follow-up questions: “Why did you do that?” … “How do you know that?” … “What did that feel like?”
At the end of the interview:
“Is there anything else you’d like to add?”
Run through your notes and fill in any gaps
Get the person’s contact information
Offer your business card (if you haven’t already)

Note taking
Always have a notebook and take notes. But know the difference between information (facts you might include in a paraphrase) and a direct quote (when you want to convey the subject’s exact words).
If you don’t know shorthand, invent your own. Identify letters or numbers that will stand in for entire words or phrases.
As soon as possible after the interview, go through your notes and flesh them out.
Always use a recorder. (Virginia is a single-party-consent state.) Your smartphone probably will do.
Use the bookmark button on your voice recording app to mark verbatim quotes or key information during the interview.
Upload your recording to VoiceBase, a free voice-to-text service. It will provide a transcription. The transcription won’t be perfect -- but it will be synched with the audio online. (So you can click on a word or phrase in the transcript, and VoiceBase will play that part of the recording.)

Body language
Where and how to sit
Take the edge of direct conflict position with a slight turn.
Keep head up and shoulders square.
Keep arms to the side. Try not to cover body cavity.
Use environment to your advantage.
Avoid “buddy” positioning and direct conflict position if possible.
Lean forward