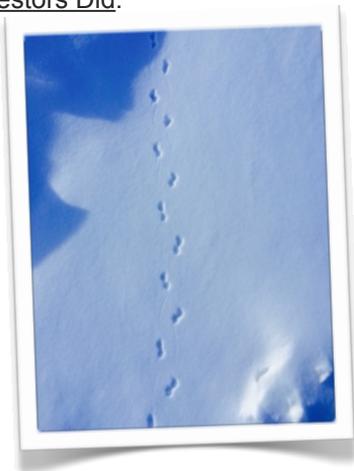




Interview Strategies for Creating Documentary Performance

Ping Chong + Company has an established history of creating interdisciplinary and community-based performance works that engage interviews and documentary materials. These include over 40 years of interdisciplinary devised productions and more than 50 projects in the company's *Undesirable Elements* series. PCC offers workshops, residencies, and an annual Summer Training Institute to provide reflections on the company's practice and to share strategies for creating interview-based theatre. PCC's interview styles fluctuate between journalistic approaches, social science methodologies, and straightforward conversation. The power and value of authentic human connection guides PCC in its interview processes and in its creation of interview-based works.

Where the Sea Breaks Its Back, PCC's newest multidisciplinary work in development, continues to activate these powerful approaches. Here, PCC shares a workshop activity for theater makers and students interested in conducting interviews from which to create performance. This workshop sequence addresses professional makers, community participants, and young artists in educational contexts. PCC artist Ryan Conarro has developed this activity and has also used it in arts education engagements in numerous communities. This workshop has evolved from and draws inspiration from several sources in the field, including Jo Carson's [Spider Speculations: A Physics & Biophysics of Storytelling](#), and Daniel Kelin II's [To Feel As Our Ancestors Did](#).



An interview is like **a journey down a river.**

Each question takes you down a different branch of the river.

Each branch yields its own stories.

When you begin, you never know where the stories may take you.

1. FACT QUESTIONS

- Nearly every interview begins with some sort of Fact Question (also known as a “direct question”). This is the beginning of the journey down the river.
- This type of question can also provide a “warm-up” for the interviewee. Usually, an interview begins with at least three fact questions, as both you and the interviewee settle into your conversation. Later in the process, this question can offer a break from open-ended questions. It can also signal a switch to a new topic—a new branch of the river.
- This type of question usually yields “yes,” “no,” or a short answer.
 - *Example: “Are you originally from Alaska?” – “No.”*
 - *Example: “Where were you born?” – “Idaho.”*



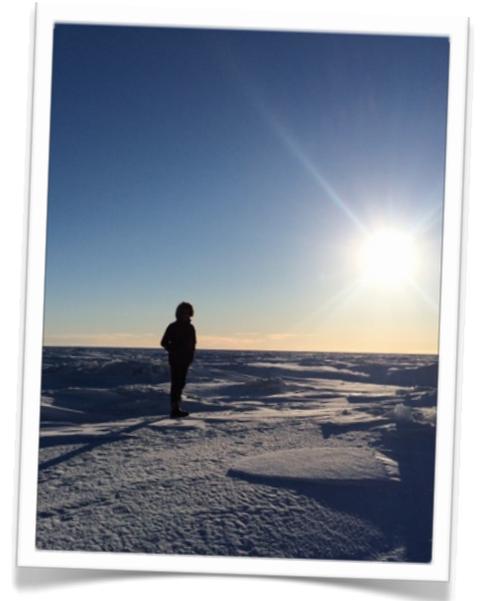


2. FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

- Ask for more details about the fact you just learned. A Follow-Up Question yields a longer answer—you're continuing down this branch the river.
- This type of question often begins with *Who, What, Where, When... Did you...*
 - *Example: "What were your first impressions when you came to Nome?"*
 - *Example: "If you were born in the Lower 48, how did you end up in Alaska?"*

3. OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

- This type of question makes space for the interviewee to share more details about this branch of the river--the topic you're discussing. Ideally, the question invites emotion, nuance, imagery, and associations.
- An Open-Ended Question often begins with *Why, How...*
- This type of question should be framed broadly. With this question, you're saying to your interviewee, "Keep going."
 - *Example: "Tell me more about what it was like when you decided not to get on that airplane."*
 - *Example: "How did you feel?"*
- Sometimes, with a slight shift, you can adjust a Fact Question into an Open-Ended Question.
 - *Example: Instead of "Where are you from?," try "Tell me about where you're from."*
- However, an Open-Ended Question must also be specific enough to be answerable. Avoid a question that's so open that it's vague.
 - *Example to adjust: "Tell me more." [More about what?]*
 - *Example to adjust: "How did you feel when you left Anchorage and how did you feel when you came back?" [Choose one topic at a time—both may yield meaningful answers.]*





SOME NOTES ON THE NUANCES OF INTERVIEW DYNAMICS

As the interviewer, your intention is to help the participant to feel safe and comfortable as you invite them to share thoughts, memories, words, and stories.

- **Your participant is a guest** who has accepted your invitation. Engage with them as you would any guest. Offer a drink or a snack. Ensure that the seating, temperature, and lighting are comfortable and inviting. Begin with establishing a welcoming, joyful, easy-going energy.
- Consider the private nature of the interview when **choosing an interview space**. Look for a space that is quiet, private, and “neutral.” In some cases, meeting an interviewee in their own home or place of their choosing might be best. In other cases, meet at an office or private meeting space. If possible, avoid loud, public spaces for a first interview.
- Your participant—your guest—is bringing something vital to share with you: his/her stories and experiences. Make this **a meaningful exchange**. Consider beginning your encounter with an offering of your own—a memento related to the project, perhaps, or even something as simple as the drink or the snack mentioned above.
- **Establish expectations & agreements** at the beginning of the interview. Outline/review the larger project goals, and give an idea of what the participant can expect during the interview. Ask the participant for permission to record the conversation and/or take notes. If you will be taking notes, be sure to mention this ahead of time so that the participant understands that your writing or typing is part of your attentive engagement, rather than a distraction from it. Share a Release / Agreement Form at the beginning of the conversation; this is another useful step in establishing shared expectations for the interview and the project.
- As the interview progresses, **make offerings** of breaks or tissues if appropriate.
- As the ebb and flow of your conversation unfolds—your journey down the river—**attend to cultural differences and power dynamics** between you and the participant. Be alert to assumptions that might be embedded in your questions. Point out your own lack of knowledge or your blind spots as they arise. These may themselves yield useful questions. Attend to and take care of the energy and pace of the participant. In particular, **observe wait time**. Avoid interrupting, finishing the participant’s thoughts, or rushing to a new question. If you sit quietly and attentively, a participant will often share something further. Silence and waiting are frequently your best follow-ups, your strongest invitations.
- Consider **the participant-observer dynamic** which is inherent in this interview. You are ‘observing’ as a listener, but you are unavoidably ‘participating’ as well, engaging in your participant’s process of interpreting and expressing their own experiences. Is the participant adjusting the stories to serve an assumed need? Is the participant summarizing or abbreviating out of a perceived desire for brevity? You may consider addressing these questions if they arise.
- Consider as a closing question: **“Is there anything else you’d like to add?”** This question allows the participant to share additional stories spurred by your conversation; to open up territories you did not know to explore; and to accept one final invitation from you.