Robin Roberts

Teaches Effective & Authentic Communication

MasterClass

Meet Robin

As a child growing up in Pass Christian, Mississippi, all Robin Roberts wanted to be when she grew up was a professional athlete. Being good at sports earned Robin her college scholarship. It taught her teamwork, leadership, goal setting, how to win gracefully, and, most importantly, how to deal with losing. Plus, she just loved playing sports.

Unfortunately, while Robin had the "heart and desire" to be a pro athlete, she admits she didn't quite have the ability. When Robin's dream didn't shake out, she decided to switch to plan B. She just had to figure out what plan B was.

Robin asked herself, "How can I still live that life, how can I still be involved in sports?" As a sports journalist, she discovered, she could continue to pursue a career in athletics.

Robin's first job was as the weekend sports anchor in Hat tiesburg, Mississippi, on WDAM. She made $5.50 an hour and worked 30 hours a week. She didn't take this part-time job because she was desperate. In fact, Robin had been offered a more prestigious, higher-paying, full-time job as a news anchor at that time. She opted for the part-time gig because she knew her passion was

in sports. "I was focusing on getting to ESPN one day," she says, "and this is where I needed to start."

Nine months after moving to Hattiesburg, the network she turned down for the full-time job called her to say it had an opening in the sports department. The network offered it to her because it knew she was dedicated to sports journalism—after all, she'd turned down the initial offer for that part-time sports gig.

Robin's new job was with WLOX in Biloxi, Mississippi. She stayed for two and a half years and was again offered a news anchor position—more money, more airtime—but again she turned it down. "I knew myself," she says. Knowing what she wanted kept her on a steady path to her dream—a job at ESPN. Shortly after Robin moved up to a top 30 market, ESPN finally came calling.

Robin met with the executives. "I don't want to be the first black woman anchor if I'm going to be the last black woman anchor," she says of her thoughts at the time. She hadn't "paid [her] dues," and she knew she wasn't quite ready to take that major step up. If she was going to take her dream job, she wanted to be 100 percent prepared for it so she wouldn't be asked to leave or scale back. She also knew her margin of error was less than that of someone who wasn't a black woman. So she told ESPN, "Thanks, but no thanks."

Soon after, Robin got a job in Atlanta, Georgia, covering big-time teams like the Braves. This gave her the experience she needed to feel ready for the ESPN job. Thankfully, ESPN came calling again. This time, when executive John A. Walsh offered her a job, Robin accepted, making her the first black female anchor on ESPN's flagship program, *SportsCenter*.

Connect With Your Fellow Broadcast Journalists

Head to community.master-class.com to meet Robin's other students, discuss effective communication, and trade tips on journalism and reporting.

Accustomed to years of turning down news anchor jobs in favor of sports gigs, Robin declined an offer from *Good Morning America* (on ABC, the owner of ESPN before the Walt Disney Company bought both) when the show first reached out to her. But shortly thereafter, Robin learned to stop saying "no" out of habit. Part of that lesson came from the former world number one tennis player, Billie Jean King. Robin told King about her *GMA* opportunity, assuming King, an athlete, would encourage Robin to stay in sports. But King gave Robin the opposite advice. "You know what, you're afraid to venture outside of your comfort zone," King said. So venture Robin did.

Today, Robin has been a *GMA* anchor for more than a decade and has been with the Walt Disney Company for 30 years (and counting—she's also been recognized as a Disney Legend, the company's highest honor). She's interviewed President Barack Obama, reported on the ground in Mississippi during Hurricane Katrina, and spoken publicly about her breast cancer and Myelodysplastic syndrome (MDS). She was a first in her industry, and thanks to her hard work and mentorship, she won't be the last.

WELCOME TO ROBIN ROBERTS'S MASTERCLASS.

Assignment

What lessons did you learn from your childhood that you can use to help you achieve your professional goals? Write down all the activities (or hobbies) you did as a kid. Under each one, write at least three lessons or skills you learned from doing that activity. Then think about how you use those skills today. If you find that you don't actively use them, write down where in your life you could employ those skills to help you move forward—in your career, relationships, etc.

The Importance of Title IX

Robin calls herself a "proud product of Title IX." She says that piece of legislation from the 1970s "changed her life."

As a little girl, Robin loved playing sports, but she couldn't play on most teams, which were for boys only (she excelled at bowling, one of the only sports made available to girls, and was a junior bowling champ in Mississippi). In 1972, the United States Congress passed Title IX of the Education Amendments, which protects people participating in educational programs from discrimination based on their gender identity. It states: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."

For Robin, being a part of a sports team thanks to Title IX legislation taught her teamwork. It also taught her how to win, lose, and lead.

Thanks to Title IX, the girls at Robin's school were allowed to start playing any sport the boys could play. Robin took advantage, excelling in sports and eventually receiving a college scholarship based on her athletic abilities. Since she was the youngest of four siblings, this helped Robin's family out financially, but it also instilled in her a sense of pride. She'd been able to provide her own means for her education, all because she'd been given the opportunity to engage in an activity that had been previously off-limits to her.

Title IX came about after a long history of consistent discrimination against women in education. Before Title IX, many academic institutions set quotas for the number of women who could attend and even barred them from studying specific disciplines, like medicine. Female students had to abide by stricter rules, like curfews, that male students didn't have, limiting the number of activities women could participate in. Female faculty members suffered from inequalities as well, achieving tenure at a much lower rate than their male counterparts and facing discrimination for taking maternity leave.

Of course, because of gender-based issues like maternity leave, discrimination remains alive and well today. But Title IX makes it technically unlawful in educational institutions that receive federal funding (which includes public schools, charter schools, many private colleges and universities, for-profit schools, libraries, and even museums). According to the White House Council on Women and Girls, 87 percent of women had at least a high school diploma in 2009, compared with just 59 percent in 1970, two years before Title IX passed. The same report states that between 1968 and 2011, the rate of women ages 25 to 34 with college degrees more than tripled.

For Robin, being a part of a sports team thanks to Title IX legislation taught her teamwork. It also taught her how to win, lose, and lead. Perhaps most crucially, it taught her how to set goals. In college, those who weren't playing sports like Robin had all day long to do their work. Because Robin knew she only had a finite amount of time to study between practices and games, she made sure to study when she could. Structuring her days productively and meeting deadlines became her strength. As a journalist—and in other aspects of her life—those skills have helped her immeasurably.

Make Your Mess Your Message

As a public person, Robin has divulged a lot of what's gone on in her personal life. But as a journalist, she was taught not to insert herself into the stories she's reporting. This can be a complicated balancing act—one that's evolving as the nature of information sharing continues to change.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit Mississippi. Robin's mother lived there and had been with Robin's sister and her sister's children during the hurricane. ABC flew Robin down to the area to cover the story of Katrina on the ground. While the producers set up the shoot, Robin rushed to find her family to make sure they were okay. How could she not? Luckily, she found them safe and sound.

Shortly after, Robin had to go on the air. Charlie Gibson, an ABC anchor, asked Robin on live television if she'd been able to find her family. Unable to stop herself, Robin started to cry. Her immediate concern was that she had lost her job for letting her raw emotions take over on live TV.

"Just the opposite happened," she says today. "I was being authentic. I was being in the moment. I was speaking from the heart. People

sensed that, rallied around me, and adopted my hometown, which was decimated." People thanked her for being real.

The experience has led Robin to feel more comfortable "being real" on camera ever since. When she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2007, she shared the news with viewers. She even ended up encouraging her colleague Amy Robach to get a mammogram live on *GMA* as part of a "Mammogram on Wheels" segment. Amy hadn't wanted to do it, says Robin. She was worried it would feel like a stunt, like she'd be inserting herself into the story at the expense of delivering straightforward news. As it turned out, inserting herself into the story may have saved Amy's life. That mammogram she got on *GMA* detected her breast cancer, and she was able to catch it early on.

All of these experiences and more encouraged Robin to "make her mess her message," as she puts it—in other words, she's gotten good at turning messy life events into stories that could help others. Other media outlets might discourage their journalists from exploring such personal stories, but as far as Robin is concerned, making her mess her message has contributed to her career. "It made me a better journalist," she says.

When Journalism Gets Personal

For a long while, journalists were taught to keep themselves out of their stories to ensure complete impartiality. But in the last 60 or so years—thanks in part to writers like Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe, and Hunter S. Thompson—the use of first-person narration in reported features has become more and more conventional. It's often employed by writers who are looking to imbue their work with a sense of authority and emotion, or maybe to add a bit of levity or scene-setting to a particularly wieldy story. No matter how it's being used, though, one thing is for sure: First-person narration draws a reader (or, in Robin's case, a viewer) in.

But long before Didon, Wolfe, and Thompson were widely credited with this style of journalism, women like Djuna Barnes and Nellie Bly had built their careers on subjective, experience-based writing. Bly became a household name in the late 1880s after going undercover for the paper *New York World* to investigate what were said to be horrendous conditions at the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell Island. Her resulting book, *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, was a widely read account of her personal experience at the asylum. In 1914, as part of her investigation on female suffragists who were force-fed during hunger strikes, Barnes willingly put herself under the same conditions and then wrote about it (also for *New York World*).

Women and people of color took part in a notable moment for personalized journalism with the explosion of the anecdotal personal essay, which took off around 2008. That year, Emily Gould wrote an essay for *The New York Times Magazine* called "Exposed," in which she discussed the results of writing about her personal life online. As Jia Tolentino wrote for *The New Yorker* in 2017, that essay was the beginning of a "boom" of first-person writing perpetuated by sites like xoJane, Jezebel, BuzzFeed Ideas, and Salon.

It's up to news organizations, producers, and editors to decide how and when to use a first-person point of view.

These days it's fairly common for feature writers to write themselves into their stories. Tolentino herself is a writer of color who often inserts her identity into her pieces, primarily when she acknowledges that a specific subject hits close to home. Ultimately, it's up to news organizations, producers, and editors to decide how and when to use a first-person point of view in the name of offering the most accurate, authetic, and authoritative reporting.

Making an Authentic Connection

Robin's childhood was like a crash course in communicating well. As a "bona fide military brat," as she calls herself, Robin traveled from one new city to another (and even lived briefly in Turkey). During those years, she learned how to connect with people from all different walks of life. "It taught me we all have more in common than not," she says.

Robin stresses the importance of authenticity in effective communication. This means looking people in the eye when you're talking to them. Lean forward in your seat to show you're engaged in the conversation. Take a genuine interest. Whether or not you're a journalist, you need to have a deep, genuine curiosity about other people.

The secret to communicating effectively ultimately boils down to one action: Listening.

You may have heard about "active listening," which requires more than just listening. It means showing the person who's talking to you that you are listening to them, thinking about what they are saying, and responding accordingly.

How do you show someone you're listening? Make eye contact with them. Nod as they're talking to you, and angle your body toward them to exhibit they're holding your attention. Don't look at your watch or jiggle your legs—that's enough to make anyone self-conscious. Show that person they have your undivided attention—and then actually do listen. Soon they'll stop talking and it will be your turn, and you'd better say something to indicate you were paying attention.

Assignments

1. This week, try calling at least three people you were initially going to text. You might find that you're able to communicate more efficiently by speaking directly as opposed to exchanging multiple messages via text. Any practice with verbal communication in our text-heavy society will help warm you up if you want to speak on TV for a living.

2. This week, strike up a conversation with two strangers and ask them questions. (This isn't an exercise in alarming people. Use your judgment to make sure you're going about this appropriately.) For instance, say you pass by a person studying a movie poster. You can ask him or her if they know whether that movie was any good. Or maybe you pass by a member of a film crew working in your neighborhood—go ahead and ask them what they're filming (they might be sworn to secrecy, but it's worth a try). Or ask the barista who makes your morning coffee which baked good in the pastry case is their favorite. In other words, ask the questions you've been too shy to ask because you were afraid to start a conversation with someone you didn't know.

Public Speaking

Public speaking doesn't come naturally to most people, Robin included. If it's something you struggle with, start small. Get used to speaking up in small groups and work your way up from there.

Robin's Pointers for Public Speaking

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Preparation equals confidence. Even those people who embrace the stage and look like they're ad-libbing their way through a great speech have some predetermined talking points. The way you present those points, in large part, should be determined by your audience. Before outlining your speech (or your news report), ask yourself what your audience wants to hear. For Robin, answering this question sometimes means asking an audience member. She'll ask the person who invited her to speak what they're hoping she would convey, and then she'll plan accordingly by writing out some pertinent bullet points.

Communicating effectively during a speaking engagement requires that you engage your audience. Robin does this by sharing personal anecdotes. Just as you've learned to make your

mess your message, if you can insert yourself into your talking points, you'll show that you mean what you're saying.

WHERE TO LOOK

If you're speaking to a very large crowd, Robin suggests looking just over the crowd's eye line. That will make it appear that you're looking at everyone while giving you the personal comfort of not having to be constantly reminded of the crowd's daunting size.

In a smaller crowd, find that one person who's looking straight at you and hanging on to your every word. Speak to them. They'll make you feel confident about your speech. The audience member who's looking at their phone will only end up distracting you as well. Ignore them.

WHERE NOT TO LOOK

Don't look at a prepared script, and definitely try to avoid writing out your speech in full. Your words won't sound genuine if you're reading them verbatim from a piece of paper instead of addressing your audience directly. Even if you're not reading from a piece of paper, you'll still sound stiff if you're delivering a memorized speech.

This doesn't mean you can't write down *anything*. Robin suggests using index cards with bullet points to help you remember your big ideas.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

You don't need to impress the audience with your sentence structure. You need to keep them engaged with short phrases and quick, snappy stories. Audiences always have limited attention spans, and your speech better cater to that.

That said, your speech isn't always going to be a hit. Robin acknowledges that there's not much you can do when that happens. Just keep talking like you're killing it and get through what you came there to say.

ENUNCIATE, DARLING

Perfect diction takes some serious practice. Robin managed to get rid of her filler words, like "you know," but that took paying attention to her own speech patterns. You first have to identify your verbal tics before you can get rid of them.

Assignments

1. Choose a topic you know well (or, if you're feeling confident, have a friend or partner choose a topic for you at random), and prepare a three- to five-minute speech about it (five minutes is a lot longer than you might think). Start by writing down any and all personal experiences you've had that relate to the main points you'd like to get across in your speech. Then write some bullet points on index cards that will help you get through your speech when you have to deliver it.

2. Practice your speech. Record yourself delivering the speech to yourself in the mirror. Listen to the speech and make a note of every moment you make a verbal tic, like "um" or "like" or "you know." Note how fast (or slow) you're speaking, and adjust accordingly. Pay attention to words you fail to enunciate. Do you say "gonna" instead of "going to"? As a broadcaster, you'll be expected to pronounce every word you say. Repeat this process until you've all but eliminated any filler words, poorly enunciated words, and overly fast or slow segments.

3. Once your speech is in a good place, deliver it to a small group of trusted friends (or even only one other person), and have them give you notes on the delivery.

Interviewing for a Job

Robin always comes back to being *real*. That could be easier said than done. Robin is a confident woman who is at ease in front of the camera, but you may not have the same luck. You know what, though? That's okay.

Making an impression during a television journalism interview, or really any interview, isn't solely about wowing people with your confidence. Confidence is important, but what matters more is stepping into an interview with deep knowledge about the specific job you're applying for: If you're interviewing at a magazine, are you intimately familiar with each editor and writer on staff as well as the magazine's different sections? If you're interviewing at a department store, do you know which brands it carries and which ones it doesn't? Doing your research ahead of time will show you're thoughtful and sharp and you have a genuine interest in the role. Don't be afraid to show that you have a genuine interest in the interviewer, either.

WHETHER YOU'RE INTERVIEWING FOR YOUR FIRST JOB OR YOUR 50TH, REMEMBER SOME OF ROBIN'S BASIC DOS AND DON'TS:

DO

- Feel proud that you have an interview. You earned it. If you walk into an interview with your head held high, your confidence will come through—even if you're nervous.
- Be prepared. Do your homework. Come in having studied up on the company and the person conducting your interview. "Google the heck" out of both, Robin says.
- Come in with ideas. Because you've done your homework, you should have some creative and informed thoughts on what the company could be doing differently or additionally.
- "Dress for the job you want" is an old standby for a reason. If the interviewer can picture you sitting at the anchor's desk delivering the news on their network, it might help you land the job.

DON'T

- Be cocky. Confidence is one thing—it shows that you understand your worth—but being arrogant is presumptuous and disrespectful. It won't get you anywhere. As Robin often says, "When you strut, you stumble."
- Prep answers for interview questions word for word. Your interviewer will be able to tell if you've memorized your reply in advance. Plus, while there are some questions you can be fairly sure interviewers will ask, they may surprise you. Don't spend time rehearsing your lines—you'll appear stiff and inflexible.
- Assume you know what the job will require. No matter the industry, no one company operates in exactly the same way as another.
- Be afraid to ask questions. Leave that interview being as informed as possible about the job lest you wind up in a position you didn't bargain for. Asking questions is another way to show you've read up on the company and care about what it does.

Before you even get to the interview stage, however, you have to position yourself so that you *can* get that interview. "Proximity is power," Robin says. If there's an event you really want to cover but no one hired you to report on it, find a friend who can hold a camera and report on it anyway. Sometimes you have to create the experiences that will give you the skills and terminology you'll need to move forward in your career.

You can also put yourself in front of the right people. Robin brings up a time when a broadcast reporter sent over a clip of her coverage of a natural disaster. (The reporter wrote to Robin after seeing Robin's coverage of Hurricane Katrina.) Robin was intrigued. She watched the clip. "Dang, she's good!" was Robin's first thought. Her second thought was to go to her company's talent department and say, "This is someone you all need to look at."

The moral of the story here is that this woman hadn't asked Robin for a job. She asked her for career advice. Doing this shows a true desire for professional development. The problem with reaching out to influential people like Robin, however, is that they're busy. If you don't hear back right away, remember that it's probably not because they're ignoring you or they didn't like that you reached out. They just have dozens of other items on their to-do lists.

LIKE ROBIN SAYS, THERE'S NO PROBLEM WITH FOLLOWING UP. CONSIDER THESE RULES AS A GUIDELINE BEFORE SENDING A GENTLE NUDGE:

1. Give the person a chance to respond on their own. That may mean waiting one or two weeks before reaching out again.
2. Be understanding and respectful in your messaging. Don't get exasperated, even if it's your second follow-up email. Always acknowledge that the person you're contacting is busy, and reiterate that you appreciate their time.

Following up after an interview is a different beast. Sending a thank-you email later the same day is fine, as is the day after. Waiting much longer will make it look like you're not that interested in the job. If you really want to go above and beyond, send a handwritten thank-you note. Just remember that you'll need to drop it off in person rather than mailing it if you want it to arrive promptly.

Tips for Creating Your Demo Reel

A demo reel is a short video featuring compelling excerpts of your on-camera work. Consider them a promo for you. Put your best work at the front of the reel—as with a résumé, a recruiter may not make it through the whole thing, so you want them to see the good stuff straightaway.

A typical demo reel for broadcasting is seven minutes long at most. After you begin with your most compelling piece of filmed journalism, that's still quite a lot of time to fill. As Stephanie Tsoflias Siegel, a former TV news reporter who founded a training and mentorship agency for broadcasters called Reel Media Group, told the International Journalists' Network a while back, the stories in your reel should be "compelling, visually interesting, and something different." That means, "no fire stories, no crime stories, no fake live shots."

Instead, try to include the more surprising stories you've covered—but don't force it. If you're still in the very early stages of your career, include clips that not only show your TV poise but also your reporting and writing skills.

Assignment

Make your reel. Start by going through all of your clips and narrowing them down to the four or five best ones. From there, choose the one "headline clip" you'll put at the front of your reel—you want the best material to be at the top. Don't be afraid to ask friends and family for help determining which clip is your best one—sometimes others make for more impartial judges than yourself.

Communicating Your Value at Work

So you've got the job. Congratulations—you should be proud! But if you want to follow in Robin's footsteps, you should be "always grateful, never content." In other words, you should always be looking for ways to improve and move up (if that's what you're aiming for). To do that, you'll need to add a few negotiation techniques to your repertoire.

TAKE THE FOLLOWING INTO CONSIDERATION WHEN YOU'RE ANGLING TO RISE IN THE RANKS:

DO

- When it comes to negotiation conversations at work, make sure you have a game plan. Know what you're going to ask for and outline how you will benefit the company if you get what you ask for.
- Know your worth. Before you can tell a boss your worth, you have to know what you're bringing to the table. Write down some of your skills and successes at your company to date in advance if that helps.
- Show your worth. This may be reminding a boss of your past accomplishments or telling them specific attributes you have that are unique on your team. Why are *you* the right person for the job?

DON'T

- Act entitled. Stay away from commentary about how long you've been working at the company or that "it's about time" for a promotion. That can be part of your case, but it absolutely shouldn't be all of it.

Assignments

1. Write down a road map of where you want to go professionally. The starting point can be your current job, and the end point should be your dream gig. Use your starting point and your goal point to come up with the other stops on your career path. This may require some research about your current or desired industry. What are the steps between a writer's assistant and a showrunner? Or a news network intern and an on-air anchor? Use resources like LinkedIn to map the jobs that will take you from point A to point B.

2. Write down a list of your dream mentors, from your current boss to someone on Robin's level of fame. Who in the business would you most like to get coffee with to learn about their work? For each of those dream mentors, make a list of what you admire most about them. Next, write out a list of questions you'd like to ask each of them. What do you want to know about their career? What would you ask them about *your* career? Challenge yourself to ask at least one of the people on your list out for coffee this month.

Behind the Scenes at *Good Morning America*

Hours before your alarm goes off, Robin is up and on her way to the *GMA* studios in Times Square (she gets out of bed at 3:15 a.m. in order to arrive by 5 a.m.). Upon her arrival, she greets her many behind-the-scenes colleagues who've gotten up even earlier than she did in order to make the morning news possible.

While she's in hair and makeup, a producer will come into her dressing room and prep her on her morning segments. Though Robin would have already received information on that morning's broadcast the night before, the 24-hour news cycle means stories could have continued to develop while she slept.

Robin is on the air from 7 a.m. until 9 a.m. But before that, she records the "cold open" in the studio (the short narrative you hear summarizing the day's top stories before the broadcast opens up to the live anchors). Shortly before going on the air, Robin takes a seat at the anchors' desk with her co-anchors, George Stephanopoulos and Michael Strahan.

They'll shoot the breeze and ease into their roles together.

GMA is broken into four half-hour segments. Robin says you can think of each half hour as a different section of the newspaper: Front-page news comes first; followed (loosely) by business, metro, and maybe international; then sports, culture, arts, and human interest; and, finally, entertainment and food.

At 7 a.m., Robin and her co-anchors deliver the hard news—top stories that the general public needs to be aware of, like the sudden outbreak of a disease or a pressing conflict with a foreign government. The 7:30 a.m. segment is still newsy, but Robin calls it "news you can use." Think of it as an assemblage of stories that might affect your morning commute.

As the news team inches toward 8 a.m., the show takes a turn toward human interest stories, like the dog that somehow managed to dial 911 to save her owner's life. At 8 a.m., the *GMA* anchors leave the downstairs studio for the upstairs studio, where a live audience is waiting. There, they may interview celebrities, do an "everyday heroes" segment, or learn a holiday recipe if 'tis the season.

Communicating for Television

Robin has been in the broadcasting business for a long time. In fact, her very first gig in the industry was as a country music radio DJ. That was about 35 years ago.

The industry has changed since then. Even *GMA* has changed since Robin started working on the show in 2002. The information landscape has scaled up from a few radio stations and a few TV news networks to the plethora of platforms, including Twitter and countless digital outlets, from which we can glean information.

"That's good and bad," says Robin. "It's good for you in that there are many opportunities." You don't have to start your career at a traditional local news market the way Robin did. Instead, you can launch your own YouTube channel where you write, deliver, and produce your own news reports. You can pitch your articles to a wide variety of national, even international, online news publications. You may even get lucky enough to strike up a Twitter friendship with one of your favorite reporters. The possibilities are almost endless.

But if you want to be a traditional journalist, Robin asks you one critical question: Why? "If your answer is anything other than you want to help tell people's stories," says Robin, it's the wrong answer.

Luckily, the one thing Robin believes has stayed the same throughout the changing journalistic landscape is storytelling. It remains a core value in her industry. And it's not just about storytelling for the sake of storytelling. Rather, journalists use storytelling to share the truth with the public.

Is It Easier or More Difficult to Get Into TV Right Now?

It's become more difficult to be a television sports journalist—or any other specialized on-air reporter—because there aren't that many major on-camera roles available, Robin says. Generally on major networks, there's the weekend person and the regular, weekday person covering sports. However, when it comes to general news reporters, Robin says there are "more openings." So if you're looking to cover general news, opportunities abound.

There's NBC, CBS, ABC, Fox, and CNN, each of which operates on a 24-hour news cycle and includes multiple offshoot channels and programs. And let's not forget all of the local cable networks in every state. So yes, there are a lot of on-air reporting jobs.

Even so, the competition for those jobs is stiff. If you want to land the job, you've got to set yourself apart. To do that, think back to what's at the heart of everything Robin says: At the heart of it all is, well, *heart*.

Revealing who you are—who you *really* are—in your work life will help more than hurt you, Robin says. "What you see is what you get with me," Robin says. Her on-air persona is much the same as her off-air self. That's not true for everyone in her industry, and that's okay for them. Robin, personally, finds it to be "a lot of work" to be anything but herself on camera.

This type of authenticity can also make it easier when you're meeting with interview subjects or sources for stories. People tend to open up more freely when they're in the presence of someone they trust or who makes them feel like their voice matters. But bear in mind that authenticity and oversharing are not mutually exclusive. There's rarely a need to share intimate details of your life with the person you're interviewing. You can convey your true personality without revealing personal information.

> "Don't get caught up on having to be so doggone perfect with the process of being a journalist. Keep in mind the people you are trying to reach."

Think Like a Producer

Robin calls producers the "unsung heroes" of broadcast journalism. They do background research into stories, including prescreening by doing advance interviews. They find people who will want to go on the air. They figure out the best shots. They know the process for broadcasting news through and through.

When you're starting off in broadcast journalism, you're probably going to have to be your own producer. And your own editor. And maybe even your own cameraperson. So you'll learn firsthand that the work a producer does, as Robin puts it, "can make or break you."

That's why it can be so helpful to struggle through those early days of your career, when you're doing every part of the process yourself. You'll be able to recognize the importance of the jobs being done by people around you and be able to empathize when they suffer a setback.

You may even be able to help them. Producers have to take into account all the cogs in the machine that make a TV show work, so for you to deeply understand that will make you an invaluable part of a news team.

Producers enjoy working with Robin because she can "see through their eyes." She knows how to structure an interview and build a segment because she had that experience coming up. She's not telling them how to do their jobs. She just does her own work in such a way that it helps producers do their best work.

Handle Criticism With Grace

Let's face it: Criticism hurts, and putting yourself on TV means opening yourself up to commentary, whether it be positive or negative.

Viewers have criticized Robin for everything from her enunciation to her outfit choices. "It stung, but when I just really sat with it," she says, she realized those people were just trying to help her. She learned to try and receive it that way—as constructive criticism. She's since used some of that constructive criticism to improve her work.

Of course, not all criticism is constructive (and not all constructive criticism is useful—if one person doesn't like the shirt you wore on camera yesterday, that's no reason to ditch the shirt). There will always be trolls. Unfortunately, this is especially true for female journalists. It's more than okay to block people on social media who behave in a threatening or abusive manner.

The New York Times' social media policy, for example, specifically supports journalists' right to "block people on social media who are threatening or abusive." As *Times* journalist Rukmini Callimachi writes in the newspaper's social media guidelines, "I used to get really upset and respond to abuse—which only made it worse. What I finally discovered is that... By blocking anyone and everyone who uses abusive terms, I am able to halt the conversation."

Some of Robin's Noteworthy (and Newsworthy) Contemporaries

Belva Davis

As the first black woman to get a job as a television reporter in the 1960s, Davis initially appeared on TV to cover a beauty pageant for black women. In 1966, KPIX, a CBS affiliate, hired her, and she became an anchor there in 1970.

Carole Simpson

Simpson was the first black woman to anchor a major broadcast television network news show (at NBC) in 1975. She went on to be the first black woman to moderate a presidential debate, one between Bill Clinton, George H. W. Bush, and Ross Perot.

Melba Tolliver

In 1971, Tolliver covered the wedding of Tricia Nixon, President Richard Nixon's daughter. She refused to cover her natural hair during the broadcast, a stance for which she remains well-known. Executives at WABC "said I looked less attractive—less feminine," she told *The New York Times* in 1973. "But it was their standard of femininity, not mine."

Oprah Winfrey

Winfrey got her start in media when she was only 19 years old as the first black woman to anchor a nightly news program in Nashville, Tennessee. Her eponymous talk show, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, was so successful that it made her the world's first black female billionaire. Winfrey has since expanded her brand into a media and philanthropic empire. She was awarded the Spingarn Medal for outstanding achievement by the NAACP in 2000 and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2013.

Gwen Ifill

The late, great Ifill became the first black woman to host a nationally broadcasted public affairs program in the U.S., *Washington Week in Review*, in 1999. She moderated two vice presidential debates in the early 2000s.

Jayne Kennedy

An actress and model, Kennedy was the first black woman to host a network television sports broadcast, *The NFL Today*, in 1978.

Soledad O'Brien

O'Brien anchored multiple NBC news shows in the 1990s and became co-anchor of CNN's *American Morning* in 2003. She anchored CNN's *Black in America* special in 2007 and finished the documentary *Latino in America* in 2009. She's gone on to form Starfish Media, which produces documentaries.

Diane Sawyer

Three years after starting as co-anchor on CBS's morning news program in 1981, Sawyer became the first female correspondent on the network's newsmagazine program, *60 Minutes*. Her career went on to include co-anchor positions on ABC's *Primetime Live*, *20/20*, *Good Morning America*, and *World News*. In 1997, she was inducted into the Television Academy Hall of Fame.

A Brief History of the News

1890s

Wireless communication started out as a series of dots and dashes, aka Morse code. The U.S. Navy used it before one Virginia-based station started using it to report the weather across parts of the Eastern United States.

1912

Charles Herrold started broadcasting music weekly out of San Jose, California.

Post-1918

Civilians were not allowed to engage in radio broadcasts during World War I, but the ban ended after the war did in 1918. The first few radio stations started up in the United States. Most were used for music.

1920

The Detroit News rented a radio transmitter to start short daily broadcasts, which included state, county, and congressional election primary results in August of that year. The same year, radio station KDKA in Pittsburgh broadcasted the results of the Warren Harding vs. James Cox presidential election.

1920s

The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) started up as radio networks.

1930s-1940s

President Franklin Roosevelt used the radio to broadcast his "fireside chats" to the American people. He spoke about the economy, policy decisions, and World War II.

1940s

The first regular TV news broadcast, hosted by Lowell Thomas, began airing in 1940. (It aired at the same time as his radio broadcast on NBC.) A year later, CBS started airing two daily TV news broadcasts. American Broadcasting Company (ABC) moved into television broadcasting in 1948.

1953

ABC premiered *John Daly and the News*, now known as *ABC World News Tonight*.

1975

Carole Simpson became the first black woman to anchor a major broadcast network, at NBC News.

1978

Max Robinson became the first black man to anchor a nightly national network news broadcast, at ABC News. That same year, Jayne Kennedy became the first black woman to host a network television sports broadcast, at *The NFL Today*.

1980s-1990s

Ted Turner started the Cable News Network (CNN), the first 24-hour news network, in 1980. Other cable news networks, like Fox News (1996), followed.

1994

The O.J. Simpson trial began, bringing with it a media circus that permanently changed the way news events were covered. In the scientific journal *Geografiska Annaler*, Derek Alderman called this attentiveness to Simpson's trial the "Simpsonization" of national news.

1995

By the mid-'90s, many news publications had some kind of internet presence. CNN.com launched in 1995, the same year the digital-native news site Salon debuted. The year prior, the Raleigh, North Carolina-based *News & Observer* launched Nando.net, one of the first online journalism sites.

2005

YouTube launched and paved the way for anyone to create and easily share videos online. This ushered in the era of "video" (as opposed to television and film) in which broadcast and cable networks would cease to be the sole way to watch moving pictures.

2010s

The popularity of streaming services created a whole new venue for consumers. News shows and channels proliferated. So did digital news outlets, all with the ability to host their own videos. And let's not forget social media. These days, lots of people get their news from scrolling through their Facebook and Twitter feeds to see what stories and information other people have posted.

2018

Hoda Kotb and Savannah Guthrie became the first female duo to anchor the *Today* show. Kotb replaced Matt Lauer, who'd been dismissed from NBC over multiple allegations of sexual assault and harassment by colleagues.

Interviewing People for TV

A good TV interview looks like a good conversation. The questions don't appear scripted, and the relationship between interviewer and interviewee almost resembles friendship, or at least camaraderie.

But don't be fooled. When television journalists sit down with their subjects, they come prepared. "Do your homework," says Robin. In the same way you learned about the company you wanted to work for ahead of your interview, you want to learn as much as you can about the person you're interviewing before you meet them. Write down some questions for them in advance. Remember to think about why this person is sitting down for an interview with you.

What information do you want to get from them to share with your viewers?

TWO KEY COMPONENTS TO CONDUCTING A SOLID INTERVIEW:

LISTEN

Some people come into an interview ready to tell their story. With others, your job is to coax their story out of them. One way to do this, says Robin, is to show that you care. Show them that you're genuinely interested in what they have to say with conversational cues ("uh huh," "I see," "fascinating, go on") and body language (eye contact, posture).

FOLLOW UP

Following up means paying attention to small turns of phrases. Politicians, for example, tend to come to interviews with talking points. They're going to say what they're going to say regardless of the question you ask them—they're masters of spin. Listen carefully to the person who comes to your interview armed with scripted talking points. Pull out the details of what they're saying, and question them on specifics. That way, they'll be forced to answer you in more than just canned sound bites. Sometimes you'll hear something unexpectedly fascinating from the person you're interviewing—something your research didn't prepare you for. Feel free to ask follow-ups on those, too, to get a story that may not have been told yet.

Assignment

Choose a celebrity or political figure you'd love to interview, then do some background research on them. Read past articles written about them, watch past interviews they've done, and scan their social media feeds. Reading the news will tell you if they have any big career milestones coming up or any new projects coming out, while looking at their social media can provide you with conversation icebreakers. Once you've read up on this person, write down a list of questions as they come to you. Be as exhaustive as you'd like. You certainly won't ask all of these questions in your "interview," but writing out every question you have will help you sort them in terms of priority and also help you determine when in your interview you should ask them. Once you've got your questions:

- Find a question or two you can use as an opener—something to ease them into the conversation. Did they just celebrate an anniversary or return from a trip? Start with something casual and topical to get them comfortable.
- Circle three that would be crucial to ask your subject *right now*. Did your subject just take a controversial stance on a pressing issue? Do they have a new album coming out you must ask about?
- Find at least one tricky question that you think is important to ask but might be a prickly topic. This shouldn't be something inappropriate or invasive, like discussing their weight, but it could be about that controversial stance they recently took or getting them to address a conflict they have with another public figure. (It's probably best not to start with that question, but you probably don't want to end on it, either. Think about asking this after you've established a bit of a rapport.)

Breaking Down the Ethics of Journalism

The Society of Professional Journalists offers a code of ethics for all journalists. Here's a closer look at its four core principles:

Seek Truth and Report It

There's more to seeking out the truth than sticking to the facts. Seeking truth means providing adequate context so as not to distort the facts. It means relying on as many firsthand sources as possible and crediting secondhand sources (like other news organizations) when you rely on their work. It means taking extra care to verify the information you've received while reporting and considering your sources' motives.

Minimize Harm

When writing a story, it's important to think about why you're telling it. Is it just to catch readers' attention with some salacious details? Is it so you and your news organization will get more views or clicks? If that's a yes, and it comes at the expense of the subject's safety or peace of mind, then think twice before broadcasting, writing, or posting. In other words, weigh the outcome of your story. Is getting this information out to the public so crucial that it's worth the discomfort it may cause one source? Or is the information not so critical after all?

Understanding the difference between a public and private figure is key here. Public figures understand that their positions put them in the spotlight. For private people, being in a news story could alter their lives in unforeseen ways. Special sensitivity is required when writing about minors, crime survivors, and sources who may be in danger for sharing information.

Act Independently

This means avoiding all conflicts of interest as a journalist or at the very least disclosing them. It's probably okay to quote a subject matter expert who also happens to be your cousin, as long as you mention in the article that he or she is your cousin. However, if your partner is the CEO of a company, you probably shouldn't be reporting on that company.

Generally, newsrooms don't permit journalists to accept gifts that exceed about $25 in value. It's probably all right to take the gift bag from a convention, but it's not okay to accept free travel, a night at a hotel, or a Rolex. (That's right: Pay-to-play Instagram influencers and "bloggers" who accept free stuff in exchange for posts are not reliable or ethical sources of information. Chances are they won't share an honest review of a hotel or restaurant when they're being paid to talk about it.)

Allowing a source to buy you a coffee is usually fine—a full meal, if possible, should be avoided (unless you're paying for the meal on your own dime). On the flip side, journalists should not be paying sources for information. Sure, the *National Enquirer* made this a practice for years—the tabloid famously paid Elvis Presley's cousin thousands of dollars to snap a picture of the King in his casket—but it's certainly not considered ethical. Payment can influence what a source might tell you.

Be Accountable and Transparent

This one is simple. If a journalist makes a mistake, they should acknowledge that and provide clear corrections of their errors. And transparency means transparency—how journalists do their work isn't meant to be a secret from those who watch, read, or listen to the news. It's more than okay to tell the public about the journalistic process and how you went about reporting a story.

Assignment

Listen carefully to a few interviews—some from late-night shows, some from news networks, some from YouTube, some from podcasts. As you're listening, write down any questions you have for the subject as they occur to you. When the interview is over, look at what you've written down and mark which questions the interview eventually answered, and circle which ones it didn't. How would you have steered the conversation differently in order to get answers to your questions?

Now listen to those same interviews again. This time, listen for follow-up questions. Make a note of each time the interviewer, instead of moving on to a different topic, asked another question about the answer the subject had just given so you get a sense of how follow-ups are executed. Would you have had the instinct to follow up in the same way? If not, how would you have done it?

10 Types of Interviews

Just as no two people are alike, no two interviews are alike—ask 100 people the same question and you'll probably get a different answer from each one of them. Even so, you may find yourself conducting the same types of interviews over and over again. Here are 10 of the most common ones, but there are endless others to be encountered.

1 The Personal Hardship Interview

In 2019, the actor Selma Blair invited Robin to her home to conduct Blair's first on-air interview since developing serious symptoms of multiple sclerosis. The fact that Blair invited the camera crew to her home meant something—not everyone wants you in their home. Robin took a signal from that. She was being warmly welcomed into the actor's personal life.

Part of Robin's homework for this sensitive interview was discovering why Blair wanted to speak with Robin as opposed to another journalist. Turns out it was because Robin had previously been public with her own health issues. To prep for the interview, Robin spent some time alone with Blair before the cameras started rolling (they hadn't met before). While it's always important to try and establish a rapport with your interview subjects, doing so is especially critical when they're talking about something particularly difficult to discuss publicly.

Before taping began, Robin asked some of the people who didn't have to be in the room for the interview if they could please wait elsewhere in order to make Blair as comfortable as possible. The idea was to make the interview feel more like an intimate conversation about an intimate subject.

When discussing someone else's hardships, you can always draw from your own experiences. If you can't find anything relative in your personal life, just be human, Robin says. Empathy—not to be confused with pity—will go a long way.

2 The New Book/Movie/Album Interview

Robin interviewed Michelle Obama right after she came out with her memoir, *Becoming*. Everyone wanted that interview, and Robin got it, so she had to make it good.

If you're doing an interview with somebody who's just written a book, *always read as much of the book as you can*. Same goes for listening to an artist's latest album or watching an actor's latest film. Doing so won't only give you knowledge of the book, but it will also give you deeper knowledge of your interview subject.

3 The Sensitive Subject Interview

Interviewing people isn't always going to be comfortable, and it won't always be in your best interest to make your subject comfortable. Sometimes tough questions can elicit the most illuminating answers. Just remember to ease into the trickier questions. If you start with the most controversial question at the top of the interview, your subject might clam up and you'll lose their trust or even cooperation for the rest of your allotted time.

4 The Tangent Interview

This is the flipside of the reticent interview—in this case, your subject is a person who talks too much. Asking them a simple question leads to a digression about that time they got into a fight as a child and broke their Gameboy—do you remember Gameboys? Well there was this one crazy game with a monkey… You get the gist.

Interrupting someone during an interview, particularly an on-air interview, can be awkward. You don't want to appear rude to the subject or to viewers. A polite interruption, however, is possible. Gently remind your guest that you have a limited amount of time and do have a few more important questions you'd like to get to.

5 The Groundbreaking Interview

Robin had recently been diagnosed with MDS, or myelodysplastic syndromes, a serious cancer-like condition that affects the sufferer's bone marrow, when she got the call that the White House wanted her to interview President Barack Obama. She had been in a horrible, hours-long doctor's appointment with a physician who told her, in essence, "dig a grave, you're going to die" (she fired the doctor and eventually overcame MDS). But at that time, when Robin left her appointment feeling gutted and spoke on the phone with her boss, then ABC news division president Ben Sherwood, about accepting the interview offer with the president of the United States, she told Ben she needed a minute.

"I shortly called him back after and I said yes," Robin says. "Of course, I'm going to do this interview."

Ben told Robin that he believed the president had requested the interview to announce he'd changed his stance on same-sex marriage—but they couldn't be sure. So Robin did her prep work, establishing an alternative conversation they could have just in case.

Whenever you're talking with someone as important as the president, you're given a short amount of time to do so. Robin had just minutes with President Obama. So she didn't waste time getting to the big question. "Mr. President, are you still opposed to same-sex marriage?" she asked. The president's answer was no. "I've just concluded that for me personally, it is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same-sex couples should be able to get married," he told Robin.

6 The Wait-Are-We-Best-Friends-Now? Interview

When you really click with your subject, it can feel easy to get derailed. You may selfishly find yourself wanting to turn away from the questions you'd planned to ask in favor of a conversation about whatever mutual interest you've discovered.

Do that after the interview is over. During the interview, it's okay to briefly acknowledge that you share an interest with your subject, but remember you're interviewing that person for the benefit of your viewers, who came to hear them talk about something else.

Also, getting too friendly with a subject can make you seem biased. Most news organizations will generally avoid having journalists interview people with whom they are genuinely friends. But a good journalist can make a stranger feel like a friend while still staying in line with journalistic ethics. Robin says that after her interview with Michelle Obama, some viewers suggested they looked like two girlfriends having a chat. "I'm glad that's how people looked at it," Robin says, because it showed she'd provided an environment in which Michelle felt comfortable sharing so much of herself.

7 The Political Interview

Politicians almost always have preplanned talking points. Ask them what you will, and they'll find a way to respond with a memorized script. To get around this, try asking something unexpected, or drill down on the specifics of their argument to get them out of speaking in generalizations. Bring up their critics' thoughts on their policies, or mention a historical example in which a similar policy failed to get them to elaborate on their ideas.

Then there's the issue of assumed bias. It doesn't matter what you say to the politician, says Robin. People are always going to challenge a journalist about their biases when they're interviewing a politician or political candidate. "Maybe that's because you have a bias when you're watching the interview," Robin challenges. She hangs on to this thought and doesn't take it personally when people accuse her of conducting biased political interviews. She does her job, asks non-leading questions, and hears her subjects out.

8 The Person on the Street Interview

As a TV news reporter, you may have to take to the streets and ask people what they think about an unfolding situation. The format is inherently a little jarring. Most people, when suddenly approached on the street by a person with a camera crew, will be instantly thrown off guard.

First of all, not everyone you approach is going to want to be interviewed on the air, and that's okay. For those who are up for it, keep your questions direct, simple, and to the point. You're looking for an average person's take on a current event, not their full backstory.

9 The Interview With a Person With Whom You Fundamentally Disagree

You're not going to like or agree with every person you interview. Sometimes you'll find your subject's views downright reprehensible. It's still your job to give them an opportunity to speak their mind to the public.

In these situations, remember not to let your biases show (everyone has biases—journalists aren't robots). Just ask your questions and don't visibly grimace. Of course, feel free to challenge your subject. If they express an idea that makes no sense, ask them to explain themselves more thoroughly, or bring up a fact that contradicts what they're saying. Just keep your tone composed and consistent. Viewers will be able to judge the subject's words for themselves.

10 The Reticent Interview

Over the course of your career, you'll inevitably find yourself interviewing someone who doesn't really want to talk, nor will all interview subjects be naturals on the air. For those who are shy and hesitant, or who respond to all your questions with two-word answers, open-ended follow-up questions are key. Avoid questions that can be answered in just a few words, and ask them to describe a moment or provide certain specifics.

As a heads up, this can often feel like pulling teeth. If you're repeatedly getting nothing from a subject, change tack. Instead of asking the same questions in different ways, maybe try bringing up a relatable moment from your life and seeing if they respond to that. By showing that you can be a bit vulnerable on air, maybe they'll follow your lead.

Diverse Representation in Newsrooms

When Robin was first asked to consider taking a job at ESPN, she decided not to because she hadn't yet racked up enough experience. She knew that if she made a mistake or didn't do as well as ESPN executives hoped, she would not be given much leeway because of her race and gender—a black woman has a lot less room for error in broadcast journalism (and most other male-dominated industries) than a white man.

It's a grim reality, but it's a reality nonetheless—one that's rooted in years of discrimination and unequal representation across American newsrooms. The media in the United States has historically been and continues to be an industry largely populated by white professionals, and particularly white men. Perhaps one of the first times this was formally addressed was in the 1960s due to a series of race-related riots in Detroit, Michigan. On the heels of those events, the Kerner Commission, an advisory board formed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, examined how a mostly white media often overlooked the cause of these riots. According to the commission, this problem could be remedied in part by increased diversity in newsrooms.

The media in the United States has historically been...largely populated by white professionals.

Decades later, the state of diversity in the news media has improved, but it's still not reflective of the U.S. population. According to a 2018 report by the Radio Television Digital News Association, the percentage of women and people of color in American TV newsrooms had reached a record high as of 2017. Across all TV newsroom staff, 24.8 percent were people of color in 2017, exceeding the previous high of 24.6 percent in 2001. Meanwhile, 17.4 percent of TV news directors were people of color in 2017 compared with just 7.9 percent in 1990. However, when about 38.8 percent of the total U.S. population is made up of people of color, about a quarter of a newsroom representing that population isn't too impressive.

The portion of women working in local TV news, according to the same RTDNA report, also rose in 2017—to 44.4 percent, up by 0.2 percent from the previous record year in 2015. (A bit more than 50 percent of the U.S. population is female, according to the country's Census Bureau.) Women made up 53.8 percent of African Americans in television news in 2017, while half of Latinx people in TV news were women. As for Asian Americans in newsrooms, 70 percent were women, while women accounted for 66.7 percent of Native Americans in newsrooms.

"Gender and ethnic diversity in newsrooms have hardly improved in the last decade," *NPR* reported in May 2017, citing studies by the American Society of News Editors, the Women's Media Center, and VIDA, an advocacy group focused on women and marginalized voices in literature. ASNE reported that women of color were hit particularly hard by layoffs that took place in the news industry in the 2010s.

Then there's the mentorship problem—a homogenous industry can breed more homogeneity. Robin says she was blessed to have quite a few supportive white men mentor her, like John A. Walsh, who hired her at ESPN. But as longtime news broadcaster Soledad O'Brien told the Women's Media Center in 2018, "There are so many microaggressions that come with being a journalist and female and not white."

Joy-Ann Reid, an MSNBC political analyst, talk show host, and columnist at *The Daily Beast* made a similar observation. "Things are better and they are not," she has said. "For every Ta-Nehisi Coates or Don Lemon or Van Jones in the spotlight of journalism, you've got a Tamron Hall or Melissa Harris-Perry exiting the daily news market. Women of color are not getting the same opportunity." But seeing other women of color in the news media helps. "Watching [the late] Gwen Ifill [on PBS], there was something edifying about seeing someone who looks like you in a position of influence, giving information," Reid said. "It's more credible than a bank of white male faces telling you what is."

Parting Words From Robin

Regardless of whom you're interviewing or what you're reporting on, the main objective is always the same. You're there to tell a story for the benefit of the public, your viewers (or readers or listeners). As Robin says, helping people tell their stories is the reason to go into journalism. If you have that desire, then you can follow in Robin's footsteps and tell stories to the world.

CREDITS

Various Pieces of News Footage
Courtesy ABCNEWS VIDEOSOURCE

ESPN Footage
Courtesy ESPN

Photo of *Good Morning America* co-anchors
ABC/Fred Lee