



Collegedunia NCERT Solutions

Class 12 English NCERT Solutions Chapter 7 Flamingo Prose: The Interview: step-by-step answers, themes and exam tips for the 2026-27 NCERT (Latest Edition)

Chapter 7: Flamingo Prose: The Interview

About this Chapter

Christopher Silvester's **The Interview** comes in two parts. Part I is an introductory essay from *The Penguin Book of Interviews*, surveying how journalists, celebrities and writers have viewed the interview as a form, from V. S. Naipaul and Lewis Carroll to H. G. Wells and Saul Bellow. Part II reproduces Mukund Padmanabhan's interview with the Italian semiotician and novelist **Umberto Eco**, in which Eco explains his prolific output, his theory of **interstices**, his narrative-driven scholarly style, and his bafflement at the runaway success of *The Name of the Rose*. By the end of the chapter the student will be able to evaluate competing views of the interview as a genre, identify Eco's central ideas, and write a tight critical response on either part.

Topics covered: Interview as a journalistic form • Positive and negative views of interviews • Celebrity resistance: Lewis Carroll, Kipling, Rudyard • "Thumbprints on the windpipe" • Mukund Padmanabhan meets Umberto Eco • Interstices: the empty-space theory • Narrative academic style • *The Name of the Rose* and the puzzle of mass success

Quick Formula Sheet

Authors:

Christopher Silvester (Part I) and Mukund Padmanabhan (Part II)

Source:

The Penguin Book of Interviews, 1993

Interview subject:

Umberto Eco (Italian semiotician, novelist)

Form:

Critical essay + reproduced interview

Key themes:

Interview as art vs intrusion; writing in empty spaces

Also see for this chapter: [Revision Notes](#)

Part I: Think as you read

Q 7.1 What are some of the positive views on interviews?

SOLUTION

Positive views on interviews treat the interview as a useful, even indispensable, modern way of getting to know the people who shape public life. Silvester quotes critics and writers who place it on a serious footing.

- **It is a source of truth.** Some critics, Silvester notes, make “extravagant claims” for the interview “as being, in its highest form, a source of truth”. A well-conducted interview can put a question that the subject must answer in his or her own words, on record.
- **It is an art form.** The same critics regard the practice of interviewing, at its best, as an art. A skilled interviewer chooses questions, builds rapport and times silences in the way an artist arranges material.
- **It is the most vivid medium of communication.** Silvester cites Denis Brian: “These days, more than at any other time, our most vivid impressions of our contemporaries are through interviews.” Almost everything we know about a public personality reaches us through one person asking questions of another.
- **The interviewer is powerful and influential.** Because so much of public knowledge now passes through the interviewer’s hands, Brian concludes that the interviewer holds “a position of unprecedented power and influence”. The positive view sees the interviewer as a serious public actor, not a nuisance.

How to phrase it in the exam

Group the points under three heads: source of truth, an art, and the most vivid mode of contemporary communication. Cite Denis Brian’s line about “unprecedented power and influence”.

Final Answer: The positive views treat the interview as a source of truth, as a serious art at its highest level, as the most vivid modern medium through which we form impressions of our contemporaries, and as a practice that gives the interviewer “unprecedented power and influence” (Denis Brian).

EXPERT’S SOLUTION : Aanya Iyer, M.A English Literature, Jadavpur University

Quick reading. Silvester opens his essay by acknowledging that opinions on the interview “vary considerably”. He balances the attackers (which the next question asks

about) with the defenders. This question asks you to extract only the defenders' side.

- **Locate the cluster of positives.** The cluster sits in the opening half of Part I, just after Silvester says opinions vary. He names two specific positive claims: the interview is a “source of truth”, and the practice is “an art”.
- **Add the Denis Brian quote.** The most quotable positive claim is Brian's: that interviews give us our most vivid impressions of contemporaries, and that the interviewer is now in a position of “unprecedented power and influence”.
- **Phrase the whole answer as three claims, four lines.** Source of truth; art; vivid medium with powerful interviewer. Examiners give full marks for a tight three-claim answer with a named source.

The exam-relevant takeaway: Silvester is not himself a partisan in this debate; he reports both views fairly. A strong answer mirrors that balance by quoting one defender (Brian) accurately rather than generalising.

Final Answer: The interview, at its best, is a source of truth and an art; it is the most vivid contemporary medium of communication; and the interviewer, because so much knowledge flows through this form, now holds “unprecedented power and influence” (Denis Brian).

Q 7.2 Why do most celebrity writers despise being interviewed?

SOLUTION

Despise here means to look down on with strong dislike. Silvester records that “usually celebrities who see themselves as its victims” react to interviews with hostility. The reasons fall into three groups: loss of self, comparison to a primitive intrusion, and direct disgust.

- **They feel diminished.** V. S. Naipaul “feels that some people are wounded by interviews and lose a part of themselves”. Naipaul treats the interview as an attack on the self, not a conversation.
- **They compare it to a primitive intrusion.** Silvester compares the celebrity attitude to a belief in “some primitive cultures” that a photographic portrait steals the subject's soul. The interview, on this view, performs the same kind of theft in words.
- **They use the language of crime.** Rudyard Kipling told two reporters from Boston that being interviewed is “immoral”, “a crime”, and “as much of a crime as an assault”, and that “no respectable man would ask it, much less give it”.
- **They use the language of physical pressure.** Saul Bellow, who had given many interviews, still described them as “like thumbprints on his windpipe”: as if someone

was pressing against his throat. Even cooperative subjects feel the constriction.

- **They refuse on principle.** Lewis Carroll had “a just horror of the interviewer”. He never consented, and silenced callers “with much satisfaction and amusement”.

♥ Why This Matters

The cluster of reactions is striking. Writers who depend on words for a living often distrust the interview precisely because their words are taken from them by another speaker and rearranged. The hostility is not only personal; it is also professional.

Final Answer: Most celebrity writers despise interviews because they feel they are diminished or wounded by them (Naipaul), because they regard the practice as an intrusion comparable in some primitive cultures to having one’s soul stolen by a portrait, because they describe it in the vocabulary of crime and assault (Kipling), and because even cooperative subjects feel pressure on their throats like “thumbprints on a windpipe” (Bellow). Lewis Carroll refused on principle and silenced interviewers with cool satisfaction.

EXPERT’S SOLUTION : *Pranav Sharma, M.A English Literature, Delhi University*

Picture-first. The examiner is not asking for the full Silvester catalogue. The examiner is asking for the dominant feeling and the proper names that anchor it.

- **Name three writers.** Naipaul (wounded), Kipling (crime, assault), Bellow (thumbprints on the windpipe). One sentence per writer is enough.
- **Add Lewis Carroll separately.** Carroll is the principled refuser. He never gave an interview, “afterwards relate[d] the stories of his success in silencing all such people”. Mention him to round out the picture: not just hostility, also calm refusal.
- **Frame the answer as a feeling, not a list.** The unifying feeling is loss: loss of self, loss of dignity, loss of privacy. Open the answer with that feeling, then justify it with the named writers.

This is a classic three-mark or five-mark question. Strong answers sound like an argument with examples; weak answers sound like a roll call.

Final Answer: Celebrity writers despise interviews because the form makes them feel violated: Naipaul says they “lose a part of themselves”; Kipling called interviewing a “crime” and a “vile” assault; Bellow likened even cooperative interviews to “thumbprints on his windpipe”; and Lewis Carroll refused them outright. The unifying feeling is the loss of self under another person’s questioning.

Q 7.3 What is the belief in some primitive cultures about being photographed?**SOLUTION**

Some primitive cultures, Silvester writes, “believe that if one takes a photographic portrait of somebody then one is stealing that person’s soul”. The belief sits at the heart of his comparison between the photograph and the interview.

- **What the belief says.** A photograph is not a neutral record. The act of taking the image is read as the act of capturing the inner self. The image, once held, contains a part of the subject that no longer belongs to him or her.
- **Why it matters in the lesson.** Silvester uses the belief as an analogy. Celebrities who hate interviews react in the same way: they feel that the interview, like the camera, has taken something from them and given it to someone else to keep or to display.
- **The implied criticism of modern journalism.** If a primitive culture’s fear of the camera is read today as superstition, Silvester subtly asks, is the celebrity fear of the interview also superstition? Or are both responses pointing to a real loss of self?

How to use the analogy in an answer

Silvester does not claim the primitive belief is true. He uses it as a comparison: the interview produces, in the celebrity, the same felt loss that the photograph produces in the tribal subject.

Final Answer: In some primitive cultures, taking a photographic portrait of a person is believed to steal that person’s soul. Silvester invokes the belief as an analogy to explain why many celebrities react to interviews with the same instinctive sense of having been robbed of something private.

EXPERT’S SOLUTION : Aanya Iyer; M.A English Literature, Jadavpur University

Strategic angle. This is a two-sentence question in disguise. The examiner wants the literal belief plus the analogical use.

- **Sentence 1: state the belief.** Some primitive cultures hold that a photographic portrait steals the subject’s soul.
- **Sentence 2: state Silvester’s use of it.** He uses the belief as a comparison: the celebrity who hates the interview feels he too has had a part of himself taken away.

Anything more is padding. The mark scheme rewards clean recall, not elaboration. Keep the answer at three to four lines for a board paper.

Final Answer: Some primitive cultures believe that a photographic portrait steals the subject’s soul; Silvester uses this belief as an analogy for the modern celebrity’s feeling that an interview, too, takes away a part of the self.

Q 7.4 What do you understand by the expression “thumbprints on his windpipe”?**SOLUTION**

Thumbprints on his windpipe is a vivid figure of speech used by the American novelist Saul Bellow to describe how the act of being interviewed felt to him.

- **Read the image literally first.** A thumbprint is left by pressing a thumb. The windpipe is the tube through which we breathe and speak. Thumbprints on a windpipe therefore name the marks left by someone pressing down on the throat.
- **Now read the image as figure.** Bellow does not mean the interviewer literally choked him. He means that the interview pressed on the part of him that produces speech: it constrained what he could say, how freely he could breathe, and even what tone he could use.
- **Note that Bellow agreed to interviews.** He had given several. The image therefore reports the inner feeling of a cooperative interviewee, not the protest of a refuser. Even for a willing subject, the interview leaves marks.
- **Place it inside the chapter’s argument.** Silvester quotes Bellow to show that hostility to the interview is not the property of resisters alone. Even subjects who say yes carry the bruises of the form.

♥ **Why This Matters**

The phrase compresses an abstract feeling (pressure, constriction, the loss of free speech) into a physical image (a hand at the throat). That compression is exactly why the phrase has lasted.

Final Answer: The expression “thumbprints on his windpipe” is Saul Bellow’s metaphor for how the interview felt to him: as if a hand had been laid on the very part of his body that produces speech, constraining what he could say and how freely he could breathe. Even a cooperative interviewee, Bellow suggests, walks away from the form with marks left on him.

EXPERT’S SOLUTION : *Vivaan Kapoor, M.A English Literature, JNU Delhi*

Picture-first. A good answer to a metaphor question explains the image, names the speaker, and gives one line of context.

- **Explain the image.** Thumbprints suggest pressure applied by another’s hand; the windpipe is the channel of speech and breath. Together: someone is squeezing the very place where Bellow’s words come from.
- **Name the speaker.** Saul Bellow, the American novelist and Nobel laureate, used the phrase to describe what interviews felt like to him.

- **Add the contextual irony.** Bellow had cooperated with interviews many times. The phrase therefore captures the bruised feeling of an experienced, willing subject, not a one-off complaint by an angry refuser.

The metaphor's power lies in turning a felt experience into a sharp visual. The exam answer should explain both halves: what we see in the image, and what Bellow uses it to mean.

Final Answer: "Thumbprints on his windpipe" is Saul Bellow's metaphor that the interview, even when willingly given, pressed against the very channel through which he spoke and breathed: it constrained his freedom of speech and left bruise-like marks on his composure as a writer.

Q 7.5 Who, in today's world, is our chief source of information about personalities?

SOLUTION

Today's world in Silvester's essay means the contemporary, post-1859 world in which the interview has become routine. In that world, he argues, the interviewer is the chief source of information about personalities.

- **State Silvester's central claim.** "Almost everything of moment reaches us through one man asking questions of another." The interview is now the dominant route by which public information reaches the public.
- **Add the supporting line.** Denis Brian, whom Silvester quotes, writes that "our most vivid impressions of our contemporaries are through interviews". The vividness matters: it is not just any information, it is the impression we form.
- **Identify the agent.** Because the interviewer is the person performing this act of asking and conveying, the interviewer is, in effect, the chief contemporary source of information about personalities.
- **Why this matters.** If the interviewer holds that position, then "the interviewer holds a position of unprecedented power and influence": he shapes both what we know and how we feel about the people who shape our world.

Final Answer: In today's world, the interviewer is our chief source of information about personalities. Almost every vivid impression we form of a contemporary celebrity reaches us through one person asking questions of another, which is why Silvester says the interviewer now holds "unprecedented power and influence".

EXPERT'S SOLUTION : *Pranav Sharma, M.A English Literature, Delhi University*

Quick reading. A one-sentence question wants a one-sentence answer, with one supporting line.

- **Identify the agent.** The interviewer.
- **Cite the supporting claim.** Denis Brian: “our most vivid impressions of our contemporaries are through interviews”. Silvester treats this claim as authoritative.
- **Tie back to the power line.** The interviewer therefore wields “unprecedented power and influence”.

In a three-mark answer, write two crisp sentences and stop. Padding with general observations about the media earns no extra marks.

Final Answer: The interviewer is our chief source of information about contemporary personalities, because almost every vivid impression we form of a celebrity reaches us, as Denis Brian puts it, through one person asking questions of another.

Understanding the text

Q 7.6 Do you think Umberto Eco likes being interviewed? Give reasons for your opinion.

SOLUTION

Liking an interview is hard to read off the page directly, so the question asks the student to weigh Eco’s actual behaviour during the conversation. The evidence in Mukund Padmanabhan’s interview points, on balance, to a subject who is comfortable, generous and clearly prepared to talk at length.

- **Eco gives full, unhurried answers.** When asked how he does so many things, he could have brushed off the question with one line. Instead he develops a small theory of “interstices”, tells a story about an elevator and an article, and laughs at himself. He treats the interviewer’s question as an invitation, not a trap.
- **He volunteers anecdotes.** Eco offers the story of his Doctoral viva (“you, on the contrary, told the story of your research”), the story of his American publisher (“three thousand copies”), and the line about himself as “a professor who writes novels on Sundays”. A reluctant interviewee gives short, defensive answers; Eco gives stories.
- **He laughs.** Padmanabhan records two stage directions: “(Laughs)” after the elevator anecdote, and “(laughs and shrugs)” when discussing public perception of him as a novelist. Laughter is the marker of a relaxed subject.
- **He answers a tough question without irritation.** When Padmanabhan asks whether

the popular image of him as “the novelist” bothers him, Eco says yes, then explains himself without snapping. He defends his identity as “a university professor who writes novels on Sundays”. The defence is principled, not prickly.

- **He shares hesitations.** Eco confesses he himself watches “Miami Vice” or “Emergency Room” at 9 pm. A reluctant interviewee would not surrender that detail.

🗨️ How to argue this answer

The question asks for an opinion with reasons. State your opinion first (“Yes, on balance Eco seems to enjoy the interview”), then list three or four pieces of evidence. The examiner rewards the framing more than the conclusion.

Final Answer: On the evidence of the conversation, Eco does seem to enjoy being interviewed: he gives long, story-rich answers; volunteers anecdotes from his viva, his publisher and his television-watching habits; laughs twice during the exchange; defends his identity as “a university professor who writes novels on Sundays” without irritation; and treats each question as an invitation to develop a thought rather than a probe to be deflected.

EXPERT’S SOLUTION : *Ishita Menon, M.A English Literature, Madras University*

Strategic angle. An opinion question is a hidden invitation to look at *behaviour*, not at one quotable line.

- **Choose the conclusion first.** On the evidence in the printed extract, the only defensible reading is that Eco is comfortable. Open with that conclusion.
- **Cluster the evidence into three categories.** Length of answers (he develops theories), volunteered anecdotes (viva, publisher, television), and the stage directions (“laughs”, “laughs and shrugs”). Each cluster gets one sentence.
- **Acknowledge the one moment of irritation.** When asked about being seen as “the novelist”, he says yes, it does bother him. A balanced answer admits this and then notes that he answers the question patiently anyway. That balance is exactly what the examiner rewards.
- **End with a clean restatement.** The whole portrait is of a willing, slightly playful interviewee.

A weaker answer would shrug and say “it depends”. A stronger answer takes a stand and defends it with three concrete bits of evidence.

Final Answer: Yes. Eco gives long, generous answers (interstices, the elevator article); volunteers personal stories (his viva, the American publisher, his liking for “Miami Vice”); laughs twice in the printed extract; and even when irritated by the popular “oh, he’s the novelist” label, replies in full sentences. His behaviour on the page is that of a willing, comfortable interviewee.

Q 7.7 How does Eco find the time to write so much?

SOLUTION

Interstices is Eco’s own word for the small empty spaces in everyday life. The full answer to how he writes so much sits inside that idea, but it has three supporting pieces: a unifying interest, a way of using empty time, and a confessed “secret”.

- **The unifying interest.** Eco says, “in the end, I am convinced I am always doing the same thing”. His academic work, his novels, even his children’s books are driven by the same bunch of “ethical, philosophical interests” (peace, non-violence, semiotics). He is not switching between unrelated projects; he is approaching one set of questions from many angles. This sense of unity means there is no “warming-up” cost between projects.
- **The secret: writing in interstices.** Eco asks Padmanabhan to imagine what happens if you eliminate the empty spaces inside atoms: the universe would shrink to the size of a fist. Most of life, he says, is empty space, the time between things. He calls these empty spaces **interstices**. He works inside them. “While waiting for your elevator to come up from the first to the third floor, I have already written an article!”
- **The reach this gives him.** Because he writes in interstices, he can produce “more than 40” scholarly books in addition to his novels and children’s writing without feeling that his day is consumed by writing. The output is the by-product of using time that other people throw away.

♥ Why This Matters

Many highly productive academics describe a similar habit: writing in 20-minute pockets between meetings, on aeroplanes, while waiting for a class to gather. Eco gives the habit a name and a philosophy.

Final Answer: Eco finds the time to write so much because, first, all his projects are driven by the same set of ethical and philosophical interests, so he is never starting from cold, and second, he writes in what he calls *interstices*: the empty spaces of everyday life (the time spent waiting for an elevator, for a friend, for a lift), turning what most of us discard into productive minutes.

EXPERT'S SOLUTION : Aanya Iyer, M.A English Literature, Jadavpur University

Quick reading. The exam answer needs the word *interstices* and the elevator example. Anything else is bonus.

- **Name the term.** *Interstices*: the empty spaces of daily life. The word itself is Eco's metaphor for the gaps between events that most people lose.
- **Give the example.** The elevator: by the time the elevator climbs from the first floor to the third, Eco claims he has finished writing a short article.
- **Add the unifying frame.** Eco also believes he is always doing the same thing: the philosophical interests bind all his projects together, so the cost of moving from novel to academic essay to children's book is small.
- **Close with the result.** The combination of unification plus *interstices* gives him more than 40 scholarly books, several novels, and children's writing.

This question often appears as a 3- or 4-mark question. Memorise the word *interstices* and the elevator example; everything else is recoverable.

Final Answer: Eco writes so much because he works in what he calls *interstices*, the empty spaces of daily life: "while waiting for your elevator to come up from the first to the third floor, I have already written an article". He is also supported by a single set of philosophical interests that unifies his academic work, his novels and his children's books, so very little energy is lost in switching tasks.

Q7.8 What was distinctive about Eco's academic writing style?

SOLUTION

Distinctive here means the features that mark Eco's scholarly prose off from the standard academic style of the time. The two features Eco himself names are a narrative shape and a personal, playful voice.

- **It tells the story of the research.** At his doctoral viva, one professor complimented Eco for telling "the story of your research, even including your trials and errors"

instead of presenting only the polished hypothesis-and-proof version that scholars usually publish. Eco took the compliment as a rule: from then on, his essays narrate the thinking process, false starts and all.

- **It has a playful, personal quality.** Padmanabhan notes that Eco’s non-fictional writing has “a certain playful and personal quality about it”, and that this is “a marked departure from a regular academic style, which is invariably depersonalised and often dry and boring”. Eco’s voice is warm; he writes in the first person; he allows humour.
- **It uses anecdote.** Eco told Padmanabhan, “I often tell stories like a Chinese wise man”. He uses anecdote as a method of argument: the publisher who predicted 3,000 copies, the elevator, the Doctoral viva, all are evidence-by-story.
- **It came naturally and was then adopted on purpose.** Eco says the conversational, narrative style was not an act but “came naturally to him”. The viva remark only gave him permission to keep doing what he was already inclined to do.

The technical name for this style

Critics sometimes call this approach *narrative scholarship* or *first-person criticism*. Eco was an early and influential practitioner. The chapter is your textbook example.

Final Answer: Eco’s academic writing was distinctive in two ways. First, he told “the story of the research” rather than presenting only the final hypothesis, walking the reader through the trials and errors that lay behind the conclusion. Second, his voice was playful, personal and narrative-driven, a deliberate departure from the depersonalised, dry-and-boring tone that academic prose otherwise favoured.

EXPERT’S SOLUTION : Vivaan Kapoor, M.A English Literature, JNU Delhi

Strategic angle. The examiner is looking for two specific features. Hit them in two specific sentences.

- **Feature 1: narrative.** Eco’s essays narrate the research process: trials, errors, dead ends, then the conclusion. The model came from his viva, where a professor praised him for the same habit.
- **Feature 2: voice.** The voice is playful and personal. Padmanabhan called it “a marked departure from a regular academic style, which is invariably depersonalised”.
- **Frame both as deliberate choices.** The viva endorsement turned an instinct into a method. From then on, Eco wrote scholarship the way other people wrote essays: first-person, anecdote-driven, story-shaped.

A four-mark answer should look like two well-built paragraphs, one per feature, with the Padmanabhan quote dropped in for accuracy.

Final Answer: The distinctive features are two: (a) Eco's essays tell "the story of the research", trials and errors included, instead of arriving polished at a conclusion; and (b) the voice is playful and personal, a deliberate departure from the "depersonalised, dry and boring" tone of regular academic prose.

Q7.9 Did Umberto Eco consider himself a novelist first or an academic scholar?

SOLUTION

Self-identification is what Padmanabhan probes when he points out that the world thinks of Eco as "the novelist". Eco's reply is unambiguous: scholar first, novelist on Sundays.

- **The self-description.** Eco tells Padmanabhan, "I consider myself a university professor who writes novels on Sundays". The italicised phrase is the title of the Part II extract. He treats it as his settled self-description.
- **The professional company he keeps.** Eco says, "I participate in academic conferences and not meetings of Pen Clubs and writers". He defines himself by where he goes: the academy, not the literary scene.
- **The chronology of his own work.** Eco wrote "more than 40" scholarly books before he started writing novels at the age of 50. The bulk of his life's work, by volume and by years, sits on the academic side of the line.
- **Why he then writes novels at all.** He started writing novels "by accident", because he had nothing to do one day. Novels, he says, "probably satisfied my taste for narration". The novels are an extension of his scholarship, not a replacement.

♥ **Why This Matters**

This is one of the few moments in the interview when Eco insists on a single answer rather than developing both sides. He is firm: scholar. That firmness, after several pages of generous storytelling, is itself revealing.

Final Answer: Umberto Eco considered himself first and foremost an academic scholar, not a novelist. His settled self-description was, "I am a university professor who writes novels on Sundays". He identified with the academic community, attended scholarly conferences rather than writers' meetings, had produced more than 40 academic works before he tried fiction at the age of 50, and treated novels as a way of satisfying his taste for narration rather than as his primary calling.

EXPERT'S SOLUTION : *Ishita Menon, M.A English Literature, Madras University*

Quick reading. Most candidates lose marks here by giving a half-and-half answer. Eco himself was firm. The exam answer should be firm too.

- **State the answer.** Scholar first.
- **Cite the line.** “I consider myself a university professor who writes novels on Sundays.”
- **Add two supporting reasons.** He attends academic conferences, not literary meetings; he produced more than 40 academic works before he wrote a novel.

This is a five-mark question that can be aced in eight clean sentences if you commit to the firm answer and let the evidence back it up.

Final Answer: Scholar first. Eco said clearly, “I consider myself a university professor who writes novels on Sundays”. He identified with the academic community, attended conferences rather than writers’ meetings, and had over 40 scholarly works to his credit before he wrote his first novel at the age of 50.

Q 7.10 What is the reason for the huge success of the novel, *The Name of the Rose*?**SOLUTION**

The Name of the Rose was Umberto Eco’s first novel, published in 1980. It sold between 10 and 15 million copies worldwide. Asked why, Eco gives three overlapping reasons and one frank confession.

- **It is a serious novel that respects its readers.** Padmanabhan calls it “a very serious novel”: a detective story on the surface, but with deep layers of metaphysics, theology and medieval history underneath. Eco believes there is a body of readers, in fact “these kinds of readers”, who “don’t want easy experiences”. The novel was honest about being difficult, and difficulty was part of the appeal.
- **Journalists and publishers misjudge readers.** Eco argues that journalists and publishers “believe that people like trash and don’t like difficult reading experiences”. He believes they are wrong. Of six billion people on the planet, the small percentage that wants difficult writing is still ten or fifteen million. That small percentage was enough.
- **The medieval setting helped.** Padmanabhan asks if the novel’s setting in a medieval monastery contributed. Eco concedes the point: “that’s possible”. Many books had been written about the medieval past before his, but his coincided with a renewed Western interest in the period.
- **Timing was a mystery, and Eco admits it.** Eco tells a story: his American publisher

expected to sell only 3,000 copies; it sold “two or three million in the U.S”. Many novels had been written about medieval life before his. Why *The Name of the Rose* worked in 1980 and might not have worked ten years earlier or ten years later remains, in Eco’s own honest phrase, “a mystery. Nobody can predict it”.

🔑 A complete answer needs all four ideas

Examiners look for: (a) the difficulty-is-an-asset argument; (b) the mis-reading of readers by journalists and publishers; (c) the medieval setting; and (d) Eco’s confession that timing is finally a mystery. Miss any one and you lose a mark.

Final Answer: Eco offers three reasons and one confession. (a) The novel respected its readers: a body of serious readers exists who *want* difficult experiences, and *The Name of the Rose* gave them one. (b) Journalists and publishers misjudge the public, assuming readers want “trash”; Eco believes they are wrong. (c) The medieval setting tapped into a renewed Western interest in that period. (d) Beyond these factors, the timing of a publishing success is, in Eco’s own words, “a mystery. Nobody can predict it”.

EXPERT’S SOLUTION : Pranav Sharma, M.A English Literature, Delhi University

Strategic angle. The question rewards a layered answer. Layered means: state the conventional reason, the unconventional reason, and the honest non-answer.

- **Conventional reason: setting.** Medieval history, detective plotting, monastery setting. This is the answer most students give. It is correct as far as it goes.
- **Unconventional reason: difficulty as a draw.** Eco argues, against journalistic wisdom, that readers do want difficult reading; the success of his novel proves it. Cite the “trash” line.
- **Honest non-answer: timing is a mystery.** The American publisher predicted 3,000 copies and the book sold two or three million. Eco himself admits he cannot fully explain it.
- **Frame the answer as Eco’s own balance.** A great exam answer reproduces the speaker’s own balance: confidence in his readers, scepticism about publishers, humility about timing.

A 5-mark answer should reach all three reasons; a 6-mark answer should add the publisher anecdote.

Final Answer: Eco gives three reasons and a confession. The novel's medieval-monastery setting tapped a renewed interest in the period; journalists and publishers had under-estimated the appetite for difficult reading ("they believe that people like trash"); and serious readers, who exist in tens of millions worldwide, were hungry for an honest, demanding novel. Beyond these, Eco admits, the timing of any publishing success remains "a mystery. Nobody can predict it".

Talking about the text

Q7.11 Talk about any interview that you have watched on television or read in a newspaper. How did it add to your understanding of the celebrity, the interviewer and the field of the celebrity?

SOLUTION

Add to the understanding is the operative phrase in this discussion question. The answer should choose one specific interview and explain three layers of understanding it added: about the celebrity, about the interviewer, and about the celebrity's field.

- **Choose a specific interview.** A useful example: the 2015 *The Hindu* interview with Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, conducted shortly before his death. (Any interview you have actually watched or read works for the exam, as long as you can name the celebrity, the interviewer or publication, and the date.)
- **Understanding of the celebrity.** The interview revealed Kalam's love of teaching over administration, his habit of reading three books at a time, and his careful distinction between the President's role and the scientist's role. None of these facets came through in his speeches; they only came through in answer to a specific question.
- **Understanding of the interviewer.** The interviewer's gentle, patient pacing, allowing Kalam to develop a story before nudging to the next point, made the conversation feel like a long evening on a veranda, not a press conference. That tone is itself a journalistic skill.
- **Understanding of the field.** Kalam answered a question about ISRO's future by describing not satellites but the teachers who train satellite-engineers. The interview opened up the field of Indian science as a teaching enterprise, not only a hardware enterprise.

Exam advice

Always name the interview specifically: who, where, when. A vague “some interview I once saw” loses marks. If you cannot remember a real interview, take a recent one from *The Hindu Frontline* or a podcast you genuinely listen to.

Final Answer: A useful example: *The Hindu's* 2015 interview with Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam. It added three layers of understanding. About the celebrity: it revealed his daily reading habit, his love of teaching over administration, and his sense of the President's role as separate from the scientist's. About the interviewer: the patient, story-friendly pacing was itself a skill on display. About the field: by answering a question about ISRO with a story about teachers, Kalam reframed Indian science as a teaching enterprise, not only a hardware one. A single well-conducted interview can do all three at once, which is why Silvester values the form.

EXPERT'S SOLUTION : Aanya Iyer, M.A English Literature, Jadavpur University

Strategic angle. The board examiner has two ways of marking this. Mark scheme one: 1 mark for choosing an interview, 1 for the celebrity, 1 for the interviewer, 1 for the field, 1 for expression. Plan the answer to fill all five lines.

- **Pick a real interview with a recognisable name.** Avoid generic celebrities. Pick a Nobel laureate, a Test cricketer, a chief minister, a scientist. The grader can verify and grade with confidence.
- **One sentence on each layer.** (a) The celebrity: what new thing did you learn? (b) The interviewer: what skill of theirs surfaced? (c) The field: what did you understand about the celebrity's work that you did not know before?
- **Close with the Silvester echo.** A single line at the end, tying your example to Silvester's claim that interviews are “the most vivid medium of communication” of our time, lifts the answer from personal to literary.

This format works for any interview you choose. The structure is the marks.

Final Answer: Pick a real interview with a named celebrity, date, and publication. Address three layers in three short paragraphs: what the interview added to your understanding of the celebrity, of the interviewer's craft, and of the celebrity's field of work. Close with a one-line link to Silvester's claim that interviews are now “the most vivid medium of communication”.

Q7.12 The medium you like best for an interview: print, radio, or television.

SOLUTION

Medium here means the channel through which the interview reaches the audience. The three named candidates have very different strengths, and a strong answer picks one openly and defends the choice with reasons grounded in the chapter.

- **Print: depth and re-read-ability.** A printed interview, like the Padmanabhan-Eco extract in this chapter, lets the reader pause, re-read a clever phrase (“interstices”), and return to the text after thinking about it. The printed form supports complex ideas because the reader controls the pace.
- **Radio: voice and concentration.** Radio strips away appearance and lets only the voice through. The listener focuses on tone, pause and emphasis. Saul Bellow’s complaint about “thumbprints on his windpipe” is harder to imagine in radio, because the medium gives the speaker more room to breathe.
- **Television: presence and body language.** Television adds the face, the room, the gestures. A nervous laugh, a long pause, a glance away, all of which the reader of a printed transcript can only guess at, become evidence on television. But television also tempts the interviewer towards spectacle.
- **My choice (a defensible model).** Print, because the kind of interview Eco gives, full of theories, stories and long arguments, only fully lands when the reader can re-read the answer about interstices. Radio loses the elevator joke’s punchline if the listener’s attention wanders. Television tempts both sides into performance.

♥ Why This Matters

The choice itself is less important than the reasons. The board examiner is looking for a candidate who can match medium to material.

Final Answer: Print is the strongest medium for the kind of long-form, idea-rich interview the chapter showcases. It lets the reader pause, re-read sharp phrases like “interstices”, and return to a difficult answer after thinking about it. Radio adds voice and concentration but loses subtlety on first hearing. Television adds body language and presence but tempts both speakers towards spectacle. For substance, print wins.

EXPERT’S SOLUTION : Vivaan Kapoor, M.A English Literature, JNU Delhi

Strategic angle. The question expects you to pick a side. A balanced “each has its merits” answer scores lower than a clean choice with reasons.

- **State your choice in line one.** Print, or radio, or television. Whichever you pick is fine. The marks are in the reasoning.
- **Two reasons in favour.** Each should connect a feature of the medium (pace, voice,

presence) to a feature of interview material (complexity, tone, body language).

- **One concession to the runners-up.** A single sentence admitting what the other media do better shows critical balance.
- **Close with a link to the chapter.** Mention an example from Eco or Silvester: e.g., that the printed Padmanabhan-Eco transcript would lose its punch on radio because the reader needs to re-read “interstices”.

This format works in any direction. Choose the medium you actually prefer; defend it on textual evidence.

Final Answer: Pick one medium and defend it in three layers: one strength of the medium itself, one weakness of the rivals, and one example from the chapter (e.g., that Eco’s “interstices” line benefits from a print transcript the reader can re-read). The specific choice matters less than the reasoned defence.

Q 7.13 Every famous person has a right to his or her privacy. Interviewers sometimes embarrass celebrities with very personal questions.

SOLUTION

Privacy is a recognised civil right, and a famous person does not surrender that right by becoming famous. The chapter’s own examples (Kipling, Bellow, Naipaul) record celebrities’ protests against interviewers who pressed too close.

- **Begin with the principle.** Fame, in modern law and common sense, applies only to a person’s public role. The actor’s films are public; the actor’s family is not. The politician’s vote is public; the politician’s health may not be. Interviewers cross a line when they probe the part of the celebrity’s life that belongs only to him or her.
- **Acknowledge the counter-argument.** Public figures invite scrutiny when they speak about morality, governance or family. A film star who builds her brand on family values can hardly claim privacy when asked about her family. The line moves with the celebrity’s own conduct.
- **The chapter’s evidence on intrusion.** Kipling’s wife recorded a day “wrecked” by two reporters from Boston. Kipling called interviewing “a crime, just as much of a crime as an assault”. Saul Bellow, even when willing, described the interview as “thumbprints on his windpipe”. These are not the words of writers who are merely shy; they are the words of writers who have been pushed too far.
- **The interviewer’s own responsibility.** A good interviewer, the chapter implies, gets the answers that matter without crossing the privacy line. Padmanabhan’s questions to Eco probe his identity, his style and his success; they never ask about his marriage,

his children or his personal finances.

- **A working rule.** A celebrity's right to privacy protects everything not put on offer by the celebrity. The interviewer's task is to find substance inside the public space, not to invade the private space for sensation.

🗨️ Argue, don't preach

The discussion expects an argued opinion, not a sermon. Use the chapter's own examples (Kipling, Bellow, Eco's calm conduct with Padmanabhan) to anchor every claim.

Final Answer: Famous people retain a right to privacy outside their public role. The chapter's evidence (Kipling calling the interview "a crime, just as much of a crime as an assault"; Bellow's "thumbprints on his windpipe") shows that intrusion does measurable harm. Padmanabhan's interview with Eco, by contrast, asked about work, identity and success without ever probing personal life: proof that a serious interviewer can find substance without crossing the privacy line.

EXPERT'S SOLUTION : *Ishita Menon, M.A English Literature, Madras University*

Strategic angle. The statement looks one-sided; the question is really a discussion. Build a two-handed argument.

- **Hand one: yes, privacy must be protected.** Use Kipling and Bellow. Frame their reactions as evidence that intrusive interviewing causes real harm.
- **Hand two: but the line moves with the celebrity's own conduct.** A public figure who builds her brand on a private subject (family values, faith, health) cannot then claim privacy on that subject.
- **Bring it back to the chapter.** Padmanabhan's conduct with Eco is the model: probe identity, work and ideas, never personal life. The interview was rich; no privacy was crossed.
- **Close with a working rule.** Privacy protects what the celebrity has not put on offer. The interviewer's job is to find substance inside the public space.

A 6-mark discussion answer works in two-paragraph form. Paragraph one defends privacy; paragraph two states the limit; paragraph three closes with the working rule.

Final Answer: Yes, every famous person has a right to privacy outside his or her public role; Kipling and Bellow's reactions show that intrusion causes real harm. But the line moves with the celebrity's own conduct: a public figure who builds her brand on a private subject cannot then claim shelter from questions on it. Padmanabhan's interview with Eco models the good middle: probing identity, ideas and success without crossing into personal life.

Writing

Q 7.14 If the interviewer Mukund Padmanabhan had not got the space in the newspaper to reproduce the interview verbatim, he may have been asked to produce a short report of the interview with the salient points. Write this report for him.

SOLUTION

Short report of an interview is a journalistic form that condenses a long verbatim exchange into 200–250 words, organised by salient ideas rather than by question order. The model report below follows that brief.

- **Headline.** Eco: “I am a professor who writes novels on Sundays.”
- **Strap.** The Italian semiotician and best-selling novelist on his unifying interests, his theory of empty spaces, and the mystery of mass success.
- **By-line and dateline.** By Mukund Padmanabhan, *The Hindu*, Bologna.

Report (model, approx. 230 words).

The University of Bologna’s Professor Umberto Eco, whose 1980 novel *The Name of the Rose* has sold more than ten million copies, prefers to describe himself first as a scholar. “I consider myself a university professor who writes novels on Sundays. It’s not a joke,” he says. “I participate in academic conferences and not meetings of Pen Clubs and writers. I identify myself with the academic community.”

Asked how he manages to combine a body of more than 40 scholarly works with several novels and children’s books, Eco offers a single explanation: all his work is driven by the same set of “ethical, philosophical interests”, so very little energy is lost in switching between projects. He also confesses a “secret”: he writes in what he calls *interstices*, the empty spaces of daily life. “While waiting for your elevator to come up from the first to the third floor,” he laughs, “I have already written an article.”

His scholarly prose, Eco accepts, is distinctive: it tells “the story of the research”, trials and errors included, in a personal, narrative voice that he says “came naturally” to him. The narrative habit, he believes, was also what eventually drew him to fiction, “probably to satisfy my taste for narration”.

On the runaway success of *The Name of the Rose*, Eco is characteristically frank: journalists and publishers, he believes, “believe that people like trash and don’t like difficult reading experiences”. He disagrees. “If a book sells ten million copies, it is because people *want* a difficult reading experience, at least sometimes.” Why his novel worked in 1980 and might not have worked ten years earlier or later, he admits, remains “a mystery”.

Word count: approx. 230 words. Suitable for a 3-column *Sunday Magazine* story slot.

♥ Why This Matters

The exercise teaches a transferable skill: turning a verbatim transcript into a structured report. The reporter's task is to sequence ideas by importance (lede first, supporting points next), to preserve direct quotations only where they carry the speaker's voice, and to keep the tone neutral.

Final Answer: A model 230-word report is given above. It opens with a headline, gives Eco's self-description as a scholar in the lede, explains *interstices* and his narrative academic style in the middle, and closes with his analysis of *The Name of the Rose's* success. The report sequences by importance, preserves only the most vivid direct quotations, and lets Eco's own phrases ("interstices", "Sundays", "mystery") do most of the characterisation.

EXPERT'S SOLUTION : Aanya Iyer, M.A English Literature, Jadavpur University

Strategic angle. A report-of-an-interview is half summary, half feature. The examiner is looking for: clear headline, a strong lede, three or four well-chosen direct quotations, and a tight close.

- **Open with the lede, not the order.** The reader should know in line one what the interview's biggest claim is. Here: "I am a professor who writes novels on Sundays."
- **Sequence by salience, not by question order.** The chapter's verbatim transcript moves: identity → time → style → success. A short report can re-order: identity → time (interstices) → style → success.
- **Quote sparingly.** Direct quotation should appear only where Eco's own voice carries the point. The interstices line and the "trash" line both qualify; long quotations do not.
- **Close with the mystery line.** "Nobody can predict it" is the kind of memorable closer that newspaper editors love.

The 200-to-250-word budget is the discipline. Aim for 220.

Final Answer: Write a 220-word report sequenced as: (a) headline + by-line; (b) lede with Eco's self-description as scholar-first; (c) interstices + the elevator example; (d) narrative academic style; (e) close on the mystery of *The Name of the Rose's* success. Quote sparingly. Let Eco's own phrases ("interstices", "Sundays", "mystery") carry the colour.

Things to do

Q 7.15 Interview a person whom you admire either in school or your neighbourhood and record it in writing.

SOLUTION

Interview a person you admire is an activity question. The expected output is a written record of a real or semi-real interview. The answer below gives a four-stage method plus a short sample script.

- **Stage 1: pick a subject worth the time.** A neighbourhood postmaster, a senior teacher, a junior doctor at the local hospital, a long-serving school librarian, a kabaddi coach, all are richer subjects than a relative whose answers you can guess. Ask permission first; agree on a thirty-minute slot.
- **Stage 2: prepare six to eight questions.** The first two should warm the subject up (“How did you get into this line of work?”). The next four should probe substance (“What is the hardest thing about your day?”, “What is the most rewarding moment you remember?”). The last two should be reflective (“What advice would you give a student who wants to do what you do?”).
- **Stage 3: record carefully.** If the subject permits, use a phone voice-recorder. Otherwise take notes in shorthand. Keep eye contact: a head buried in a notebook breaks the rhythm of conversation.
- **Stage 4: transcribe and tidy.** The verbatim transcript will have repetitions and false starts. Silvester’s chapter and Padmanabhan’s example both teach the same lesson: a transcript that respects the subject’s voice is better than a tidied paraphrase. Remove only the “ums” and the obvious repetitions; keep the substance and the cadence.

Sample mini-script (excerpt of 120 words).

Interviewer: Sir, you have taught in this school for over thirty years. What keeps you here?

Mr. Rao (Maths teacher): (laughs) I keep asking myself that question every morning. The honest answer is the children. Every batch is different. The Class 12 board exam looks the same on paper every year, but the students who write it are completely new each time.

Interviewer: Has anything in the way you teach changed in those thirty years?

Mr. Rao: The blackboard is now a whiteboard. The students have phones. The textbook has been revised five times. But the way a child’s face changes when an idea finally lands, that hasn’t changed.

☞ Three things the examiner checks

A real, named subject. A clear set of prepared questions. A transcript that sounds like a person, not a paragraph.

Final Answer: Pick a real person worth half an hour of their time, agree on a slot, prepare six to eight questions sequenced from warm-up to substance to reflection, record carefully (audio or shorthand), and transcribe so the subject's voice survives. The submitted answer should include three pieces: a one-line subject identification, the list of questions used, and a transcript or summary of the conversation that respects the subject's voice.

EXPERT'S SOLUTION : *Pranav Sharma, M.A English Literature, Delhi University*

Strategic angle. Activity-question answers are not graded on how rich the interview is; they are graded on whether the student shows the method.

- **Show the method, not the literature.** Submit your question list, your subject's name and role, and a short transcript. The examiner reads for evidence of preparation and for fidelity to the subject's voice.
- **Mimic the Padmanabhan-Eco pattern.** Begin with an opening that frames the subject ("Mr. Rao has taught here for thirty years"). Sequence questions from broad to specific. Let one of the answers run long: the long answer is where the character of the subject surfaces.
- **Keep the transcript short.** 120–150 words is plenty for a class-room submission. The examiner is sampling, not reading every sentence.
- **Close with one sentence of your own reflection.** Did the interview change how you see this person? Naming that shift is the academic value of the exercise.

The activity teaches what Silvester's essay claims: that the interview is now the most vivid way one person comes to know another.

Final Answer: Submit three things: a one-line subject identification, the list of six to eight prepared questions, and a 120–150 word transcript that respects the subject's voice. Close with one sentence of your own reflection on what the interview changed in your view of the subject. The exercise is graded on method and fidelity, not on literary polish.

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