



# Collegedunia NCERT Notes

Class 12 English Notes Chapter 7 Flamingo Prose: The Interview

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## Chapter 7: The Interview

Part I by Christopher Silvester; Part II by Mukund Padmanabhan

Also see for this chapter: [NCERT Solutions](#)

### Why these notes?

*The Interview* is a two-part Flamingo Prose chapter. Part I is an essay by Christopher Silvester drawn from his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Interviews*, which surveys conflicting attitudes to the interview as a form. Part II is a printed extract from Mukund Padmanabhan's interview with the Italian semi-otician and novelist Umberto Eco. For the Class 12 board paper, the chapter is a steady source of short-answer questions on themes (interview as art vs intrusion), character-style questions on Eco (interstices, narrative style), and longer interpretive questions on the writers Silvester quotes (Naipaul, Kipling, Bellow, Lewis Carroll). These notes cover both parts, the central themes, the named writers, the key phrases the examiner expects, and a tight set of likely board questions with model answers.

## Contents

<b>1 Introduction: The Lesson at a Glance</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1 The two authors at a glance . . . . .	3
1.2 Plot movement at one glance . . . . .	3
<b>2 Part I: Silvester's Essay on the Interview</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1 When and how the interview began . . . . .	4
2.2 The positive view of interviews . . . . .	4

2.3	The negative view: celebrity resistance . . . . .	5
2.4	The soul-stealing analogy . . . . .	5
2.5	H. G. Wells and the irony of the form . . . . .	6
2.6	“Thumbprints on his windpipe” . . . . .	6
2.7	Silvester’s own balancing claim . . . . .	6
<b>3</b>	<b>Part II: Padmanabhan’s Interview with Umberto Eco</b>	<b>7</b>
3.1	Movement 1: Who is Eco, really? . . . . .	7
3.2	Movement 2: How does he find the time? . . . . .	7
3.3	Movement 3: His narrative academic style . . . . .	8
3.4	Movement 4: “Scholar first, novelist on Sundays” . . . . .	8
3.5	Movement 5: <i>The Name of the Rose</i> and the puzzle of mass success . . . . .	9
<b>4</b>	<b>Themes, Style and Likely Board Questions</b>	<b>9</b>
4.1	Main themes of the chapter . . . . .	9
4.2	Literary devices and style . . . . .	10
4.3	Likely board questions with model answers . . . . .	11
<b>5</b>	<b>Glossary, Tone and Examiner’s Hooks</b>	<b>12</b>
5.1	Key terms with meanings . . . . .	12
5.2	Tone and voice . . . . .	12
5.3	Five common board-paper traps . . . . .	13

## 1 Introduction: The Lesson at a Glance

*The Interview* is unusual in the Flamingo book because it is the only chapter built out of two completely different pieces of writing. Part I is a critical essay by Christopher Silvester, originally the introduction to *The Penguin Book of Interviews: An Anthology from 1859 to the Present Day*. Part II is a verbatim extract from a 2000s interview with Umberto Eco, conducted by Mukund Padmanabhan of *The Hindu*. Together, the two parts ask the same question from opposite ends: Part I asks “what is an interview, and is it worth doing?”; Part II shows what a serious interview actually looks like.

## 1.1 The two authors at a glance

### Christopher Silvester (Part I)

- **Born:** 1959.
- **Education:** Studied history at Peterhouse, Cambridge.
- **Career:** Ten years at the British satirical magazine *Private Eye*; feature writer for *Vanity Fair*.
- **Famous work:** Editor of *The Penguin Book of Interviews* (1993). The chapter is taken from his Introduction to that anthology.
- **Role in the lesson:** Surveys a century and a half of opinion on the interview as a journalistic form.

### Mukund Padmanabhan (Part II)

- **Role:** Senior journalist with *The Hindu*; later Editor of *The Hindu BusinessLine*.
- **Famous interviews:** Conducted long-form interviews with academics and writers including Noam Chomsky, Amartya Sen and Umberto Eco.
- **Role in the lesson:** The interviewer of Umberto Eco; his questions are sharp, well-prepared and respectful, providing a model for any student asked to conduct an interview.

### Umberto Eco (the interviewee in Part II)

- **Lived:** 1932 to 2016.
- **Nationality:** Italian.
- **Profession:** Professor at the University of Bologna; semiotician (a scholar who studies signs); novelist.
- **Famous works:** *The Name of the Rose* (1980), *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988), more than 40 scholarly works on semiotics, literary interpretation and medieval aesthetics.
- **Key phrase to remember:** "I am a professor who writes novels on Sundays."

## 1.2 Plot movement at one glance

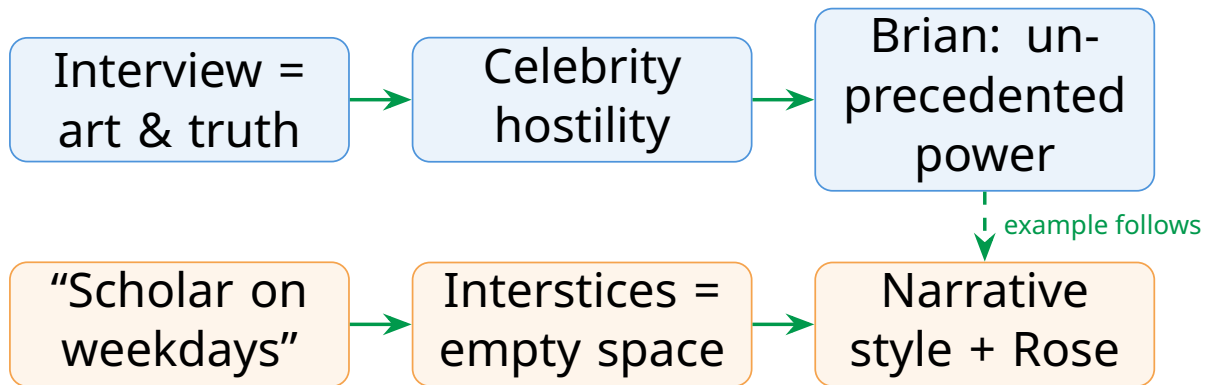
The chapter has no plot in the conventional sense, but it has a clear movement of ideas. The examiner often asks the student to trace this movement.

### The two halves in one breath

**Part I (essay):** positive views of the interview → celebrity hostility (Carroll, Kipling, Naipaul, Bellow) → Denis Brian's defence: the interviewer holds un-

precedented power.

**Part II (interview):** identity (scholar vs novelist) → how he writes so much (interstices) → his narrative academic style → the runaway success of *The Name of the Rose*.



## 2 Part I: Silvester's Essay on the Interview

Silvester's essay reads like a balanced editorial. He sets out the two camps, names the people who speak for each, and lets the reader weigh both before forming a view of his own. The structure of this section therefore mirrors his essay: positives first, negatives next, then his own balancing claim.

### 2.1 When and how the interview began

The interview as a journalistic form is barely 130 years old at the time Silvester is writing (he is writing in the early 1990s). The first recognisable journalistic interview, by his account, dates to 1859. Since then, almost every literate adult has read at least one interview, and several thousand celebrities have been interviewed, some of them many times over.

#### Date to remember

The interview is roughly 130 years old at the time of Silvester's essay (1993). Mention this in any question that asks "when did the interview become a journalistic form". The figure dates the form to roughly 1859.

### 2.2 The positive view of interviews

A first group of critics and writers treats the interview as a serious form. Silvester catalogues three claims:

- **Source of truth.** Some critics make "extravagant claims" for the interview as "in its highest form, a source of truth".

- **An art.** The same critics regard the practice of interviewing as an art when done well.
- **The most vivid medium of communication.** Denis Brian: “These days, more than at any other time, our most vivid impressions of our contemporaries are through interviews.”

#### Denis Brian’s quotable line

“Because of this, the interviewer holds a position of unprecedented power and influence.”

### 2.3 The negative view: celebrity resistance

The opposing camp is much louder in the essay. Silvester collects four named writers who resented the form.

#### The four resisting voices

- **V. S. Naipaul:** “feels that some people are wounded by interviews and lose a part of themselves.”
- **Lewis Carroll:** “had a just horror of the interviewer.” Never consented; silenced the persistent with “much satisfaction and amusement”.
- **Rudyard Kipling:** told two Boston reporters in 1892, “It is immoral! It is a crime, just as much of a crime as an offence against my person, as an assault. ...No respectable man would ask it, much less give it.” (His own day, by his wife’s diary, had been “wrecked by two reporters from Boston”.)
- **Saul Bellow:** had consented to many interviews, “nevertheless once described interviews as being like thumbprints on his windpipe.”

#### Do not confuse Kipling’s complaint with Kipling’s conduct

Kipling called interviewing a “crime” and an “assault”. But Silvester adds a wry detail: “Yet Kipling had himself perpetrated such an ‘assault’ on Mark Twain only a few years before.” A complete answer about Kipling notes both the protest and the hypocrisy.

### 2.4 The soul-stealing analogy

Silvester reaches for a striking comparison to explain the celebrity’s gut reaction. “In some primitive cultures,” he writes, “it is believed that if one takes a photographic portrait of somebody then one is stealing that person’s soul.” The celebrity who hates the interview, on this analogy, feels the same: that the interviewer has taken away a part of the self that did not belong on the page.

**Two-mark question**

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

**A.** A photograph is believed to steal the subject's soul; Silvester uses the belief as an analogy for the celebrity's feeling about being interviewed.

## 2.5 H. G. Wells and the irony of the form

H. G. Wells, in an interview of 1894, called the experience "the interviewing ordeal". Forty years later, however, the same Wells found himself *interviewing* Joseph Stalin. Silvester records this fact without commentary, but the irony is exactly his point: even those who resent the form get drawn into it, on one side of the table or the other.

**A literary parlour game**

A useful classroom exercise: list five writers or public figures who have publicly complained about interviewers but who have also given many interviews. The list is unfailingly long, and that is itself part of Silvester's argument.

## 2.6 "Thumbprints on his windpipe"

Of all the phrases in Part I, Saul Bellow's is the one examiners ask about most often. The image fuses pressure ("thumbprints") with the channel of speech ("windpipe"). Even when the interview is wanted, Bellow suggests, it presses on the part of the person that produces words.

**Decoding the metaphor**

**Literal:** marks left by fingers on the breathing tube.

**Figurative:** the interview constrains both speech and breath, leaving bruise-like marks even on a willing speaker.

**Why it works:** a writer is, professionally, a speaker. To press on the windpipe is to press on the source of the writer's livelihood.

## 2.7 Silvester's own balancing claim

Silvester is not a partisan. He acknowledges every complaint, then closes Part I with a quiet defence: "despite the drawbacks of the interview, it is a supremely serviceable medium of communication." The interview, in other words, is imperfect but indispensable.

**The line to quote in the long answer**

“Despite the drawbacks of the interview, it is a supremely serviceable medium of communication.” Cite this line whenever a question asks for Silvester’s own view of the form.

### 3 Part II: Padmanabhan’s Interview with Umberto Eco

Part II is the practical test of Silvester’s argument. If the interview can be both serious and revealing, here is what it looks like. Padmanabhan’s questions are sharp, well-prepared and respectful; Eco’s answers are full, story-rich and laced with characteristic playfulness. The conversation has four logical movements.

#### 3.1 Movement 1: Who is Eco, really?

The interview opens with David Lodge’s remark, “I can’t understand how one man can do all the things he does.” Eco’s reply is the chapter’s first key idea: “in the end, I am convinced I am always doing the same thing”. All his projects, academic and fictional and children’s, are driven by the same bunch of “ethical, philosophical interests” (non-violence, peace, semiotics).

##### Read this carefully

Eco’s claim is not that he writes in many forms. It is that he writes about *one* thing in many forms. The unification of interests is what enables the variety of outputs.

#### 3.2 Movement 2: How does he find the time?

Asked the natural follow-up, “how do you find the time?”, Eco gives the chapter’s most quoted reply.

##### The secret: interstices

**Definition.** *Interstices* (Eco’s word) are the empty spaces in everyday life: the time between things.

**Eco’s analogy.** If you eliminate the empty spaces inside atoms, the universe would shrink to the size of a fist. Most of life, similarly, is empty space.

**Eco’s example.** “While waiting for your elevator to come up from the first to the third floor, I have already written an article!”

##### Mnemonic for the secrets of Eco’s output

**INTER:** **I**nterstices (empty spaces), **N**arrative style (story shape), **T**heoretical unity (one set of interests), **E**arly start (he read widely before he wrote),

Reading habit (continued lifelong).

### 3.3 Movement 3: His narrative academic style

Padmanabhan compliments Eco on a “playful and personal quality” in his scholarly writing that is “a marked departure from a regular academic style, which is invariably depersonalised and often dry and boring”. Eco accepts the compliment and explains it with a story from his viva.

#### The viva that became a method

At his doctoral viva, one of the professors said: “Scholars learn a lot of a certain subject, then they make a lot of false hypotheses, then they correct them and at the end, they put the conclusions. You, on the contrary, told the story of your research. Even including your trials and errors.”

The professor recognised that Eco was right and went on to publish the dissertation as a book. “At that point, at the age of 22,” Eco says, “I understood scholarly books should be written the way I had done: by telling the story of the research. This is why my essays always have a narrative aspect.”

This narrative habit, Eco speculates, is also what eventually drew him to fiction. “I started writing novels by accident. I had nothing to do one day and so I started. Novels probably satisfied my taste for narration.”

#### Roland Barthes as foil

Eco mentions his “dear friend Roland Barthes was always frustrated that he was an essayist and not a novelist. He wanted to do creative writing one day or another but he died before he could do so. I never felt this kind of frustration.” The mention is generous: Eco places himself *against* an unfulfilled mentor and counts himself lucky.

### 3.4 Movement 4: “Scholar first, novelist on Sundays”

Padmanabhan presses: “ask most people about Umberto Eco and they will say, ‘Oh, he’s the novelist.’ Does that bother you?” Eco’s answer is the second of the chapter’s most quoted lines.

#### The self-description

“I consider myself a university professor who writes novels on Sundays. It’s not a joke. I participate in academic conferences and not meetings of Pen Clubs and writers. I identify myself with the academic community.”

The self-description is firm and is backed by two facts: more than 40 scholarly works in his bibliography, against five novels, and a working life spent at the University of Bologna rather than on the literary-festival circuit.

### 3.5 Movement 5: *The Name of the Rose* and the puzzle of mass success

The interview closes with the question of why *The Name of the Rose* sold between 10 and 15 million copies despite being, as Padmanabhan calls it, “a very serious novel” that delves into metaphysics, theology and medieval history.

#### Three reasons and a confession

- **Reason 1: readers want difficult experiences.** “Journalists and publishers ...believe that people like trash and don’t like difficult reading experiences.” Eco disagrees. There are millions of readers worldwide “who don’t want easy experiences”, and they were enough.
- **Reason 2: small percentages of large populations.** Six billion people on the planet; if a fraction of one percent want serious novels, that is still ten to fifteen million people: exactly the novel’s actual sales.
- **Reason 3: medieval setting.** Padmanabhan asks if the setting helped. Eco says, “that’s possible”.
- **Confession: timing is a mystery.** His American publisher predicted 3,000 copies; it sold two or three million in the US alone. “The success of the book is a mystery. Nobody can predict it. ...Why it worked at that time is a mystery.”

#### The line examiners love

“Nobody can predict it.” Eco’s honesty about the limits of his own analysis is itself one of the things that makes him a memorable interviewee.

## 4 Themes, Style and Likely Board Questions

### 4.1 Main themes of the chapter

#### Theme 1: The interview as a contested form

The chapter’s spine is the unresolved tension between two views: the interview as art and source of truth (Silvester, Brian) versus the interview as intrusion and assault (Kipling, Carroll, Naipaul). Eco’s calm conduct in Part II is, implicitly, an answer to the tension: a serious interview, with prepared questions and a willing subject, can be both.

#### Theme 2: Power and influence in modern journalism

Denis Brian’s line about the interviewer’s “unprecedented power and influence” is the chapter’s headline claim. Because so much of what we know about public figures now reaches us through this single form, the interviewer

is the gatekeeper of the modern impression. The theme dovetails with civics syllabus topics on media and democracy.

### Theme 3: Identity, work and the productive life

Eco's section is, secondarily, about how a serious mind structures its working day. The unifying interests (one set of questions, many outputs), the interstices (empty spaces converted to writing), and the narrative style (one method, all forms) sketch a model of focused productivity. Class 12 students under board pressure often find this section the most personally useful.

### Theme 4: The artist's relationship with mass success

The closing exchange on *The Name of the Rose* sits inside a wider debate about whether serious writing can also be popular writing. Eco insists it can; the proof, he says, is on the sales charts.

## 4.2 Literary devices and style

### Devices to mention in any long answer

- **Citation as argument.** Silvester quotes named writers (Carroll, Kipling, Naipaul, Bellow, Brian) instead of generalising. The device gives Part I its weight.
- **Analogy.** The soul-stealing photograph; the atoms emptied of space; the elevator-as-interstice. Each is a vivid concrete image standing in for an abstract idea.
- **Anecdote-as-evidence.** Eco's stories (the viva, the American publisher, "Miami Vice" at 9 pm) carry the points; the abstract claims sit behind the anecdotes.
- **Stage directions in the transcript.** Padmanabhan preserves Eco's laughter, the shrug, the pause: "(Laughs)", "(laughs and shrugs)". The transcript reads like a conversation precisely because these markers are kept.
- **Self-deprecation.** "A professor who writes novels on Sundays" deflates the celebrity image; the modesty itself becomes characterful.

### 4.3 Likely board questions with model answers

#### Q (1 mark) — What is Eco's definition of interstices?

**A.** The empty spaces of everyday life, the time between things. Eco uses the spaces to write.

#### Q (3 marks) — Why do most celebrity writers despise being interviewed?

**A.** They feel diminished or wounded by the form (Naipaul: "lose a part of themselves"); they describe it in the vocabulary of crime and assault (Kipling: "a crime, just as much as an assault"); they feel pressure on the very channel of speech (Bellow: "thumbprints on his windpipe"); some refuse altogether (Lewis Carroll). The unifying feeling is the loss of self under another person's questioning.

#### Q (3 marks) — What was distinctive about Eco's academic writing style?

**A.** It told "the story of the research", trials and errors included, instead of arriving polished at a conclusion. Its voice was playful and personal, a deliberate departure from the "depersonalised, dry and boring" tone of regular academic prose. Eco traces both habits to a viva-board compliment received at the age of 22.

#### Q (3 marks) — Did Eco consider himself novelist or scholar?

**A.** Scholar first. "I consider myself a university professor who writes novels on Sundays." He attends academic conferences rather than writers' meetings, identifies with the academic community, and produced more than 40 scholarly works before writing his first novel at the age of 50.

#### Q (5 marks) — Why was *The Name of the Rose* such a huge success?

**A.** Eco gives three reasons and a confession. (a) Readers do want difficult experiences; journalists and publishers under-estimate this appetite ("they believe that people like trash"). (b) Even a small percentage of the global reading public is a large absolute number; "these kinds of readers" were enough. (c) The medieval setting tapped a renewed Western interest in the period. (d) Beyond these, the timing of a publishing success is, in Eco's own honest phrase, "a mystery. Nobody can predict it."

#### Q (5 marks) — Explain the metaphor "thumbprints on his windpipe".

**A.** A thumbprint is the mark left by a pressing finger; the windpipe is the tube through which we breathe and speak. The image therefore names the pressure of someone's hand against the channel of speech. Saul Bellow uses

it to describe how the interview felt to him: even when he agreed to give one, the form pressed against the part of him that produced words, leaving bruise-like constraint on the very flow of language. The phrase is doubly powerful because Bellow had cooperated with many interviews; it is the testimony of a willing subject, not the protest of a refuser.

## 5 Glossary, Tone and Examiner's Hooks

### 5.1 Key terms with meanings

#### Terms most often asked

- **Commonplace** (adjective): ordinary, taken-for-granted. "The interview has become a commonplace of journalism."
- **Lionised** (verb, "to lionise"): treated as a celebrity. Lewis Carroll "repelled would-be acquaintances, interviewers, and the persistent petitioners for his autograph".
- **Vile** (adjective): morally disgusting. Kipling on interviewing: "cowardly and vile."
- **Serviceable** (adjective): useful, fit for service. Silvester's defence of the interview: "a supremely serviceable medium of communication."
- **Interstices** (noun, plural of interstice): the small gaps between things. Eco's working hours.
- **Semiotics** (noun): the study of signs and symbols. Eco's main academic field.
- **Spectacularly** (adverb): in a way that draws great attention. Eco became "spectacularly famous after the publication of *The Name of the Rose*".
- **Yarn** (noun): a long, often improbable story; here used loosely to mean a novel. Padmanabhan calls *The Name of the Rose* "a detective yarn at one level".

### 5.2 Tone and voice

#### Match the tone to the part

- **Part I:** essayistic, balanced, lightly ironic. Silvester reports both sides; he never preaches.
- **Part II:** conversational, story-rich, lightly playful. Eco laughs twice in the printed extract.

### 5.3 Five common board-paper traps

**Trap 1: confusing Silvester with the celebrities he quotes**

Silvester is the essayist. Naipaul, Kipling, Bellow and Lewis Carroll are the writers he cites. Always name the speaker accurately.

**Trap 2: forgetting that Bellow agreed to interviews**

Bellow's "thumbprints on his windpipe" is sometimes mis-read as the complaint of a refuser. He was not a refuser; he had given many interviews. That is what makes the phrase powerful.

**Trap 3: thinking "interstices" is a typo for "interest".**

*Interstices* is a real word, plural of *interstice*, meaning the small spaces between things. Eco uses it as his metaphor for empty time.

**Trap 4: missing the word "Sundays" in Eco's self-description**

The full phrase is "a professor who writes novels on Sundays". The single word "Sundays" is what makes the line memorable; it announces that the novels are weekend work, the scholarship is the day job.

**Trap 5: writing "Mukunda" instead of "Mukund".**

The interviewer's first name is Mukund (no trailing "a"). Spelling errors on proper nouns are graded.

**Five quotes to memorise**

1. "A supremely serviceable medium of communication." (Silvester on the interview.)
2. "Unprecedented power and influence." (Denis Brian on the interviewer.)
3. "Thumbprints on his windpipe." (Saul Bellow on being interviewed.)
4. "I am a professor who writes novels on Sundays." (Eco on himself.)
5. "Nobody can predict it." (Eco on the success of *The Name of the Rose*.)

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