

Tips for Oral History Interviews

An interview is not a conversation. The whole point of the interview is to get the narrator to tell his or her story. Limit your own remarks to a few pleasantries to break the ice, then brief questions.

Ask open-ended questions, ones that require more of an answer than "yes" or "no." Start with "why," "how," "where," "what kind of. . ."

Ask one question at a time.

Ask brief, understandable, and clear questions.

Start with questions that are not controversial; save the sensitive questions, if there are any, until you have become better acquainted. A good place to begin is with the narrator's youth and background.

Don't let periods of silence fluster you. Give your narrator a chance to think of what he or she wants to add before you hustle him or her along with the next question.

Don't interrupt a good story because you have thought of a question, or because your narrator is straying from the planned outline. If the information is pertinent, let him or her go on, but jot down your questions on your notepad so you will remember to ask it later. Be willing to let the interview wander – but if you're not getting interesting material, put it back on track with a question.

Be accurate: After the interview, confirm the spelling of names or places used by the subject. Write the spellings in your notebook.

Be respectful.

Try to establish at every important point in the story where the narrator was or what her role was in this event. Like, "Where were you when you heard about the bombing of Pearl Harbor?" It is important to ask about their perception of these events: "How did hearing about this event affect you?" or "What did you think this event meant?"

End the interview at a reasonable time.

Thank the person you interviewed. You might even wish to send them a note or a copy of your final report.

the one provided with this manual. Your interview should begin with several memory questions. First, memory questions should help relax your subject and get them in a mood to reminisce. Second, these questions will help you gather information about your subject's personal experiences.

Note that your topic and questions will be shaped by the subject(s) you choose to interview. You will get the best answers if you ask your interview subject to talk about his or her *own* experiences, so encourage your interviewee to provide personal stories, sad and funny memories that you will not find in the standard school books.

Your Job is to Record and Interpret History

- Write and ask good questions.
- Get good stories that are told in an interesting way.
- Examine and understand the different beliefs, interests, hopes and fears in follow up questions.
- Evaluate your evidence to make conclusions.

Writing Additional Questions

In order to learn as much as possible from the interview experience you should write several questions that will encourage your subject to expand and explain their feelings and ideas. The second stage of questions should encourage your subject to dig deeper into the stories to explain why things happened and how they relate to other events.

Below are some basic questions to help you get started. Use your own worksheet, or the one provided, to write your own complete questions.

Explanation Questions

- What caused this event...?
- Why did this happen...?
- What happened next...?
- Can you describe the scene in one word...?
- Can you compare two events...?
- Explain the reason for...?
- What conclusion can you draw...?
- What is your point of view about...?
- Can you describe the scene...?
- Can you explain a photograph...?

Judgment Questions

The last group of questions should offer your subject a chance to talk about the "big picture" by telling about what was good or bad, important or less important. These questions should be asked last because they allow the interview subject a chance to sum up and make conclusions. Remember that this is your subject's opportunity to give his or her own opinion—you may or may not agree with the conclusions.

Judgment Questions

- What was the happiest (funniest or saddest) memory?
- What was your biggest accomplishment?
- What actions would you change if you had a chance to re-live those years again?
- What mistakes did people make during this period or event in history?

- What should people today remember about this time/event?

**MEMORY + EXPLANATION + JUDGMENT =
SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEW**

Even with your best efforts some people may need some extra questions to encourage them to tell the full story.

Don't be afraid to ask for details or explanations.

Back up Questions:

Why was this important?

How did the story begin or end?

What else do you want to tell me about this?

What important question did I forget to ask you?

Interview Tips

Proper Attire

You want your interview subjects to relax and tell their best stories. Your clothing should not distract your subject from the purpose of the interview. You should be neatly dressed in comfortable clothes.

Practice

If you are not familiar with audio- or videotape recorders, you should make a practice tape at home.