

Interviewing Guidelines

Preparation

1. Set up the appointment for the interview, confirm the appointment, and keep the appointment.
2. Make sure the interviewee understands the purpose of the interview and how you intend to use it. This is not a private conversation.
3. Make sure the person knows that they don't have to answer any questions you ask; they are welcome to pass or to talk about a different topic.
4. Buy the best recording equipment you can afford. Know your equipment thoroughly and make sure it is in working order before you arrive at the interview.
5. Prepare for each interview by knowing as much as you can about the person you'll be interviewing.
6. Remember what information you want to gain from the interview, and design a list of questions with that focus in mind.
7. What to bring to an interview: Digital recorder, microphone, power cord, extension cord, extra batteries, note pad & pens, list of questions, a watch, camera

Set-up

8. Interview and record in a quiet place. When setting up, listen for a moment. Make adjustments such as stopping the pendulum on a clock, putting out the dog, muting the phone, closing the window or door on noisy traffic, etc.
9. Find a comfortable distance/proximity between yourself and interviewee, reading cues of interviewee.
10. Make sure the recording equipment is in close proximity to both interviewer and interviewee (about a foot away from each is a good rule of thumb).
11. Set sound recording levels on recording equipment based on the individual space.
12. Make sure to do a test recording and play back to check sound.
13. Monitor equipment throughout interview. Use an adaptor in preference to batteries, or make sure you bring extra batteries.

Tips

14. Start each recording by introducing yourself and having your interviewee introduce him/herself. Include the date and place where the interview is taking place.
15. It is best to have a one-on-one interview rather than a couple or group interview.
16. Listen actively and intently.
17. Speak one at a time.
18. Allow silence. Give the interviewee time to think. Silence will work for you, as it invites a person to share more as more thoughts and memories come.
19. Maintain appropriate eye contact.
20. Give encouragement and demonstrate interest through genuine responses.
21. Use facial expressions and gestures to show interest and avoid interrupting or dominating the conversation.
22. Keep concentrating on the person's story rather than focusing too hard on what your next questions will be.
23. Be sensitive to what you discover. Sometimes people become emotional talking about the past. If your interviewee is upset by a memory, either remain silent, or quietly ask, "Is it all right if we talk some more about this? Or would you rather not?" People frequently feel better when they talk about sad things; you should gently give your relative the choice of whether to go on.
24. Try not to interrupt. If your interviewee strays from the subject, let him or her finish the story and then say, "Let's get back to Uncle Moe," or, "You said something earlier about..."

Asking Questions

25. Usually ask questions open enough to get “essay” answers unless you are looking for specific short-answer “facts”.
26. Follow up your current question thoroughly before moving to the next.
27. Ask one question at a time.
28. With the life history interviews, generally plan to begin the discussion with their childhood, unless they are clearly focused on starting somewhere else. Try to get the major events of chronology in the person’s life.
29. Help situate the interview by asking basic questions about dates and places.
30. People often don’t think chronologically. One story from one point can spark another. Be open to that.
31. Try to listen for and follow the sparks of the person’s excitement or interest with follow-up questions. Watch where people’s eyes light up. This will often lead to the richest stories.
32. Reflecting back what you are hearing at key points can be helpful: “That sounds like a real turning point in your life...”
33. Reflecting back a resonant word or phrase can support the person in feeling heard and propel him/her onward.
34. Emphasize questions that evoke sense-memories to bring stronger and more specific stories (i.e. what are some sounds you remember from your childhood home? What did your father/mother look like? What images come to mind when you think of your early days at church? What songs do you remember singing?)
35. It can be helpful to sum up or piece together what you have heard around a particular issue or experience or make a statement and then ask a question. This strategy is known as “The Two-Part Question”. For example: “The Depression was a time of struggle for a lot of people. What was it like for your family?”
36. Start with easy, less probing questions. Leave the more difficult or emotional material for later in the interview, after you’ve had time to gain your interviewee’s trust.

Wrapping Up

37. Wrap up the interview with lighter talk. Do not drop the interviewee abruptly after an intense interview.
38. Give people notice when you are nearing the end of your time and ask if there are parts that haven’t been covered that are important.
39. Limit interviews to about one to two hours in length, depending on the fatigue levels of you and your interviewee.

Post-Interview

40. Always make back-ups of your interviews and store them in separate locations. Consider your interviews important archival material.
41. Make a written transcription of the recorded interview in order to preserve it and more easily use it in projects. Be sure to include the interview questions. Depending on your needs it may be more practical to write a summary of each tape and transcribe only the key points or important quotations word-for-word.
42. When appropriate (and with proper consent), place copies of your interview in a library or archive. Don’t underestimate the historical significance of what you have recorded.
43. Be ethical and considerate when using interviews. Respect requests not to use certain information. Never share interviews publically without the consent of the interviewee. Be respectful of sensitive topics and how it might affect others who hear the interview.

Useful resources

Baylor Institute for Oral History’s 20 page style guide for transcribing oral history interviews –

www.baylor.edu/oral_history/index.php?id=23607

Step-by-step guide to oral history by Judith Moyer - http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html

Tips from Sharon DeBartolo Carmack - <https://www.familytreemagazine.com/premium/oral-history-interviewing-tips/>

Tips from Dr. Barbara Truesdell, Center for the Study of History and Memory –

http://www.indiana.edu/~cshm/oral_history_techniques.pdf

Conducting Oral History Interviews with Family Members - https://www.library.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/UCLA-COHR_Interviewing-Family-Members.pdf