

Three Ps of an Oral History Interview

PREPARATION

Before the Interview

1. **Research the topic/person** to become familiar with important dates, people, issues, and events. Know as much as possible about your interviewee and the subject matter of the interview.
2. **Schedule appointment.** Who, where, when, how long? Select a time of day that is best for the interviewee. For elderly persons, morning hours are often best. Sixty to ninety minutes is a good average length for an interview. Both interviewing and being interviewed are tiring, and concentration spans diminish if the interview is too lengthy. Select a location that is convenient and comfortable (neutral) for the interviewee and where minimal distractions will occur.
3. **If appropriate or requested, prepare and send a brief framework of questions.** These questions are not the ONLY questions you will ask, but this initial list accomplishes a couple of goals:
 - a. The questions get the interviewee to think about events they need to recall, events that may have happened a good many years ago. The questions give the interviewee time to do some research into their own memories *before* they sit down for the interview. The questions may remind interviewees of artifacts they have, such as photographs, news articles, letters, or recordings. The artifacts may jog memories, which will enhance the interview, and the interviewee may share the artifacts with you, perhaps even asking you to archive them.
 - b. The questions ease some of the interviewee's fear of the unknown - What will I be asked about? which in turn makes the interviewee less nervous. Answers to these questions will raise more questions as the interview unfolds, as trust is built, and as your conversation deepens.
4. **Prepare your equipment and forms** (gift, biography form, photo consent) before you arrive for the interview.

Setting Up for the Interview

1. Choose a quiet place where you are unlikely to be disturbed or distracted, where competing, background noises will not interfere with your recording. When you arrive at the location for the interview, listen for background noises: fans, television, radio, air conditioner/heater. Minimize these as much as you can. Bring an extension cord if you plan to use A/C current for power. Bring extra batteries just in case. **Test your equipment before the interview begins.** Use an external microphone on a stand and place it closest to the interviewee (no more than 12 inches away). You can control the projection of *your* voice but don't want to interrupt them to do so. Have the recorder close to you for ease of monitoring.
2. At the interview, obtain signed **Gift form**, also known as a Gift of Personal Statement. The interviewee has the option of restricting the interview (option of retaining literary rights and/or restricting access for a number of years or by anonymity).
3. Obtain signed **Photo Consent form**, if needed.
4. If time permits, ask the interviewee to complete a **Biography form**. Leave a postage paid envelope if it's more convenient for the interviewee to complete and mail back later.
5. Talk to the interviewee about the interview. **Let them know what to expect and how it will be archived and used.** Express your appreciation.

PROCESS

Recording the Interview

1. **Record a general introduction** (ID tag) to the interview. Include location, date, names of interviewee and interviewer, name of project (if applicable), others attending the interview, and a brief statement of purpose. The ID tag should be recorded as you begin the interview. For example: “Today is Tuesday, April 14, 2010. This is John Smith with the Center for Oral History and I am interviewing Mrs. Jane Doe about her Hurricane Katrina experience. We are at her home in Gulfport, Mississippi. Also present is her daughter, Jennifer Doe.”
2. Ask standard biographical questions up front:
 - “Would you state and spell your name?”
 - “Where and when were you born?”
 - “What are the names of your parents?”

These initial, easy questions give the interviewee a chance to relax, if nervous; give you a chance to build rapport with the interviewee; give you a chance to be an enthusiastic listener who is engaged in the process; give you a chance to set the tone of interest and to create an ease and a settling in.

How to ask the questions:

- **Ask open-ended questions**—how, when, what, and why—to see where they lead. Tailor your reactions and follow-up questions to the responses of the interviewee. Pursue detail – “Tell me more about that.” “Describe in your own words.” When a new question arises in your mind as the interviewee is speaking, jot the question down. When the interviewee stops talking, ask your new question (always one at a time).
- **Use non-verbal responses** so as not to interrupt but show interest.
- Use silence and be patient. **Give people a chance to think.**
- **Be an active listener.** You should simultaneously monitor the recording equipment and quality of what the interviewee is saying while also listening for clues about areas to explore with follow-up questions.
- Avoid giving your opinions. **Don’t ask leading questions** that suggest answers. Rather than, “Did you have a hard childhood?” Ask, “What was your childhood like?”
- Don’t assume other listeners know what you know. **Ask for explanations** that those outside of your culture or generation may not understand, including what may be arcane in 100 years or more.
- **Avoid starting with controversial or emotional topics.** Begin with broad, easy questions then progress to narrow your focus. Approach emotional topics with questions like, “How did that make you feel?”
- As a rule, **don’t challenge accounts you think may be inaccurate.** You are facilitating an oral history from your interviewee’s viewpoint and perspective. If the interviewee seems to be denying a historical fact, you can say to them, “Some people have said that. . .what do you think about that?”
- **Ask for examples and anecdotes as illustrations.**
- Do not end abruptly. **Last question of the interview:** “Is there anything I have *not* asked you that you feel is important to add at this time?”

PRODUCT

After the Interview

1. Before archiving the interview, **make a recording log**. A recording log has an entry every time the narrator introduces a new topic (or approximately every 5 minutes). The counter number (when discussion begins) is recorded beside the topic. It is a helpful finding aid, similar to a table of contents, so researchers can know and find what is on the audio. Type up any field notes you want to include which may add context to the interview (description of setting; relevant dynamics or events that occurred; others present). Assemble duplicate forms, field notes, and any other accompanying documentation in an interviewee's correspondence file.
2. **Make duplicate copies** of the audio recording and accompanying forms and/or documents. Archive the originals in acid-free containers in a location of low humidity and constant temperature that avoids extremes of heat and cold. **Label audio** (noting whether original or duplicate) with the date of recording, name of interviewee and interviewer, and name of project or topic (if applicable). Transcribe the interview if time/resources allow.
3. Send a thank you note and copy of the audio to the interviewee. Arrange for a follow-up interview if necessary.
4. Consider using excerpts from the interview to produce educational resources you can share. Excerpts may be used for:
 - Web site development
 - Podcasts
 - Theatrical productions
 - Curriculum development/teacher workshops
 - Compiling a community/family history
 - Organizing and hosting a public exhibit
 - Publishing a newsletter or magazine
 - Producing a radio show or documentary
 - Composing a song or essay based on information gathered

Much time and effort goes into an oral history project, so document carefully and PASS IT ON!