

Mining the Past to Illuminate the Present: How Oral History Can Work for You!

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TIPS FOR INTERVIEWING

A. GETTING READY

1. Know your equipment!! Be sure you do. Read the manual. Know its specific features. Consult experts when necessary.
2. Travel with your recorder's adapter, extension cord and a set of batteries in case the power source fails or there isn't an outlet available. Be prepared!
3. Test your recorder before beginning the interview, in the place where the interview will be conducted. Read in identifying information, including your name, the name of the interviewee, the date and place of the interview. Play back what you're recorded (through earphones or the recorder's external speakers) to ensure the equipment is working and the sound level is good. Try to find as quiet a spot as possible for the interview.
4. Bring a notebook — I use steno pads — and divide the page in two: in the left-hand column, write down names of people and places as the interviewee uses them. Later you can check for correct spellings. (The more accurate you are, the easier it will be for your transcriber and the less work you will have to do afterwards.) In the right-hand column, make notes of things the interviewee says that you want to follow-up on later. In this way, you don't have to interrupt, but can return to clarify, add, etc. Write down code words from questions you've asked, such as "mother's family," so you can see later what content the interview contains, or what you've missed asking.
5. Oral history is about informed listening. Know something about the background and history of your interviewee beforehand, and know something about the subject matter to be covered. This may well require some historical/genealogical research.
6. Organize a topical outline to guide the interview. For instance, in asking a question about a person's personal background, know you want to query family life; religion; politics; culture; schooling; and early interests, for example. General topics are useful, but avoid framing specific questions in advance. That way, you won't "stunt" the interview with what you think may be important but may not turn out to be.
7. Download the completed interview(s) to the computer and then burn a CD/DVD. Label the CD/DVD with the name of your interviewee and the date(s) of the interview.

B. CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

1. To begin the interview, ask your subject to state and spell his or her full name, and the date and place of his or her birth. Play this back to be sure your recording is working.
2. An oral history interview is not a dialogue. You are the instrument through which your subjects tell their own stories, in their own way.
3. Start with questions that are broad in nature, that leave room for longer answers. For example, you might ask: "Tell me a big about your religious upbringing." From there, you can move to more specific questions, depending upon what you hear.
4. Try not to ask questions that reveal your own biases; be as neutral as possible.
5. During the first few minutes of the interview, break the ice in whatever way your choose, but once you arrive at the meat of the interview your ability to listen — and then to follow up when your subject has finished what he or she has to say in response to a particular question — will produce a far better interview.
6. As a rule, try not to interrupt. Allow your subject to talk. Make a note of any questions you have, and when a natural pause occurs, ask the follow-up question. A good interview is mostly follow up!
7. Celebrate silences. Do not rush to fill them. Most often your subject will, and what you hear may surprise you.
8. Ask for specific examples when what you are hearing is general in nature. If what you are hearing is too specific, try to broaden its significance by asking, for example, "Was that typical of the time?"
9. Be prepared for emotional responses. Be sympathetic, but remember you are the interviewer, not a therapist.
10. Be gracious and grateful at the conclusion of each session, and remember to thank your subject for his or her time, and the material shared.

GOOD LUCK!!

C. TRANSCRIBING THE INTERVIEW

1. If you plan on transcribing the interview yourself, consult a guide to transcribing oral history interviews.
2. If you plan to send the interview out for professional transcription, there are agencies and private practitioners who are available for hire. Consult the Internet for suggestions.

With a grateful nod for all to: Ronald J. Grele, retired director of the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University (now renamed the Columbia Center for Oral History), and Mary Marshall Clark, current director there; and Willa Baum, author of *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*.

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On-line Guides to Doing Oral History

<http://www.baylor.edu/oralhistory/index.php?id=931753>

<http://www.lib.lsu.edu/oralhistory>

http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html

On-line Guides for Transcribing Oral History Interviews

<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/transcribing-oral-history-in-the-digital-age/>

<http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/66438.pdf>

Guides to Oral History Technique and Background Works on Oral History Theory

- *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, by Donald A. Ritchie, Oxford University Press, 2003
- *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, by Ronald J. Grele, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1985
- *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*, by Willa K. Baum, American Association for State and Local History, Third Edition, 1991
- *The Oral History Workshop*, by Cynthia Hart with Lisa Samson, Workman Publishing Company, Inc., 2009

Great Source for Researching Digital Equipment to Purchase

<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/askdoug/>