

NOTES ON INTERVIEWING

An oral history interview involves complex social interactions; no rigid formula can guarantee success. Respect for the sanctity and complexity of human lives, intelligence, empathy, flexibility—all these personal qualities influence the interview situation. But interviewing is also a skill which can be learned with systematic practice. The following suggestions are meant to facilitate this process.

PREPARATION

1. Begin by defining the historical problem you wish to investigate. Only then can you decide whom to interview and what to ask.
2. In order to handle the problem of interview bias, you must explore your own assumptions, values, and attitudes. An interview does not call for an impossible neutrality. It does demand special self-awareness and self-discipline.
3. Before conducting your first interview, do as much background research as possible. Oral history cannot be separated from or substituted for other methods of historical research.
4. Select respondents who will be able and willing to provide information you need. Respondents may be chosen because their lives illustrate certain historical themes or because they have special knowledge of or occupy a unique position in a historical event, movement, or institution.
5. Either in writing or in person (preferably followed by a letter of confirmation) ask permission to conduct the interview and explain its purpose. Provide a description of the project and mention any release forms you will be using. This is a good time to make certain that the interviewee understands that the materials may be deposited in an archive. In the course of this conversation, be sensitive to any hesitation on the interviewee's part. Emphasize the importance of preserving these stories and

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- making them available to later generations. Be reassuring about the fact that these are spoken reminiscences, not polished, grammatical essays.
6. Draw up a list of the topics or specific questions to be explored. You will want to refer to these questions during the interview, but you should not feel constrained by them.
 7. Choose a setting for the interview that will maximize the respondent's comfort. Avoid places where there will be distracting background noise.
 8. Prepare any release forms or other paperwork that may be necessary.
 9. Before the interview, become thoroughly familiar with your recording equipment. Read the equipment manual; test the microphone and the input levels so that you know how to monitor the equipment during the interview.

THE INTERVIEW

1. Set up your recorder and record your opening announcement. Include the interviewee's name, your name, the date, the location, and the topic you will be discussing in your interview.
2. Be sure to check (i.e. play back) the recording early in the interview. If there are background noises (fans, air conditioning, etc.), or other problems with the recording, this will be the moment to address such issues.
3. Interviews may be autobiographical or topical. In either case, begin at a point in time previous to the central events you want to explore. For all interviews, include basic information

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regarding birthplace and family of origin.

4. You should seek a balance in which you allow respondents to express the logic of their lives as they understand it, while at the same time maintaining a sense of the overall direction of the conversation and framing questions so as to elicit information that pertains to your area of interest. Listen carefully. Do not be afraid of silence. Allow the respondent time to think, to continue after a pause. Critically evaluate the flow of information, so that you can ask for elaboration where the respondent's statements are unclear. Take notes that will remind you to ask follow-up questions at an opportune moment, rather than interrupting the respondent's train of thought.
5. Your questions should be open-ended and should not supply a list of alternative answers. They should be direct and to the point: Avoid asking several questions in the guise of one. Avoid leading or prejudicial questions. Frame questions within a language and context understood by the interviewee.
6. Seek concrete examples of attitudes and feelings from which you can infer subjective orientations. Focus on behavior; but try to understand the meaning the interviewee attaches to his/her actions. Develop facts and events first, then explore feelings and values. You may need to stimulate the interviewee's memory or reduce chronological confusion by supplying key facts learned from background research.
7. It may be helpful to arrange the sequence of topics so as to postpone until last questions that may be threatening or challenging to the interviewee. Within each topic, it may be helpful to begin with a broad question, then ask successively narrow and detailed questions as the conversation proceeds.
8. When an interviewee seems unwilling or unable to provide

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certain information, try approaching the topic from another angle, indicating contradictory information that you have obtained from other sources; alternatively, wait until later in the interview to return to the topic. When appropriate, mention that it will be possible to restrict the interview according to the interviewee's wishes.

9. A typical interview session lasts around 90 minutes. Be alert to signs of fatigue, distraction, or boredom. Conduct a long interview in several sessions.
10. Have the interviewee fill out and sign the release forms and/or other paperwork. (See page 40 for guidelines.)

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

1. Immediately after the session, write up your field notes. Field notes should include: the names of yourself and your interviewee; the date, time, and location of the interview, and a description of the interview itself. Describe the setting, other people present; any pertinent events that happened prior to, during, or after the interview; and your honest reflections on whatever dynamics occurred during the interview/visit.
2. Send a written thank you to the interviewee.
3. Only work from a copy of the recording for transcription or indexing purposes.
4. Decide how you will store and organize your recordings, transcripts, copies of release forms, and other interviewee information.
5. Listen to the recording and evaluate both your own behavior and the content of the interview. Only by such self-criticism can you learn from your mistakes and refine your interviewing skills.

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6. Decide whether or not a follow-up interview will be necessary. It is often helpful to conduct follow-up sessions after you have analyzed the content of the interview and as your understanding of the research problem evolves.

7. Once the interview is done, “history making” begins. The interview is raw data which must be compared to and used in conjunction with other evidence. Oral history starts with the collection, transcription/indexing, and preservation of interviews. But its goal is historical synthesis and interpretation. Remember that it is a collaborative effort; consider the ways in which you can engage your interviewee in this interpretive process.