

Oral History Interviewer's Guide
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The purpose of an oral history interview is to gather historically significant personal recollections and information on a specific subject. It is important for the interviewer to maintain a low profile and to refrain from expressing his or her opinion or biases. The oral history interview is not a conversation. The interviewer must ask pertinent questions, be a good listener, and have empathy for the narrator and what he or she has to say.

There are three parts to an interview:

- I. Research and preparation
 - II. The interview itself
 - III. Paper work and follow-up
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- I. Research and preparation
 - A. Contact the narrator. Telephone contact is best, but if you prefer, write the individual a note. Tell the subject about the project and why he or she was chosen to participate in a taped interview.
 - B. If the narrator agrees to be interviewed, do research on him/her personally, as well as upon the topic under investigation. Helpful resources are the local history librarian, newspapers, oral history files, and other people who know the narrator.
 - C. Make an outline of topics to be covered in the interview.
 - D. Set up an appointment with the narrator. Tell him to allow one and a half to two hours for the interview. Share your outline with him so he can think about what he wants to say. Confirm the appointment in writing.
 - E. Familiarize yourself with your equipment. Make sure that everything works properly. Your interviewing kit should include a recorder, microphone and stand, extension cord, two blank tapes, a pad and pencil, and the necessary forms, (release, biographical information, index, and information for the narrator).

- II. The interview itself
 - A. Arrange the physical setting of the interview. Select a quiet room well away from street noises and those from fans, air conditioners, telephones, etc. Place the recorder on the floor or out of the narrator's view, and place the microphone between you and the narrator. Be sure the recorder is plugged into a working outlet and that the microphone switch is in the "on" position.
 - B. Show narrator the release form. Explain that after the interview you will ask him to sign the release. (Note: the narrator cannot sign the release form before the interview, as there is nothing to be released at that time.)
 - C. Spend some time building rapport, or a trusting relationship, with the narrator. This will pay dividends in improved interview quality. Help the narrator to relax by chatting with him or her. However, avoid talking about the interview topics until you are ready to record.
 - D. Begin the interview. Start the tape recorder and allow a few seconds of blank tape to pass through the capstan. Provide an introduction in which you state the names of the interviewer and narrator; the date; the place and topic, and for whom the interview is being conducted. The introduction may be done ahead of time if you prefer. Start the interview with an open-ended question that the narrator can answer easily at some length.
 - E. Techniques for the interviewer
 - 1. Ask open-ended questions. Avoid questions that can be answered "yes" or "no." Don't talk too much.
 - 2. Be a good listener; maintain eye contact.
 - 3. Do not interrupt the narrator; don't worry about silences.
 - 4. Try not to lead the speaker in any particular direction.
 - 5. Stay on track to the greatest extent possible. This will not always be possible.
 - 6. Try to think ahead to your next question.
 - 7. Take notes on unusual names and places that need verification and on anything that will require later clarification.

8. When you turn the tape over, allow 5 to 7 seconds for the blank strip to pass the capstan before continuing.
 9. If you employ a second tape or when the interview is finished, record that information on the tape.
- F. Things to avoid
1. Avoid turning the recorder on and off.
 2. Avoid touching the microphone
 3. Avoid group interviews or having others present besides the narrator and you.
- G. Completing the interview
1. Ask the narrator to sign the release form.
 2. Secure biographical information
 3. Collect photographs and other supplementary material will contribute to the strength of the interview.
- III. Paperwork and follow-up
- A. Listen to tape and create a complete index.
 - B. Transcribe tape, being sure to include tape recorder “counter numbers” following each 100 numbers. The transcription should be an accurate representation of what was said. Do not edit the material. You may, however, wish to delete no-communicative sounds such as “uh”, “you know”, or the repeated use of the word “and” at the beginning of sentences. Avoid making any changes that alter the meaning of the narration.
 - C. Label cassette and fill out cassette box index. Punch out cassette tabs to prevent subsequent erasure or “overrecording.”.
 - D. Submit cassette, release form, the completed transcript, along with memorabilia and other materials having value to future generations to the historical archives of your choice. Wherever possible, reproduce the document on acid free paper and store it in an acid free folder.

These, then, are general guidelines for the production of a high quality and historically useful document.