

# A Guide for Conducting Oral Histories

## The Interview

### How to interview

I have been in numerous debates over the years with "Oral History Scholars" as to the "correct" method for recording an oral history. I have found that often times scholars create a process that can be sterile and remove the human element. There are numerous sites on the web that can provide you with information about recording oral histories to their standards. I have however found that many times people see this process as too complicated so they just end up not doing any oral histories. So here is my method or style for doing personal oral history interviews.

I approach each interview as a new story that I want to hear. Every person I speak with has a story to tell, and my goal is to help him or her tell that story. Although I have a list of questions with me (see Interview Questions section), and have done some background research, I do not get lost in the questions. Instead I have a conversation with the person. I am familiar enough with what I want to know that I only need to refer to my list of questions in an emergency. If I am always looking at my questions I am not listening to the person, which can make them uncomfortable and stiff. The most important thing is to LISTEN.... Don't spend your time talking and telling your story... LISTEN... LISTEN... LISTEN. When you listen and allow them to tell their story in their way, this is where you will find the gems, the magic moments.

Here is how an interview might go: I do not use a cameraperson because I like to keep things even more intimate. If I do use a cameraperson he/she is the only other person in the room with during the interview. I want to avoid any distractions. I have all of the equipment ready so the interviewee does not have to sit there getting nervous while I fiddle with things. While I am putting the mic on them I am chatting about everyday things just getting to know them. I don't ask any questions that I will ask during the interview because this could destroy the spontaneity later on. Once the mic is on I secretly signal my cameraperson to start recording. I NEVER say "Okay we are ready to record now" because this will make most people aware of the camera and nervous. Once I know the tape is recording I may start by double-checking their name and having them spell it correctly. I am still just chit chatting and look like I am writing down the correct spelling of their name. This gives the cameraperson time to check the audio levels. From here I just ease into the subject matter. I pretend I know nothing about them and just let the interview wander in somewhat of a linear way. I might start talking about where they grew up, how many kids in the family, parents, etc. By this time they have totally forgotten about the camera.

Even though I have a list of questions prepared, a lot of my questions come from listening to their answers. I cannot stress enough that the interviewer's job is to listen. Once you ask a question listen to the answer. Try to get into a conversation, without constantly interrupting stories. Rather than just

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going through a checklist of questions, This is what will make the interview personal and special.

The interviewers other job is to make the person feel comfortable and free to talk. Sometimes if you interrupt a person too much when they are telling a story, even though it does not apply to the subject, it makes them uneasy. In this case you let them finish the story and then work your questions to get them back on track. Every person you work with will be unique so you have to stay on your toes and deal with the moment.

Do not go into an interview expecting certain answers, and then try to steer the person to the answers you want to hear and the way you want to hear them. This would frustrate the interviewee and you will not get a good interview. Remember that it is their story to tell, and you are just the listener. Let the interview happen. It is okay to have silence while someone is thinking about an answer, and it is okay for people to tell long stories.

Not every interview will be an award-winning interview. Sometimes they just plain don't work. In these cases, out of respect to the person who has taken the time to come to the interview, I will spend time conversing with them so they feel a part of the process. I politely wrap it up asking them if they have anything else that I have missed and if not I thank them and conclude the interview. Don't give up right away though, but don't beat a dead horse.

If they get mixed up telling a specific story you do not need to correct them. You can always come back later and ask the question again in a little different way.

Most of the interviews I do last 60 – 90 minutes. Generally the beginning has a lot of extraneous material while I am working my way into the heart of the interview. Even though I keep an eye on my watch, generally you will sense when the interview is over.

I close by asking if there is anything that they would like to talk about that I missed, and then if not I thank them for their time and close by documenting on tape who all is in the room, the date, and re-do the interviewee's name and spelling.

As follow up I send them a thank you letter and a copy of the raw footage. This is information that they can share with their children and grandchildren. Often time's families are surprised to hear these stories because they have never heard them before. People often feel more comfortable talking to a third party rather than their own family. That is why these projects are so important.

Again, don't make the process so complicated you will never do it. Just let them tell their story... if you don't they will be lost forever.