

# THE ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

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One of the most precious resources for understanding the conditions of our society and culture is the oral history interview. It allows us to see one human event from a multitude of perspectives and is a flexible means to insure inclusiveness for a variety of literary forms. Collecting oral history interviews should be a pleasure and feel like a special intimate experience between two people. Each interview is unique and unpredictable. An interview is a monologue. The role of the interviewer is to become an empathetic listener cheering on and encouraging the interviewee to become relaxed, talkative, and revealing.

## GETTING STARTED

Making arrangements for meeting the interviewee begins with a telephone conversation explaining the nature of the interview, the intent of the work and permission to work. Trust your instincts during the initial conversation, they will inform you of the ease or challenge you will face in the interview process. Agree to meet the interviewee for an informal conversation, face-to-face to discuss topics with an option to conduct a brief interview of 45 minutes. Discuss the terms of the project such as consent forms, utilization of final products and any procedures for edits or review of materials and possible copies of final product.

## EQUIPMENT

Audiotape and videotape recorders both capture your interviewee's voice. Videotape recorders capture visual expression and the personal dimension of your interviewee's personality. Video

is more expensive and demanding in producing a final product, but more and more considered the norm. Your equipment bag should include a tape recorder with batteries or battery pack, extra tapes prepared for use, external lavalier microphone, headphones, notepad, pencils and questions, perhaps the most essential element.

## SETTING UP

The interview is a private process and therefore everyone should feel comfortable and familiar. The ideal setting is in the interviewee's home. Finding a place to set up where there is an outlet and well away from other people is a challenge, yet essential to a good sounding interview. If you are shooting video, choose a comfortable chair, but not a rocking chair or backless chair. Movement in the frame is distracting to the viewer and discomfort of the interviewee will only reduce the quality of the interview. Plan ahead to minimize interruptions. Informing

other home residents of the interview is helpful. Having spectators is a distraction. Ambient sound that is free from noise is critical. Listen for the sound of technology from TV and radios to the hum of a refrigerator. Turn off phones and answering machines.

## INTERVIEWING

Think of the interview questions as prompts to get the interviewee to think about and recall past memories. Let them know this is not a test, nor is there a right or wrong answer. Before starting the interview, review the topics in a natural and chatty way, so the interviewee relaxes and begins to understand the pacing of the interview. The best interviewers are those who are quiet, reserved and good at listening. Rapid-fire questions will disrupt thinking and may interfere with the revealing of sensitive material. Learn to be comfortable with long silences and keep eye contact and an occasional nod of the head will help move the conversation along. If the interviewee should answer a question in one or two words ask them to elaborate or give examples. If an answer is a surprise, stay with it and show your interest and curiosity. These are moments that can create a chemistry that enhances the storytelling process.

Generally oral history projects are

created with the understanding that a group of people will be asked the same set of questions with the resultant answers becoming a database of knowledge. Developing the questions will require indepth research into the nature of the people being interviewed and their concerns. Once the questions are developed, they are the structural foundation of the project and therefore the same questions should be asked of each person interviewed. It is helpful to create thematic categories that allow for building in a series of questions that aid in reaching details and deeper thoughts.

### QUESTIONS

Prepare ahead. Your questions become the backbone of the information you are gathering and enable you to gather like information across any number of interviews. Stick to basics, as they are doorways to knowledge. The first set of questions should be facts that identify the individual and place them in their community, race, and culture. The next set of questions may be “life cycle” or “life crisis” events. Another set of questions may be historical events and your interviewee’s experience of them. Once you have a good rapport with the interviewee it is possible to approach

the more personal experiences to include sensitive questions that explore conflicts, challenges, obstacles, tragedies, fears, mistakes. These questions, while difficult, are where the spirit of interviewee emerges.

### FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS

Interviewing is tiring and while it may be possible to do two in one day, it is better to stop before one is exhausted. A second interview always allows for clarification of material collected during the first interview. Also, the second interview usually reveals the interviewee has thought deeper and fuller about certain topics they may not have considered before. After the first interview is a good time to ask the interviewee to ask any questions or comments on the interviewing experience. It allows for refining and discussing the content for the next interview. You may also want to make descriptive notes after the interview and check spelling of proper names and new words. The second interview is often a good time to present old pictures and found objects. Any visual document and both found or fond objects of the interviewee provides a new and exciting prompt for often more dynamic information.

### POST INTERVIEW

Make sure each tape is labeled with the name, date, and topics of interview. The post-interview step is to duplicate the tape to protect the original master. The duplicate tape or “dub” is the one utilized for transcribing and editing for topic information. Listen to the tape and analyze for content and process. Compare the narrator’s monologue with the list of questions. Ask yourself if you feel unsatisfied or incomplete with the “answers.” Jot down questions for the new interview. Listen for the process, what went well and did not go well with the interviewee. Getting a sense of which questions worked will improve the experience of the second interview.

Remember, the greatest gift the interviewer can give the interviewee is a safe place to reconnect in some way to the continuity of one’s experience. Continued involvement with the interviewee reinforces that connection and the cultural perspective from which they speak.