

# **ORAL HISTORY TECHNIQUES: How to Organize and Conduct Oral History Interviews**

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## ***Introduction***

Oral history interviewing is one more tool in the larger repertoire of methodologies used for research in history, anthropology, and folklore. Oral history collects information about the past from observers and participants in that past. It gathers data not available in written records about events, people, decisions, and processes. Oral history interviews are grounded in memory, and memory is a subjective instrument for recording the past, always shaped by the present moment and the individual psyche. Oral history can reveal how individual values and actions shaped the past, and how the past shapes present-day values and actions.

Every interviewing experience is unique; this is part of the charm of fieldwork. So while there is some validity in the adage, "The only way to learn how to do it is to do it," there are things you can do before, during, and after your interview to make every interview more successful.

## ***Before the Interview***

Set goals for your project before you begin. First: what are you trying to learn? You might want to come up with a sentence or two that summarizes your research goals, so that you can easily explain to your interviewees what you are researching and why it is important. Second: what kinds of information already exist about your research topic, and in what form? For example, if you wanted to do a biography of a politician, you would want to look at campaign literature, political documents, other biographies that already exist—all the sources you could find that would tell you more about this person. If you were studying an event—for example, a strike in a factory—you would want to consult newspaper accounts, factory records, union records, perhaps even economic data that would indicate the effects of the strike. If you were studying a family member, the data you consult may be in different forms—scrapbooks, photographs, family heirlooms, diaries, etc. Third: you need to consider who you will need to interview to learn about your topic. Make a list of potential interviewees; this list will grow as you are referred to additional interviewees. It may not even be a list of names at first. For the

factory strike, for example, your list might include strikers, factory managers, union representatives, police on the picket line, counter-demonstrators, etc. Fourth: what product(s) do you want to create from this study, and who is the audience for the product(s)? The answer to these questions will help you decide what kinds of information you'll need and in what medium to record it. For example, if you were planning to create a website, you would need to create digital audio or video files of your interviews. You would need digital scans of any photos or documents you wanted to upload as part of the history you are presenting. You would want to be sure that the people you interview know that their interview will be available to the whole world at the click of a mouse, and you will want to keep that in mind as you decide what to post on the website and what to leave out.

Prepare for each interview by knowing as much as you can about the person you'll be interviewing. Remember what information you want to gain from the interview, and design a list of questions with that focus in mind. Remain open-minded, however; data can take you in new directions as the research and the interviews progress. If you are going to be interviewing someone about whom few or no written record exists, learn more about the times and circumstances of their lives. For example, if you were studying a woman who was an Army nurse in World War II, you might have access to some records of her service, but you should also learn about that time in history and the role of an Army nurse so your questions can better capture the history she lived. Such knowledge will also assist you in establishing rapport with the interviewee by laying a groundwork of shared knowledge and confirming your interest in him/her.

Set up the appointment for the interview, confirm the appointment, and keep the appointment. Arrange to conduct the interview in a place and time most comfortable for the interviewee, away from noise and distractions.

Buy the best recording equipment you can afford. Know your equipment thoroughly, be it audio or video, and make sure it is in working order before you arrive at the interview. Test it again on site, with the interviewee and you both speaking on the recording to be sure you are both clearly audible. If you use batteries, carry extra. If your equipment is rechargeable, be sure it is fully charged. I recommend an external microphone that is stereo and omnidirectional in preference to the recorder's built-in microphone. Record at the highest quality level on your digital equipment—do not compress the files as you record. This means you need to have sufficient memory on your recorder for your needs. If your digital recording equipment (audio or video) has an ear bud that allows you to hear the recording as it is being made, get accustomed to using it and wear it during the interview to be sure there is no audio dropout or microphone failure.

Prepare a list of questions for the interview. You need not follow this list exactly; other questions will arise during the interview, but they will give a solid organization and cohesiveness to your interview. The list of questions also makes it easier to be sure you cover the same information with all your interviewees. Put the simplest questions, like biographical data, at the beginning, and the most complex or sensitive questions at the end. Group the questions logically, so you and your interview subject can easily follow the progression of ideas or chronology in the interview. If you are not sure of the wording of a question you constructed, try it out on another person. Another good way to check the focus of individual questions is to ask yourself, "What am

I trying to learn with this question?"

Ask simply structured, single-topic questions. Compound questions (strings of questions linked together with "and"), multiple rephrasing, and false starts are harder to answer, and harder to transcribe. This is another good reason to prepare a list of questions in advance. Take your time. If you have more than one point to pursue on a given topic, compose follow-up questions. If a point that has not occurred to you in composing your questionnaire flies by in the midst of an interviewee's answer, you can always go back to it later in the interview. Keep a pen handy to jot down a word or two during the interviewee's response to remind yourself to follow up on that point when the interviewee finishes speaking.

Ask open-ended questions rather than questions answered by yes or no. You want to encourage the fullest response possible to each question. Especially do not ask leading questions. You want people to feel free to tell their own stories and express their own opinions. For example, if you were interviewing a factory worker, you would not ask, "Don't you feel that management was hostile to your concerns?" but "What was the attitude of management to your concerns?"

Questions should be not only open-ended but also concrete, avoiding as much as possible jargon or theoretical concepts (unless the jargon and concepts are part of the interviewee's experience). Remember that people's memories hang on substantial hooks. Asking for a description of a typical day or a family gathering, or breaking a subject down into its component elements (for a study of a factory, for example, asking about coworkers, work processes, job training, etc.) will give the interviewee points of reference from which to reminisce.

Interviews are generally improved by sending the interviewee a list of your questions or a summary of the interview topics—in the latter case your summary should be written in neutral terms that will not prejudice the interviewee toward a certain perspective. The point is to give the interviewee time before the interview to think about people and events that may not have occurred to him/her in a long time. Be sure to explain that the questions or summary is only a framework, that other points may occur to both of you during the interview, and any question the interviewee does not want to answer can be skipped.

Be aware of your personal appearance before you go to the interview. The tone you set nonverbally can be as important to the interview's success as what you say. Your attire tells the interviewee something about how you view him/her and the interview itself. Casual clothes can suggest a more informal atmosphere, but they can also suggest a lack of care or respect to some interviewees; businesslike clothes can suggest a more formal, purposeful atmosphere, but can intimidate some interviewees. Try to match your appearance to what will best put the interviewee at ease with you and the interview process.

Be aware that there can be subject areas or data out of your reach because of some inhibiting factor in your relationship to the interviewee: sex, age, class, etc. Be sensitive to these factors, and try to work past them, but do not alienate the interviewee by pressing too hard for information he/she does not want to share. The single best strategy for bridging these kinds of obstacles is for the interviewer to show respect and courtesy to the interviewee, and to make the interview itself a "safe place" where the interviewee feels heard and understood. Part of that atmosphere comes from the interviewee understanding the goals of the interview, his/her role in

the research, his/her freedom to answer a question or not, and how the interview will be used. Part of that atmosphere comes from the interviewer being a friendly, non-judgmental, interested listener to the life experiences and opinions of the interviewee.

Unexpected barriers to full disclosure can also arise from your level of familiarity with the interviewee. Sharing a lot of history in common with the interviewee can be as challenging to work past as meeting the interviewee for the first time. This can be a particular challenge when interviewing family members. Things you both know can be taken for granted, and things taken for granted are generally unspoken. Try to stay alert for this kind of data, and do not be shy about stating what is (for both of you) obvious. Remember you are speaking for a third person, the audience for the interview or its product(s), who may not know either of you.

Know your ethical responsibilities as an interviewer. Be prepared to answer any questions the interviewee may have about the interview or the research project. Our Center uses a narrator information sheet that explains the goals of the project, the interview process, the rights and responsibilities of both parties, and includes contact information for our center. We send this to the interviewee before the interview. We also use a copyright release form that grants permission to use the interview, and has room on it for the interviewee to state any restrictions or conditions on the interview's use. Both interviewer and interviewee sign the copyright release form at the close of the interview. The interviewee can wait to sign the copyright release until after review of the recording or transcript. Be sure the interviewee reads and understands any forms you use before you begin the interview.

### ***At the Interview***

It is best to have a one-on-one interview so that the interviewee's attention is focused on you and yours on him/her. If you cannot avoid it, or choose to interview a couple or a group, be sure to identify on the recording all the people who take part in the interview. Note: you need signed forms from each substantive participant in the interview. For people who may wander in once you have begun, use your judgment on getting signed forms depending on the person's contribution to the interview. If you interview more than one person—a married couple, for example—often one is the conversation leader and one is quieter. It is up to you as interviewer to be sure that both people have the opportunity to answer the questions fully and without interruption or contradiction (which is why it is generally easier to do each person's interview separately).

Let the interviewee suggest the interview location, whether that is their home or office or another location. Make sure the place chosen is quiet and away from outside distractions. Background noise can destroy an interview by making the recording unintelligible. Traffic, air conditioners, office noises, clock chimes, ringing telephones, etc. should be avoided if possible. It is important to examine the area around you before you begin the interview and choose the quietest location you have available to you. You may only have this one chance to get a clean recording.

Place the audio recorder and microphone between you and your subject on a solid surface (or attach the microphone to him/her if it is the clip-on type). Do not hold the microphone or the recorder in your hand. Be aware that moving objects on the table, shuffling papers, or fidgeting (if the microphone is on the person) can cause noises that obscure the conversation. Know your

microphone's strengths and weaknesses so you can plan around these kinds of disruptions as you set up the equipment. Always test your recorder on site. If you are using a video recorder, decide if you want yourself to appear on the recording, or if you will be speaking off camera. Test the video on site. You want to be sure the image is well lit, and the audio is clear. Set the camera so that if the interviewee leans or changes position, he/she won't be cut off or out of frame.

Some people are nervous about being recorded, and some people who might allow an audio recording might balk at a video recording. Be sure the interviewee understands before the meeting that you wish to record the interview and in what format. If he/she does not want to be videotaped, for example, but you are working on a video project, one possible compromise is an audio recording and a photo of the interviewee. Let your interviewee hear or see the playback when you test the equipment. Never start recording until the interviewee is ready to begin, and never record without that person's knowledge.

Start your recorded interview with a statement of the names of yourself and your interviewee(s), the date, and the location. This is very helpful when you have multiple recordings to sort through later. Then begin by collecting simple biographical information from the interviewee, such as full name, date of birth, and place of birth (which should also be at the beginning of your questionnaire). This helps put the interviewee at ease and gets the basic information about your subject up front in the interview.

Once the recorder is running, focus on the interviewee, and give the machine only the minimum attention necessary to be sure it is recording smoothly. This will also help the interviewee focus on you instead of the machine. Do not pause the recording during an interview unless the interviewee asks you to, or the interviewee is called away (by a phone call, for example). The only other time to turn off the recorder would be if the interviewee becomes upset (for example, becomes tearful remembering the death of a close family member) and needs a moment to regain composure. Tell the interviewee you are pausing the recorder, and tell him/her when you start it again. It is your responsibility to monitor the well-being of your interviewee. If you are doing a long interview, creating regular breaks give you time to review your list of questions as well as a chance for your interview subject (and you) to stretch or get a drink. This alleviates fatigue and is beneficial to both of you. Be sure to turn the equipment on again when the interviewee is ready to resume talking "on the record."

Speak at a sedate pace, and speak clearly. The tone you set will generally be echoed by the interviewee.

After you ask a question, stop...and wait for the answer, even if you have to sit in silence for several seconds. Subjects often need several moments to think about the questions you ask. Give them quiet time; do not feel you need to leap in right away with a rephrased question or a different question. The silence is not as long as it feels!

Once the answer comes, do not cut off or talk over an interviewee. Some people do like to go on and on, but let them talk to the end of their strand of thought and wait for an opening patiently. Cutting them off gives the impression that what they are saying isn't important to you, or that you are hurrying through the interview.

Verify verbally when people make gestures or point out something. The audio recorder cannot see. This won't be as much of an issue if you are videotaping the interview, unless they refer to something out of frame. For example: "The fish was this big." Interviewer: "About

eighteen inches." Or "The bandstand was over there." Interviewer: "Across the street by the pond."

Keep alert for cues from the interviewee that he/she will expand on a topic you bring up provided you let them know you want to hear it. For example, if an interviewee says, "Oh, that wasn't much of a problem, although I can think of several times where it was," it is a cue to say, "Would you like to tell me about those times?" This not only shows you are listening and enhances rapport with the interviewee; it can also give you good material the interviewee would not volunteer otherwise.

By the same token, keep alert for clues that the interviewee is uncomfortable with a question or line of questioning. This is more often clued in by body language than verbally, although some interviewees will not hesitate to tell you how they feel about a question! Remember you can prevent this rapport-damaging eventuality by letting the interviewee know before the interview begins that he/she has the right at any time to refuse to answer a question.

Be alert to your own responses to an interviewee's remarks, taking care not to sound judgmental, impatient, or disrespectful. An interview is not the place to show off how much you know, or to take issue with an interviewee's memories, beliefs, or opinions. It is not about you! Remember: you are that "safe place" in which the interviewee can be heard and understood. Treat all interviewees with unfailing courtesy, respect, and gratitude for the privilege of sharing a part of their lives with you. Even if you come away with nothing that you feel is of material benefit to your project, you can consider any interview a success if you have maintained a positive, polite, professional stance throughout the interview.

One last element of interviewee behavior to keep an eye on, especially with older subjects, is fatigue. Interviewing is a tiring process. It is emotionally and intellectually challenging for both you and the interviewee. If the person is showing signs of weariness, it is better to adjourn and take up the interview another time than to press on with an interviewee who is too tired to think clearly any longer but too polite to tell you enough is enough. You can always reschedule and continue the interview another time.

### ***After the Interview***

Unless the interviewee is pressed for time, do not run right out after an interview. Once the recorder is turned off, there is always time to say thank you, to chat about the process you have just undergone together, and often to hear the best stories or most important data the interviewee has said during your entire meeting. That's why it is a good idea not to put the machine away at once; you can always turn it on again (with the interviewee's permission) to get one more story down. For digital audio recorders, consider putting the recorder on pause rather than a full stop at the end of the interview. Then, if you have permission to put a final story on the record, you will be adding it into the same audio file.

Be sure that the interviewee signs the copyright release, or that you both understand clearly what the interviewee wants to do (hear the recording or edit the transcript, for example) before signing it. If you intend to submit your interviews to an established archive, use their forms and know what information they will need to accompany the interview when you deposit it. Be sure the interviewee knows where the interview will be deposited and who will have access to it, ensuring that this arrangement is acceptable to both the interviewee and the archive.

If you intend to keep the materials yourself, have a plan for what will happen to the interviews after your death, and be sure the interviewee is aware of that plan as well.

It is very important to label recordings completely and carefully. In digital terms, that means creating good identifying data for the digital files stored on your computer, such as a file name that is the interviewee's full name and the date of the interview. Having a good file naming system and applying it consistently will save time when you are looking for a particular interview later. Have a plan for secure storage of the files if you plan to keep them long term.

Collateral materials are documents, photos, or material artifacts that accompany or supplement an interview. If these materials are loaned to you, be sure to copy or scan them, and return them promptly. If they are given to you to keep or to pass on to an archive, be sure to label them as carefully as the recordings, and to store them with whatever explanatory notes may be needed to explain the significance of the artifact and to easily link it back to the appropriate interview recording.

Transcription can be full, partial, or indexed with a list of keywords or short descriptions accompanied by times to approximate their location in the interview. Choose the transcription format that best suits your needs. Archives prefer verbatim transcripts, of course; a transcript is easier to use than an audio recording. Be aware it can take four to five hours to do a verbatim transcript of one hour of an audio recording. While there are voice recognition software programs that can provide a first draft of your digital files, the files will still require you to listen and correct that first draft. If you are submitting your interviews to an archive, find out their stylistic requirements for transcripts. Be sure that whatever style you use, you begin by putting the names of all participants and the date of the interview, and throughout the transcript you distinguish the speakers from each other (for example, our Center uses the initials of the last names to identify speakers). Number the pages of your transcript, and use a header with the last name of the interviewee on each page.

Send a thank-you note to your interviewee. If any special arrangements were made between you—for example, for copies of the interview, a follow-up interview, or a copy of the final product(s)—reiterate these promises in the note, and follow up on your promises.

## ***Bibliography***

I have listed below a few excellent resources that discuss interview techniques and ethics in more detail. If you have particular questions about doing oral history, please feel free to contact our Center.

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