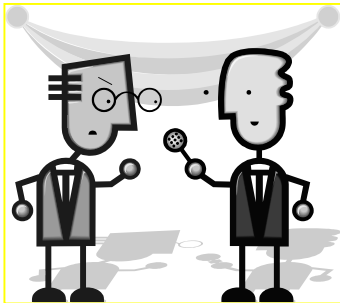


Oral History Interview Guide

What is an interview?

An interview is like a conversation but different. Like a conversation, an interview involves two people talking to one another about something they are interested in. But an interview is more one-sided than a conversation because one person, the **interviewee**, talks more and offers more explanations, while the other person, the **interviewer**, has to listen very carefully to what is being said and ask follow-up questions. When you do an interview you must both listen and respond at the same time. That's not easy!

There are different types of interviews:



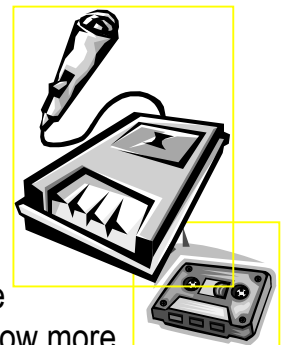
- **Journalistic** (think hard-hitting “60 Minutes”)
- **Job** (proving yourself or showing what you can do)
- **Therapeutic** (talking to a therapist or intake worker)
- **Ethnographic** (used in oral history!)

Unlike other interviews, the **ethnographic interview** needs to make the interviewee feel comfortable and encourage them to talk about what they are interested in on their own terms.

Before the Interview

Know your equipment

Test your microphone and tape recorder. Make sure your batteries are fresh. Take an extension cord and extra batteries with you.



Get to know your interviewee

Before the interview, talk on the phone, or have a little conversation with the person you will interview. Do some research (in books or on the web) to know more about the topic(s) you want to discuss. Schedule the interview for a time and place that are most convenient for the interviewee, often their home or office. Show up on time, and dressed in a way that will make your interviewee feel comfortable with you.

Make up a questionnaire

Think of all the things you want to ask and list them in a questionnaire. Put the questions in the order you want to ask them and group them by topic. Make a questionnaire for each person you interview and take it with you.

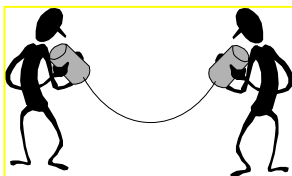
Interview Technique

Advance the tape past the leader before recording anything. Before you start the interview, record an introduction on the tape, stating your name, the date, place, and name of the interviewee.

Choose a quiet place with little background noise for the interview. Try to keep the interview around one hour long.

Ask your interviewee to sign a release form. This form is proof that the interviewee has given **consent** to be interviewed.

Make a connection



Making a connection is an important part of the beginning of an interview. Think about what you can do or say to make your interviewee feel comfortable. This is called establishing **rapport**.

It is a good idea to meet or talk with someone once before recording a full interview. Some interviewers talk on the phone first, while others chat awhile with their interviewee before turning on the tape recorder.

Tips:

- **Express interest:** make eye contact, respond by nodding, smiling, or saying something brief
- **Start easy:** Start with neutral, easy questions (like “Where were you born” “How long have you lived here?”) and work up to harder questions (“Why do you think this neighborhood has so much trash?”)
- **Encourage interviewee to share:** photos, scrapbooks or other items that will help them remember important stories.



Asking Questions

It's important to write up specific questions before interviewing, and to think of ways of making your questions specific *and* flexible. Before you go into the interview, take the time to draw up a custom **questionnaire**

that you can refer to during the interview to be sure you get the information you need. You might try grouping the questions by theme.

Types of Interview questions:

? **Descriptive:** Questions that ask someone to describe in their own words, an aspect of their history or reality.

Examples: What did this block look like 20 years ago? Who lived here?

Descriptive questions move from “big picture” (tell me what your house looked like) to “little picture” (What kinds of activities took place in the living room?)

? **Structural:** Questions that help you to discover information about your interviewee's knowledge and view of the world.

Example: What kinds of different people lived on this block 20 years ago?

Structural questions often require an explanation, especially if the interviewee uses a special term or idea.

? **Contrast:** Questions that help you find out how interviewees compare and contrast different ideas, objects, events, or people.

Example: How is this block different from how it was 30 years ago?

Contrast questions help establish the meaning of a symbol, object, or expression in relation to other things by looking at similarities and differences.

Ordering questions



Be flexible and let your interviewee guide the flow, particularly in the beginning. Most interviews are a combination of focused and unfocused approaches. General topics are good at the beginning -- suggest a subject and let your interviewee talk. Later you will want to be more focused, asking specific questions, but still retaining flexibility. Try to order your questions so that the simpler, easier-to-answer questions are at the beginning, and the more complicated questions are at the end, when the conversation is flowing and the interviewee is more relaxed and has had time to think more about the subject.

Tips:

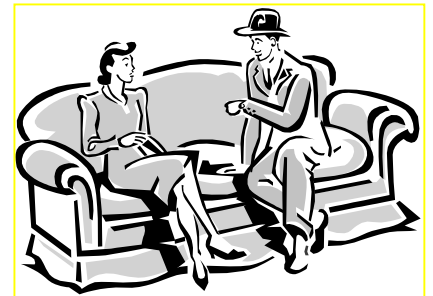
- Treat your interviewee as a teacher and ask them to teach you what they know.
- Avoid yes/no questions.
- Ask open-ended who/what/when/how questions that encourage the interviewee to describe, explain, reflect, or make a judgment.

- Ask one question at a time.
- Keep your questions short and simple.
- Think of different ways of asking the same question in case your interviewee doesn't understand what you mean.
- Always have a list of follow-up questions for each question you pose.
- Be flexible: allow the interviewee to follow the train of their memory, rather than always following your list of questions.
- Don't challenge your interviewee.

Learning to listen

Listening during an interview is hard work! Often you are so focused on asking the next question, you don't really listen to what is being said. Listen actively be prepared to follow up on what is said, not just what you planned to ask.

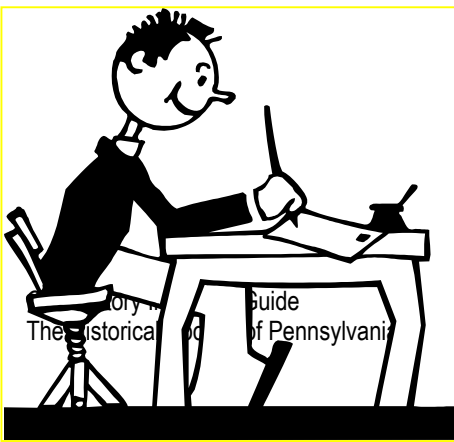
Don't worry about remembering all your questions -- it's more important to listen. You can always look at the questionnaire or your notes during a pause in the talk to remind yourself.



Show your interviewee that they are being understood by nodding and smiling and asking them to say more.

Tips:

- Use the same words as your interviewee to show that you understand.
- Don't be afraid of silence – sometimes pausing can help your interviewee remember what they want to say, so don't feel you have to jump right in with another question.
- Don't talk too much! Encourage your interviewee to talk more.
- Don't interrupt.
- Do not challenge your interviewee's memory or version of events.
- Don't talk about yourself unless you are asked to, and try to keep your personal views to yourself if controversial subjects come up.



After the interview

Thanks!

Always send a thank you note or gift to your interviewee. Remember to show them that they

have done you a favor by talking to you, and that you appreciate it.

Organize and Label

Clearly label your tapes with relevant information including interviewee name, date, and tape number.

Example: “Jane Doe, January 1, 2003, tape 1 of 2, side 2.”

Punch out the tabs on the top of the tape so that the interview is not recorded over accidentally.

Be sure to listen over your tape soon after doing the interview and list the major topics of conversation, noting their location on the tape by using the counter on your tape recorder. This is known as **indexing** and can be done by listing the main or most significant topics of conversation in the order that they appear on the tape, with any additional notes of significant detail. This indexing allows you or others to find sections of the interview when going back over the tape. As you listen back over the tape, note significant pauses, tones of voice, and patterns in the conversation.

Share

After the interview has been transcribed or written about, always share a copy with your interviewee, allowing them to edit for style and content. Make sure your interviewees get a final copy of everything!

Ethics

Never forget that you are dealing with real people with whom you have a relationship, however briefly. In addition to thanking them, try to think of ways you can reciprocate the favor they do you. Always be respectful toward your interviewee, always obtaining consent and respecting your subject’s wishes. And always share what you create with them.