

**Doing Oral History:
Some Guidelines Courtesy of the
Southern Oral History Project
www.sohp.org**

Designing an Oral History Project

Questions to consider before you begin an oral history project:

1. What is the historical subject we want to investigate?
2. What are our goals in undertaking this project?
3. What uses do we envision for the information we collect?
4. What kinds of materials will the project generate? What should we do with them?

With these broad questions answered, you can more easily tackle the nuts and bolts:

1. Who can provide us with information on this subject? How many interviews should we conduct? With how many different people?
2. What personnel do we need to do this?
3. What equipment and materials do we require?
4. How long will the project take?
5. What kind and amount of background research should we conduct?
6. What funds will we need? Where might we obtain these funds?

As an exercise in planning a project, consider how the answers to these questions would vary in each of the following cases:

1. A project in which high school students interview Vietnam veterans in their community in an effort to understand the impact of the war on individuals. (An example of oral history used in teaching.)
2. An in-depth set of interviews with former President Jimmy Carter on his administration's foreign policy regarding the Middle East to be added to the collections of materials on his presidency at the Carter Library. (An example of oral history used to create new historical materials for the future use of researchers, scholars, and policy analysts.)
3. A set of interviews with former minor league baseball players on the history of their sport and its relation to major league baseball. The interviews are to be used as the basis for a radio broadcast series on the development of minor league baseball. (An example of oral history used in public history, i.e., interpreting history to the public.)

Ten Tips for Interviewers

1. Ask one question at a time.
2. State your questions as directly as possible.
3. Ask open-ended questions-questions that begin with "why, how, where, what kind of," etc. Avoid "yes or no" questions.
4. Start with non-controversial questions. One good place to begin, for instance, is with the interviewee's childhood memories.
5. Don't let periods of silence fluster you.
6. Avoid interrupting the interviewee.
7. If the interviewee strays away from the topic in which you are interested, don't panic. Sometimes the best parts of the interview come about this way. If you feel the digression has drifted too far afield, gently steer the interviewee back to the topic with your next question.
8. Be respectful of the interviewee. Use body language to show you are interested in what he or she has to say. Remember, the interviewee is giving you the gift of his or her memories and experiences.
9. After the interview, thank the interviewee for sharing his or her experiences. Also send a written thank-you note.
10. Don't use the interview to show off your knowledge, charm, or other attributes. Remember, "good interviewers never shine-only their interviews do."

Notes on Interviewing

An oral history interview involves complex social interactions; no formula can guarantee success. Empathy, intelligence, flexibility, respect for the sanctity and complexity of human lives--all these personal qualities interact in the interview situation. But interviewing is also a skill that can be learned with systematic practice. The following suggestions are meant to facilitate this process.

PREPARATION

1. Begin by defining the historical problem you wish to investigate. Only then can you decide who to interview and what to ask.
2. In order to handle the problem of interview bias, you must explore your own assumptions, values, and attitudes. An interview does not call for an impossible façade of neutrality. It does demand special self-awareness and self-discipline.
3. Before conducting your first interview, do as much background research as possible. Oral history cannot be separated from or substituted for other methods of historical research.
4. Select respondents who will be able and willing to provide information you need. Respondents may be chosen because their lives illustrate certain historical themes or because they have special knowledge of a historical event, movement, or institution.
5. Either in writing or in person (preferably followed by a letter of confirmation), ask permission to conduct the interview and explain its purpose. Provide a description of the project and mention any release forms you will be using. This is a good time to make certain that the interviewee understands that the materials may be deposited in an archive. In the course of this conversation, be sensitive to any hesitation on the interviewee's part. Emphasize the importance of preserving these stories and making them available to later generations. Be reassuring about the fact that these are spoken reminiscences, not polished, grammatical essays.
6. Draw up a list of the topics or specific questions to be explored. You will want to refer to these questions during the interview, but you should not feel constrained by them.
7. Choose a setting for the interview that is as private and unthreatening to the respondent as possible. Avoid places where there will be distracting background noise.
8. Secure any release forms or other paperwork that may be necessary.
9. Before the interview, become thoroughly familiar with your recording equipment. Read the equipment manual; test the microphone and the gain levels so that you know how to monitor the equipment during the interview.

THE INTERVIEW

1. Set up your recorder and make your opening announcement on tape. Include the interviewee's name, your name, the date, the location, and the topic you will be discussing in your interview.
2. Be sure to check (i.e. play back) the recording early in the interview. If there are background noises (fans, air conditioning, etc.), or other problems with the recording, this will be the moment to address such issues.
3. Interviews may be autobiographical or topical. In either case, begin at a point in time previous to the central events you want to explore. For all interviews, include basic information regarding the interviewee's birthplace and family of origin.
4. You should seek a balance in which you allow respondents to express the logic of how they understand their lives, while at the same time maintaining a sense of the overall direction of the conversation and framing questions so as to elicit information that pertains to your area of interest. Listen carefully. Do not be afraid of silence. Allow the respondent time to think, to continue after a pause. Critically evaluate the flow of information, so that you can ask for elaboration where the respondent's statements are unclear. Take notes that will remind you to ask follow-up questions at an opportune moment, rather than interrupting the respondent's train of thought.
5. Avoid leading or prejudicial questions. Your questions should be open-ended; they should not supply a list of alternative answers. They should be direct and to the point; avoid asking several questions in the guise of one. Frame questions within a language and context understood by the interviewee.
6. Seek concrete examples of attitudes and feelings from which you can infer subjective orientations. Focus on behavior; but try to understand the meaning the interviewee attaches to his/her actions. Develop facts and events first, then explore feelings and values. You may need to stimulate the interviewee's memory or reduce chronological confusion by supplying facts learned from background research.
7. It may be helpful to arrange the sequence of topics so as to postpone until last questions that may be threatening or challenging to the interviewee. Within each topic, it may be prudent to begin with a broad question, and then ask successively narrower and more detailed questions as they prove necessary.
8. When an interviewee seems unwilling or unable to provide certain information, try approaching the topic from another angle, indicating contradictory information that you have obtained from other sources, or wait until later in the interview to return to the topic. When appropriate, mention that it will be possible to restrict the interview according to the interviewee's wishes.
9. Ordinarily an interview session should last no more than 90 minutes. Be alert to signs of fatigue, distraction, or boredom. Conduct a long interview in several sessions.
10. Have the interviewee fill out and sign the release forms and/or other paperwork.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

1. Immediately after the session, write up your field notes. Field notes should include the names of yourself and your interviewee; the date, time, and location of the interview; and a description of the interview itself. Describe the setting, other people present; any pertinent events that happened prior to, during, or after the interview; and your honest reflections on whatever dynamics occurred during the interview/visit.
2. Send a written thank you to the interviewee.
3. Make a copy of the tape for transcription or indexing purposes.
4. Listen to the tape and evaluate both your own behavior and the content of the interview. Only by such self-criticism can you learn from your mistakes and refine your interviewing skills.
5. Decide whether or not a follow-up interview will be necessary. It is often helpful to conduct follow-up sessions after you have analyzed the content of the interview and as your understanding of the research problem evolves.
6. Once the interview is done, "history making" begins. The interview is raw data that must be compared to and used in conjunction with other evidence. Oral history starts with the collection, transcription/indexing, and preservation of interviews. But its goal is historical synthesis and interpretation. Remember that it is a collaborative effort; consider the ways in which you can engage your interviewee in this interpretive process.

Transcriber's Guidelines

I. Format

Double-space throughout.

Margins: Top - 1.0"; Bottom - 1.0"; Right - 1.0"; Left - 1.5". These specifications will provide even margins and allow the transcript to be bound.

Page numbers should be located in the upper right hand corner starting on the second actual page of the interview, after title page and index. (No number should be printed on the first page of the interview.)

Starting on the second page of the interview, the name of the interviewee should appear in the top left hand corner of each successive page in bold face.

Indent each time a new speaker enters in. Use the whole name the first time the speaker appears; then use initials each time thereafter.

Indicate the beginning of a new side of tape or new reel by starting a new page and typing "START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B" (or whatever is appropriate). Indicate the end of the side of a tape by typing "END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B" (or whatever is appropriate).

Indicate when the interview is finished with "END OF INTERVIEW."

II. Content

NOTE: The interviewer has the responsibility for supplying transcribers with an accurate list (on the Proper Word Form) of proper names that occur in the interview.

The transcriber is expected to proofread each page of manuscript for mistakes in spelling and/or typing.

Where a word or a phrase is inaudible, type (). Do not type "inaudible" or (?).

When a speaker fails to complete a sentence, indicate this by using two dashes, the first dash flush with the last letter of the last word spoken. The second dash should be followed by some form of end punctuation (period, question mark, etc.), as in "Well, you see there was nothing more I could--."

To indicate interruptions use two dashes flush with the last word spoken. For example, "He had planned to go to Yale and--." (Speaker breaks off because another speaker enters, etc.).

When a speaker interrupts him or herself in mid-sentence to add a supplementary or clarifying remark--a strong parenthetical digression--the remark is set off by dashes as shown in this sentence, with the dashes flush with the preceding and following words. Weaker parenthetical expressions may be set off with commas.

Interruptions such as telephone calls or laughter--or moments when the tape recorder is turned off--should be indicated by brackets containing an appropriate explanation:

[Interruption] or [Laughter] or [Recorder is turned off and then back on].

Noticeable pauses in conversation should be indicated by [pause].

Common verbal lapses, such as the dropping of the "g" sound in "ing" endings, or the omission of the "a" and "d" sounds in "and," should usually be written in their proper form. The meaningless guttural sound "uh" should not be transcribed unless it indicates some sort of emotion or real quandary on the part of the interviewee.

Use lower case for state legislative bodies, upper case for national; lower for public officials; capitalize Democratic but not party; when in doubt, use lower case.

Numbers one through one hundred and large round numbers should be spelled out, as should fractions. Large complex numbers should be written numerically, as should numbers in a series, percentages, ratios, and times. The word "percent" should be used rather than the symbol %. The days of the month are written numerically, as are years and series of years, except for such expressions as "the fifties," or "the roaring twenties." Expressions such as 50s or 60s should not contain an apostrophe before the "s."

* Please note: As will be further explained in the guidelines for editing, overuse of dashes only weakens a transcript. One must judge that it is important to the context of the interview for the reader to know that the speaker paused, was in a quandary, and therefore did not speak straightforwardly. Where the pauses are not this significant, simply end the sentence with a period or a question mark.

III. Editing

Editing is the most challenging aspect of transcribing, demanding the full attention of the transcriber to what is being said, and how--by the interviewer as well as the interviewee. When one is aware of the context of an interview, and also of the rhythms and mannerisms of speech of the persons involved, one is ready to edit in a sensitive and intelligent way. Habitual false starts or unnecessary and repetitive phrases can be cleaned up; "run-on" sentences can be broken with appropriate punctuation; the context of the interview can provide clues when a word or phrase is inaudible. The following are instances that most frequently seem to require a transcriber's editing:

-- Difficult to anticipate, but important to catch, are long run-on sentences or questions that can, for clarity's sake, be broken up into separate sentences. In other words, one should not type long sentences with many commas separating thoughts. Rather, the transcriber should--whether the voice of the person speaking indicates it or not--use periods or semi-colons to make for easier reading and comprehension. When possible in long interviewee sections, paragraphing can also assist the reader.

-- The transcriber may use, sparingly, exclamation marks and underlining where the emphasis seems called for in the context of the interview.

Obviously implied in the above is the fact that speed is not the highest priority in the transcribing process. Rather, care and accuracy require that the tape be played over again when necessary to catch a phrase or anticipate the need for editing; a dictionary or atlas may be required to look up an unfamiliar proper name or geographical location. The transcriber must be satisfied that the manuscript is readable, makes sense as it is typed, and is free from typing and spelling errors. When there are questions, the interviewer may

always be consulted.

The transcriber will find standard dictionaries, almanacs, and atlases useful when questions about the spelling of proper names and locations occur. Local libraries can help identify reference books that might be helpful. For projects about the state of North Carolina, works such as these are invaluable:

William S. Powell, *The North Carolina Gazetteer*
North Carolina Atlas: *Portrait of a Changing Southern State*

The transcriber is not expected to double check historical information, dates, book titles, etc. However, one quick telephone call to the local library can often provide the correct spelling of an unfamiliar person or place.