

A little preparation and care before the interview will produce a coherent oral history rather than random reminiscences.

Before the interview:

1. Pick a good candidate to interview.
2. Do a little research. Learn when and where your narrator was born, a few facts about his or her parents, spouse, children, occupation, and community. Use the Life History sheet.
3. You may want to visit the library to look at some books, a timeline, and encyclopedia, or videotapes about American history. The more you know about your narrator's times, the richer the interview will be.
4. Get in touch with your narrator early. This will give your narrator time to get ready for the interview. Explain why you are conducting the interview and what you plan to do with the notes and tapes.
5. Learn how to use the tape recorder before the interview. Use an external microphone - the sound will be better. Run the recorder from a power cord, or bring extra batteries.

The questions

1. Give your interview focus - don't overwhelm yourself and your narrator by asking them to talk about "life".
2. Ask yourself what you really want to know about the person before you begin, then give some thought to what might interest your narrator most. If you make sure the first interview is fun, you'll probably have an easier time arranging a second interview.
3. Make broad categories of questions - family life and relationships; the narrator's life in the community; his or her reaction to important historical events. Make a list of topics and subtopics and bring it to the interview. A few specific questions prepared beforehand will also help get the interview going. Most libraries have books with sample questions.

The interview

1. Be sure the recorder is working properly. Start by recording the narrator's name, the date, place, your name, and the general subject of the interview. Use the Interview Abstract.
2. Ask open-ended questions. If you say "Tell me about your first job" or "What was it like to grow up with ten brothers and sisters?" you give the narrator a chance to explore his or her memories.
3. After you ask a question, let the narrator talk. Relax and listen. Don't interrupt.

4. Take notes and ask follow-up questions. If your narrator touches on an area of interest, say "Tell me more" or "Can you give me an example?" Don't be afraid to stray from your list of topics and questions.
5. Be encouraging and considerate. Don't pry. Interviews sometimes touch on sensitive or painful subjects. Give your narrator the chance to drop an uncomfortable subject or to gather himself or herself in silence for a few moments. Let the tape run. The silences can be meaningful, too.
6. Don't be too timid. You can ask difficult questions if you have a good reason, just ask politely. And don't take sides.
7. Different narrators will remember things differently. Don't question the accuracy of the account, but rather try to establish your narrator's place in the story. Where were they when the incident took place, did they see it or hear about it from another person? Your job is to record an oral history, not confirm or undercut someone's recollections or point of view.
8. At the end, check over your list of topics. Go back if you've missed anything important.
9. Keep the interview to a reasonable length, especially with older narrators. About one hour is usually enough. You'll be surprised to find that you will tire too.

After the interview

1. Label every tape immediately. Review them as soon as you can and make a simple index by noting the subjects on the tape every five minutes or so. You can use the counter on the tape recorder to note the location of topics or for particularly wonderful answers.
2. Transcriptions can take a lot of time, but might be worth the investment, especially if the interviews will become part of a narrator's history.
3. File the tapes with the index, your information or life history sheet about each narrator, and all your notes.
4. Send a thank-you note to the narrator.
5. Make sure you get a written release from the narrator. The release is especially important if the tapes end up in a library or historical society.

Sample questions

Thinking up questions for an oral history interview usually isn't the problem. Choosing among is more difficult. Here are three broad topics and a few examples of questions. Tailor your questions to your narrator.

Historical events and eras

- What is the first important event in American history that you lived through? What did you think when you heard about it?

- What do you remember about the years just after World War II?
- What is your most powerful memory of the 1960's? What did you think of the changes in the United States during that decade?

Your community

- What was your first job in your chosen occupation and where did you live at the time? What was a typical day like at work?
- Who were your neighbors and what do you remember about the neighborhood you lived in?
- What was your town like?

Your family

- What did your parents expect of you (behavior, chores, work, school)?
- What was the best time for you in your family, and the roughest time?
- Who was included in your "immediate" family? Stepbrothers and sisters, grandparents, boarders, line-in companions, old family friends you called "aunt" or "uncle"?
- How was your family like other families, and how was it different?