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## ORAL HISTORY GUIDELINES

### Establishing the relationship

Oral history is person-centered research. The creation of a recorded interview is a partnership between the narrator and interviewer. To succeed, the oral history partnership requires mutual respect and trust. With careful attention to the following matters, interviewers will go far toward establishing rapport with their narrators and making the oral history experience mutually rewarding.

### Value of the Interview

- ◆ Commit to producing the highest-quality interview possible.
- ◆ The useful life of the interview extends far beyond today, so strive to gather information that will be relevant to future users.
- ◆ You may be the only person who records your narrators' stories, so take time to include their memories on subjects beyond your own immediate interests.

### Relationships

Be sensitive to real and perceived differences between you and your narrator (age, gender, race, class, educational level, nationality, religion, et cetera) and take care not to reinforce thoughtless stereotypes.

### Professional Interviewing /Correct representation of meaning

Give narrators the opportunity to respond to questions as freely as possible.

Do not subject narrators to biased assumptions.

Interviewers should work to achieve a balance between the objectives of the project and the perspectives of the interviewees. **Interviewers should fully explore all appropriate areas of inquiry with interviewees and not be satisfied with superficial responses.** At the same time, they should encourage narrators to respond to questions in their own style and language and to address issues that reflect their concerns.

Interviewers must respect the rights of interviewees to refuse to discuss certain subjects, to restrict access to the interview, or, under certain circumstances, to choose

anonymity. Interviewers should clearly explain these options to all interviewees.

- Interviewers should attempt to extend the inquiry beyond the specific focus of the project to create as complete a record as possible for the benefit of others.
- In recognition of the importance of oral history to an understanding of the past and of the cost and effort involved, interviewers and interviewees should mutually strive to record candid information of lasting value.

## **Research the topic**

*Why?*

- ✓ To locate the story within its historical context
- ✓ To learn what is already known and where there are information gaps
- ✓ To learn more about the person to be interviewed
- ✓ To uncover details previously undocumented, contradictory, or forgotten
- ✓ To establish rapport with the narrator
- ✓ To create informed questions that prompt storytelling
- ✓ To create follow-up questions that encourage detailed responses
- ✓ To clarify names of people and places mentioned in an interview
- ✓ To keep the story on track

## **Maximize the interview experience**

► **By getting to know your narrator.** Whenever possible, visit with narrators before the actual recording session to assess the extent of their experience with the topic, their recall ability, and their physical stamina. You may need to adjust your outline because they have limited or very specific experience with the topic or remember some things better than others. You may decide to stimulate their memory recall with some visual clues, such as maps or photographs. You may conclude that several brief interviews will accomplish more than a single long one because they tire easily.

► **By encouraging your narrator.** For reluctant narrators, explain why you think their personal accounts are important to the overall project. Assure them that oral history allows them to speak for themselves. Begin with simple, direct, open-ended questions and give them plenty of time to respond.

► **By interviewing one person at a time.** Set a project policy that narrators will be interviewed one on one and inform narrators of the policy when scheduling the interview. The policy provides justification to ask narrators for individual attention and to request that others leave the room when the interview begins. The presence of an additional person may discourage probing questions and inhibit candid responses. One person may answer for, disagree with, or disparage the other, causing the preferred narrator to retreat into silence. The unexpected participant may usurp the interviewer's role by asking

questions and guiding the discussion. Group interviews raise additional difficulties for transcribing the session and limit potential uses of the recordings in productions.

- ◆ **Ask one question at a time.**
- ◆ **Be prepared to get off the topic, then gently bring the narrator back to the subject.**
- ◆ **Use the silent question. Keep quiet and wait.**
- ◆ **Close with a thought question.**
- ◆ **End with an expression of appreciation**

## **Setting up on location**

- Demonstrate respect for the narrator. Show up on time, be polite. Allow time to answer questions and engage in friendly conversation before and after the interview.
- Interview only one person at a time, if at all possible.
- Be very familiar with your recording equipment. The less attention you need to focus on your equipment, the more you will have to concentrate on your narrator.
- Be flexible with your equipment so that the narrator can sit wherever is most comfortable. Ask permission to rearrange light furniture, if necessary, so that the microphone and recorder are well placed between you and the narrator.
- Bring extension cords if you plan to use A/C current. If you must rely on battery power, have extra batteries. A small, portable battery tester can save an interview.
- Arrange as quiet a spot as possible. Be aware of extraneous noises that will be picked up by the microphone—chiming clocks, humming refrigerators, clattering dishes, et cetera—and request permission to make changes to minimize background noise.
- Set up your recorder so that you can easily view recording levels.
- Place the microphone, whether internal or external, between you and the narrator. Test the microphone before beginning the interview. Record both your voices, play back the test re-cording, and adjust the microphone placement and recorder settings as needed. To avoid feedback, keep the speaker volume down all the way while recording.
- Accommodate the narrator's convenience when setting a time and place for the interview. The narrator's home or place of business may or may not furnish the privacy and quiet required for recording the interview. Have in mind a suitable alternative location.
- Make clear to narrators from the start that the interview will be recorded and that they will be asked to sign a legal-release agreement form.

## **Getting the story**

Begin with a general introduction that serves as an audio label. For example:

“This is [your name]. Today is [month/day/year]. I am interviewing for the [first, second, etc.] time [full name of narrator]. This interview is taking place at [address; may include description, such as home of, office of] in [town, state]. This interview is sponsored by [name of organization, if applicable] and is part of the [title or description] project.

Compose questions from your outline of questions. Be flexible; each interview is a unique exchange with a unique individual. Let the train of memory association run its course, even if it means ignoring your outline momentarily.

Ask open-ended questions first, waiting to see what unfolds.

Tailor follow-up questions to the narrator’s responses. Pursue in detail.

Maintain a pattern of concentrated listening.

Provide feedback with silent encouragements: nod your head to indicate you are listening or smile when appropriate. Keep your feedback quiet, being aware that your sounds can override the narrator’s voice during the recording. Keep your feedback neutral (such as, “I see” or “uh-huh”), indicating neither agreement nor disagreement.

Jot down a few notes as the narrator is talking to remind you of subjects you want to cover in more detail. Rather than disrupt the narrator’s train of thought by asking for spellings of unusual words, jot down a phonetic spelling and a clue to its place in the story, then after the interview ask for the correct spelling.

Give the narrator time to answer each question fully and finish her/his train of thought, then just sit quietly for a few moments. Chances are excellent that the narrator will think of something else to add. Silence is an integral, important part of the oral history interview process.

Give the narrator a chance to think through difficult subjects.

Challenge accounts that you think may be inaccurate, but do not question the narrator’s memory or honesty. If you feel you must, refer to other accounts or interpretations you know, asking the narrator for a response or clarification.

Avoid “off the record” information or switching the recorder off and on. Assure the narrator that sensitive information may be restricted.

Be aware of the narrator’s age and physical condition when deciding how long to continue an interview. Sixty to ninety minutes is a good average length for an interview. Concentration diminishes if the interview becomes lengthy.

Make sure that the narrator has signed a release for the interview.

Continue to demonstrate respect for the narrator. If you rearranged the furniture, return everything back to place before you leave. Send a thank-you note following the interview.