



Interviewing Tips and Tricks

Before You Begin

- Do background research about your topic and the person you are interviewing.
- Prepare an outline for the interview ahead of time and give that to your interviewee ahead of time so they can see what topics you would like to discuss.
- Based on your outline, create a list of questions you would like to ask.
- If appropriate, select a few old pictures or family artifacts that you would like to discuss; these can come in handy to get conversations going. Make sure to save copies or photos of these items with your interview for context.
- Be sure the person you are interviewing understands why you are recording the oral history and what you are going to do with the completed recording (distribute it to family members, deposit it in an archive, publish it online, etc.).

During the Interview

- Be yourself! Make the person you are talking to feel as comfortable and relaxed as possible.
- The focus of an oral history interview is the interviewee, not the interviewer. The person being interviewed should do most of the talking, with the interviewer asking a few questions to guide the discussion.
- Ask open-ended questions. Don't ask questions that can be answered with just a "yes" or "no." Try to start your questions with "why," "how," or "can you tell me more about..."
- Ask only one question at a time.
- Keep your questions short.
- Don't just ask questions from your list. Think of follow-up questions as you listen.
- If there are periods of silence, don't worry. Just let the interviewee gather their thoughts before they answer.
- Don't interrupt a story because you have a question or the person is going off topic. Jot your question down on your notepad for later. Ask a question that steers the conversation on course once the person has finished speaking.

- Don't challenge accounts that you feel are inaccurate. Instead, ask for more details so it can be later determined what is fact or just family lore.
- Try to avoid "hot topics" that make the interview uncomfortable or "off the record." This is especially true if you plan to share your oral history publicly or with an archive.

After the Interview

- Be sure to thank the person you have interviewed.
- Offer to share copies of your interview with the interviewee.