

Oral History Interview Tips

Drafted by the Minnesota Historical Society
Utilized here for the Morton History Project 2018

1. An interview is not a dialogue. You are there to record someone else's experiences, not to talk about yourself. The whole point of your interview is to make sure the narrator tells his or her own story. Limit your own remarks to prompting him or her with questions to guide their reminiscences.
2. Ask open-ended questions which require more than a "yes" or "no" answer. Start questions with who, what, when, where, why, and how.
3. Ask one question at a time. Asking a series of questions all at once usually ends up with the narrator answering only the first question, resulting in the loss of possible information from the other questions.
4. Ask brief questions. Most narrators will quickly grasp the kind of information you are seeking.
5. Start with non-controversial questions. Save the more delicate questions for when you and the narrator are better acquainted.
6. Don't let periods of silence fluster you. Give the narrator an opportunity to add comments before you rush them into another direction. Relax and jot down notes while your narrator regroups.
7. Be as natural as possible. Don't worry if your questions are not as beautifully phrased as you would like. When you fumble somewhat with your questions, the narrator realizes that you do not expect him or her to give perfectly composed responses.
8. Listen quietly, carefully, and actively. Encourage the narrator with an occasional smile or nod. Do not use fillers such as "yes," "uh-huh," and "really" repeatedly. Don't look bored or disinterested. Maintaining eye contact is vital.
9. Don't interrupt a good story because you have thought of a question or because the narrator is straying from your planned outline. Jot down your question for later. Be on your toes and remember that your list of questions is only a guide, not a rigid plan. Be ready to ask further questions when your narrator offers unexpected information.
10. If your narrator does ramble, wait for a pause and try to pull him or her back to the subject at hand. Example: "That's very interesting. Now before we continue, I would like to find out more about how the Great Depression affected your family"
11. It is often difficult for the narrator to describe a person. An easy way to begin is to ask him or her to describe that person's appearance. The narrator is then more likely to move into a description of the person's character and personality traits. Ask the narrator to be specific and to elaborate on his or her comments. Encourage lengthy descriptions where appropriate.

12. Try to establish your narrator's role at important points in the story. This will establish how much of the narrative is based on eyewitness testimony and how much is based on secondhand information. Example: "So where were you during the blizzard?" "When did you realize your life was in danger?"

13. Do not challenge accounts that you think are inaccurate. Instead, try to extract as much information as possible, which can be used later to establish what really did happen. As Walter Lord, who interviewed survivors of the Titanic, said "Every lady I interviewed said she left the sinking ship in the last lifeboat. As I later found out from studying the placement of the lifeboats, no group of lifeboats was in view of the other. Each lady probably was in the last lifeboat she could see as she left the ship."

14. Tactfully point out to your narrator where his or her account differs from that of others. Consider starting with "I have heard..." or "I have read...". This does not challenge the narrator's account, but rather suggests ways to clarify other stories already in existence. Often the best interview research material comes from a narrator who differs from other sources.

15. Avoid "off the record" information, where your narrator asks you to turn off the recording device to tell you a story. When the recorder is off, the information being told is immediately lost to anyone but yourself. It is likely that you will lose much of the context of what is being said. Also, once you start turning off the recorder when asked, the narrator will fall into the habit of censoring his or her responses.

16. Interviews work best when it is just the two of you- the narrator and the interviewer. If there is another person in the room with stories to contribute, tactfully ask whether you can interview this person separately at another time. Another tactic is to ask the third person to intercept phone calls and doorbells, which will contribute to the sound quality of the interview.

17. End the interview at a reasonable time. An hour and a half to two hours is usually the maximum. By that time, both the interviewer and the narrator are fatigued. Smile, thank the narrator, and if necessary, arrange for another appointment time.

18. Review the recording afterwards. Even the most experienced interviewer will spot missed opportunities or things they might have done differently. Use what you've learned to make your next interview that much better. When reviewing the recording, remember that there is no such thing as a perfect interview. Don't be discouraged by awkward questions or repetition, or if the narrator jumps from one topic to another. This is how people often recall things. Try to think of the recorded interview as raw material.

19. Good interviewers don't shine, only their interviews do.

Citation: Interview Tips Article above provided by the Minnesota Historical Society and found on the world wide web at <http://sites.mnhs.org/library/sites/sites.mnhs.org.library/files/Interview%20Tips.pdf> on May 29, 2018.