

CONDUCTING ORAL HISTORIES WITH FAMILY MEMBERS

GUIDELINES AND TIPS

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

- The more you know about your subject, the better the interview will be. If possible, do some research ahead of time. Study genealogy charts for dates and names; if you have old diaries or letters, read them; if you have family photos or movies, look at them. And don't forget more general historical sources. If you want to talk about your father's experiences as a soldier in World War II, you'll ask more informed questions if you've read a good historical study of the war. If you want to understand your aunt's involvement in the civil rights movement, find out more about the bigger picture. That way you'll know what questions to ask and can raise topics that your interviewee might otherwise not think of or be hesitant to discuss.
- Draw up an outline for the interview ahead of time. You may not follow it exactly, but it will provide a general blueprint. In general, a chronological organization is usually the best structure for an oral history interview. It allows you to see how the interviewee's experience and ideas developed over time, gives depth and richness to the topics being discussed, and offers a convenient organizing structure so that the two of you don't simply drift in a welter of random reminiscences. Once you've finished your outline, list as many topics under each heading as you can think of. Of course you won't use every one of the questions you come up with in the interview, but it's a helpful way of starting to think about the kinds of things you want to discuss. (See sample outline and questions.)
- It will be helpful if you can give the interviewee an outline ahead of time so that they can see the topics you'd like to discuss (and also add new ones of their own). Don't give them a complete list of questions, however. Then you run the risk that they'll simply run down the list of questions one by one rather than engaging in the kind of spontaneous discussion that makes for a good interview. Also explain what you plan to do with the interview and who will have access to it. Are you going to give complete copies of the recordings to everyone in the family so that they can all listen to everything that was said? Are you merely going to pull information and quotes out of the interviews for a family history you're writing and that you will then run past the interviewees for review? And what will you do with material that is potentially painful or humiliating to the interviewee or hurtful to others in the family? You'll probably want some kind of policy that says you'll erase material that people decide they don't want on the record or will not make it available to anyone else in the family for a specified number of years. This too should be conveyed to the interviewee before the interview begins and hopefully will make for a more candid interview. Finally, if you are planning on publishing portions of the interviews, putting them on a website, or using them in any way that goes beyond the family itself, you need to have a signed agreement. Remember that legally and ethically this is the interviewee's story, and you need permission for any use you make of it.
- Insist that each interview be between you and the one person being interviewed. If you have a third person in the room, what you will get is the two people's agreed-upon version of reality in which individual experiences do not emerge as clearly and viewpoints that do not fit into the shared reality do not get aired.

INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

- An oral history interview is not about the interviewer. The focus should be on the interviewee and they should do most of the talking, with occasional questions from you to guide them in directions you think are the most productive.
- As indicated above, in general, a life history interview should proceed chronologically. Since memory does not follow a strict chronology, however, inevitably the interviewee will jump around a good deal in time. That jumping around is important and shows how they connect different areas of their experience, and you do not want to discourage it entirely. On the other hand, if they jump around too much, the chronological thread of the interview will be lost entirely. Sometimes you will decide that it is productive to have them leap to another time to illuminate the point they are making. However, once they've finished making their point, you'll generally want to indicate that, although you do want to hear what they have to say, right now you want to bring them back to the time period you were discussing.
- Once the interviewee begins talking, don't interrupt them. Interruptions disrupt the flow of their narrative, break their concentration, and mean you may never get to hear the rest of what they had to say. Wait until they complete their train of thought to ask a follow-up question or introduce a new topic. With exceptionally long-winded or rambling interviewees, you may need to learn to jump in very quickly and firmly when a story is completed and may also need to set expectations at the beginning of each interview session about how much of the material on your outline you need to cover that day.
- Don't just follow questions on a list. Instead, ask a question and then listen and build on what they say with follow-up questions.
- Open up a new topic with a large question that allows the interviewee to describe their experience at length. Questions that begin "Tell me about . . ." or "Can you describe . . ." are good ways of stimulating the interviewee's memory and allowing them to generate their own story rather than simply responding to the predetermined forms that you lay out. In general, think of the various topics of your interview as structured like an inverted pyramid: broad, general questions first, followed by follow-up questions that ask for more detail.
- Remember that what you are after are narratives—stories, that is, that convey the interviewee's experience— not just facts or opinions. Though you may be looking for some of the facts of your family history (the whos, wheres, and whens), you'll also want to ask questions that will lead people to talk about their lives more reflectively and in greater detail (the whys, hows, and whats).
- Try to get the specifics of an interviewee's lived experience before you ask them to evaluate that experience or offer more general opinions on the subject. For example, instead of simply asking people for their opinions on how children should be raised, you'll get a richer sense of their actual thoughts and practices if you talk about what they actually did with their own children and only once you've heard the specifics, asking them to give their larger philosophy or reflect on what they would do differently in retrospect.

- Yes or no questions are useful when you need to clarify a specific detail but should otherwise be avoided because they do not generate the rich, full answers that open-ended questions do. Similarly, avoid questions that are leading (“Don’t you think that . . .”) or either/or questions that allow for only a couple of options. Such questions foreclose opportunities to hear the interviewee’s own take on an issue, which may be very different than the options you had plotted out.
- Be open to hearing disturbing experiences and negative or ambivalent feelings. When we do family history, we often end up succumbing to a kind of family boosterism where family members feel they need to promote the idea of the always happy and conflict-free family. But families are complex entities and people’s feelings do not fit neatly into pre-determined categories. Ideally, an oral history should offer the interviewee the opportunity to reflect on their life and relationships thoughtfully and honestly without having to follow a party line. And it is your attentiveness and willingness to take the interviewee’s feelings and experiences seriously that enables that thoughtful reflection. (Which doesn’t, of course, mean that you will necessarily make everything one family member says available to all the others or include everything in your written family history.)
- The converse of the above problem is that there may be sensitive issues that you would like to discuss but are concerned that the interviewee won’t be willing to discuss. In such cases there are several strategies you may follow. First of all, try to create a comfortable interview atmosphere in general. Don’t start the first interview session with highly personal or sensitive questions. As the interviewee becomes more relaxed with the interview situation and with you as an interviewer, they may open up more and be willing to discuss issues they would not have been willing to discuss at the beginning of the interview. Second, if possible, instead of suddenly springing the big taboo topic late in the interview, try to build up to it by discussing matters that are less threatening but related to it early on. For example, if you know the interviewee completely broke off relations with his father later on in life but you don’t know why, you may try to spend a good deal of time early in the interview exploring their family relationships, including their relationship with their father, when they were growing up. This approach has two advantages: one, even if the interviewee never discusses the actual reason for the estrangement, you will still get a sense of the relationship and some of the issues involved; two, it gives you something to refer back when you want to open up the issue later (“You had said that when you were a boy, your father never wanted to let you run your own life. Did he continue to have that attitude once you moved out?”) and it leads the interviewee into the topic gently so that maybe they are more comfortable talking about it later on. Finally, if you have a relationship with the interviewee where you can honestly discuss the question before the interview, ask them how they feel about discussing the sensitive topic, and if you think it should be discussed, tell them why. If, however, they do not want to discuss the issue, always respect their wishes.
- Simply because you are respecting the interviewee’s right to tell their story the way they want it told doesn’t mean you shouldn’t challenge them when necessary. If you know there is more to a story than they are telling or if they seem to be glossing over negative aspects or alternative views, find ways to suggest contradictions or raise alternatives that don’t attack them directly. If the interviewee gives a very one-sided view of a conflict, ask them if they can provide any explanations for why the other party behaved the way they did or what their viewpoint was. If they leave out crucial information, indicate that you’ve heard other versions of the story and ask

if they know any way to reconcile the two (though don't implicate other family members unless the interviewee already know that those family members disagree with them). In general, if the interviewee expresses very decided opinions on an issue, raise possible objections in a very neutral way without implying that the objections are your opinion ("I've heard it said that . . ." or "I understand what you're saying, but what would you say to the objection that . . .").

- An hour and a half to two hours is usually about the right length of time for an interview session. After that point, both the interviewer and the interviewee generally begin to tire. Note too that you cannot do a full life history interview in one session. In general you should plan to do at least three or four sessions with each interviewee.

EQUIPMENT/RECORDING

- If you are going to be doing a number of interviews and you intend them to be handed down to children and grandchildren, invest in reasonable quality equipment that will record a cleaner sound and image than your computer or smart phone. A guide to buying an audio recorder can be found on the site "Oral History in the Digital Age" at <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/askdoug/> If you are doing video, a little on-line research can help you identify well-reviewed recorders in your price range. "Oral History in the Digital Age" also provides some basic tips on recording video interviews at <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/08/quick-tips-for-better-interview-video/>
- Test your equipment out beforehand to make sure that the sound and/or image are adequate for your purposes. Practice recording with the equipment until you are completely comfortable with it and understand how to troubleshoot it if anything goes wrong.
- Conduct the interview in as quiet a place as possible. Sounds that you may not even notice during the interview will inevitably be magnified on the recording, sometimes to the point of making the interview almost inaudible. So don't record in a public place and try to avoid settings with background noises such as construction, humming machines, etc.
- Before you begin each interview session, do a brief test recording with the interviewee on site and play it back to make sure the equipment is functioning properly and that there is no distracting background noise.
- Develop a filing system in which you label your recordings with the interviewee's name and the date so that nothing gets misplaced. And, above all, back your recordings up in several different places—you don't want those memories to vanish with a computer crash or a lost flash drive.

SAMPLE FAMILY HISTORY OUTLINE

I. Early Childhood and Family Background

A. Parents and Family

Ask when and where they were born and then start off with a general question: "Tell me about your parents" or "Tell me about your family background"

Where was family originally from? What do they know about that place? Have they ever visited it?

What stories did they hear growing up about earlier ancestors whom they never knew?

What parents did for a living? As a child, did they contribute to the family income or help parents in their work in any way?

What was parents' religious background? How was religion observed in their home?

What were parents' political beliefs? What political or other organizations were they involved in?

What other relatives did they have contact with growing up?

What do they remember about their grandparents?

Describe their siblings and their interactions with when they were young. What did they do together? What conflicts did they have? Who were they closest to?

Describe the house they grew up in. Describe their room.

What were family's economic circumstances? Do they remember any times when money was tight? Do they remember having to do without things they wanted or needed?

What were their duties around the house as a child? What were the other children's duties?

How did duties break down by gender?

What skills did they learn (e.g., cooking, carpentry, crafts) and who taught them? What activities did the family do together?

Any special food they remember from their childhood? Do they currently make any traditional family foods?

What did they do on Christmas? Thanksgiving? Birthdays? Other holidays?

B. Community Grew Up In

Describe the community they grew up in and especially their own neighborhood.

Races and ethnicities in neighborhood, what people did for a living, class differences.

Where did they shop? What was the largest town or city they remember visiting when they were young and what were their impression of it.

C. Early Schooling

Description of school they attended. What was school like for them? What did they like about it? What was hard about it?

Friends. Favorite teachers.

Favorite subjects.

Special activities.

Discipline.

Any teasing or bullying.

D. Friends and Interests

What did they do in their spare time?
Who were their friends and what did they do when they got together?
Hobbies? Favorite stories? Favorite games or make-believe?
What did they want to be when they grew up?

II. Teenage Years

A. Changes in Family

How did relationship with parents change when they became a teenager?
Additional responsibilities, chores?
If they had conflict with parents, what was it over?

B. School

Favorite subjects? Particular interests?
Least favorite subjects?
Memorable teachers? Describe their teaching style. How did they influence them?
Different groups in school? Which did they belong to? How do they think they were perceived by others?
Extracurricular activities.
What were their plans when they finished school? Education? Work?
What did their parents think of their plans? What did their friends plan to do?
Did the boys and girls in the family have different plans/expectations?

C. Work

Jobs during teenage years.
Contributing to family income? If not, how spent money?

D. Social Life and Outside Interests

Who were their friends and what backgrounds did they come from? What did they do together?
Age began dating? Kind of activities? Describe first date.
Parents' advice/rules related to dating/contact with opposite sex? Advice from church or school? Peer group's norms with regard to dating and relationships with opposite sex?
Hobbies/interests? Books read? Music listened to? Sports played? Crafts participated in?

III. Adulthood

A. Further Education

B. Marriage or Formation of Significant Relationships

How met. What drew them together
Describe decision to marry/move in together
What was most difficult being in a relationship originally? What was most satisfying?
Changes in relationship
Break-ups, divorces, deaths.

C. Employment

Who worked in the household and how did they support the family?

Specifics of their employment: positions they held, duties, part-time employment or self-employment

Difficulties and stresses on the job/Rewards

Balancing work and family

D. Children

Describe the birth of children.

What they were each like when they were young. How they have changed or not changed.

Relationships with when young and now

What activities did the family do together?

Family traditions.

What was most satisfying to them about raising children? What was most difficult?

What values did they try to raise their children with? How did they go about doing that?

What forms of discipline did they use and why?

E. Church, political and other involvement: specifics of, reasons for and passions behind

F. Ongoing interests and hobbies

IV. Overview and Evaluation

What has provided them the greatest satisfaction in their life?

How would they say the world has changed since they were young?

In addition, don't forget to ask people about historically significant events they lived through:

How was their family affected by the Depression?

Did they or anyone close to them serve in World War II and what do they remember of that experience?

Did they support or were they opposed to the war in Vietnam or the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and how did they express their political opinions?

Did they participate in or do they have any memories of any of the movements that came out of the fifties, sixties, and seventies—the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, the gay liberation movement, and so forth?

If the interviewee belongs to a group that has traditionally been discriminated against, ask them what they were told, both positive and negative, about their group inside their family and outside of it. Ask them about discrimination they experienced and also who their role models were.

If the interviewee is an immigrant or their parents or grandparents were immigrants, ask them to describe what they know of the country they came from, why they immigrated, how they immigrated, and the specifics and difficulties of beginning a life in a new country.

Do they remember their first contact with such significant inventions as radio, television, personal computers, etc.? When did their family first buy them and how did the family use them?

FAMILY HISTORY RESOURCES

Sharon DeBartolo Carmack, "Interviewing Mom and Grandma: Oral History Tips." Available at genealogy.com (http://www.genealogy.com/95_carmack.html).

William Fletcher, *Recording Your Family History: A Guide to Preserving Oral History with Videotape, Audiotape, Suggested Topics and Questions, Interview Techniques* (Tenspeen Press, 1986).

Workbook with numerous sample questions. Primarily for young adults.

Hasker Nelson, *Listening for Our Past: A Lay Guide to African American Oral History Interviewing* (Heritage Research Creations, 2000).

Focuses on African American family history. More concerned, however, with genealogical questions than with asking interviewees about their own lives.

Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

A clear, readable introduction to oral history in general.

Vera Rosenbluth, *Keeping Family Stories Alive: Discovering and Recording the Stories and Reflections of a Lifetime* (Hartley and Marks Publishers, 1997).

Includes interviewing tips, questions, and excerpts from sample interviews.

Elizabeth Stone, *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Our Family Stories Shape Us* (Penguin, 1984).

Explores how families use their shared stories to define themselves.

Katherine Scott Sturdevant, *Bringing Your Family History to Life through Social History* (Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 2000).

Introduction to family history that makes it more than names and dates. Includes information on analyzing family artifacts and photographs, conducting effective oral history interviews; doing library research, and writing rich family histories that give the reader a better sense of your family and the times they lived in.

Robert M. Wendlinger, *The Memory Triggering Book* (Proust Press, 1995).

Helps readers find triggers that can inspire vivid, sensory access to past events.