Oral History Interviewing Guidelines

• 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 the interview in directions you think are the most productive.

• In general, a chronological organization is usually the best structure for an oral history interview. It allows the interviewee to show how their experience and ideas developed over time, gives depth and richness to the topics being discussed, and offers a convenient organizing structure so that interviewer and interviewee do not simply drift in a welter of random reminiscences. 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 connects 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. In other instances, you may feel they are ranging too far afield and will 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.

• Open up a new topic with a large, open-ended 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 being structured like an inverted pyramid: broad, general questions first, followed by follow-up questions that ask for more detail.

• Once an interviewee has finished answering a question, be ready to come in with follow-up questions for greater detail, context, clarification, evaluations, etc. Much of your role as interviewer is to be alert to what the interviewee does not say and to help them expand their story so that it is more meaningful for you and for future researchers.

• Remember that what you are after is the story of the interviewee’s experience, not just facts or opinions. Try to get the specifics of their lived experience before you ask them to evaluate that experience or to offer analysis. In this connection, too, always ask interviewees to speak in terms of their concrete experience and not simply about what they think people in general felt or did.

• Once the interviewee begins talking, the general rule is don’t interrupt. 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 story or 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 would like to cover that day.
• Questions should be concise and focused. Try to be as precise as possible about what you want to know and ask only one question at a time. (Like most oral history skills, this takes a good deal of practice.)

• Don’t expect interviewees to read your mind. To avoid having the questions feel choppy and disconnected, clearly indicate shifts in direction or how one question relates to another. (“We’ve talked about X, but now I’d like to move on to . . .” “I’d like to follow up on something you said previously . . .”)

• 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 thoughts on an issue, which may be very different than the options you might suggest.

• Don’t start the interview off with highly personal or sensitive questions. As the interviewee becomes more relaxed with the interview situation and with you as an interviewer, they will invariably open up more and will often be willing to discuss issues they would not have been willing to discuss at the beginning of the interview.

• Part of your role as interviewer is to challenge the interviewee 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, you should politely but firmly challenge them. This can generally be done in ways that do not antagonize if you maintain a neutral stance and simply ask them to explain facts that you know that do not fit with their interpretation or call attention to other ways of perceiving the situation. Such challenges often appear less confrontational if you do not indicate that you personally disagree with them but refer to other sources that do or, in a more general way, to “criticisms at the time” or to “arguments I have heard.”