

Oral History Interviewing Guidelines

- An oral history interview involves sustained listening. Listen closely and attentively to what the narrator says and then build on what they say with questions that allow them to give examples, context, clarification, etc.
- An oral history interview is about the narrator, not the interviewer. The focus should thus be on the narrator and they should do virtually all of the talking, with occasional questions from you to guide them in directions you think are the most productive.
- In general, an oral history should be structured chronologically. A chronological organization allows the narrator 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 the interview doesn't ramble.
- Open a new topic with an open-ended question that allows the narrator to describe their experience at length. Questions with openings like "Tell me about . . ." or "Can you describe . . ." or "Can you walk me through . . ." are good ways of stimulating the narrator's memory and allowing them to generate their own story.
- Close-ended questions that can be answered with "yes/no" or a response of a couple of words are useful when you need to clarify a specific detail but should be used sparingly, since they typically do not generate the rich, full answers that open-ended questions do.
- 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 narrator's own take on an issue, which may be very different from the options you have presented them.
- Remember that what you are after is the story of the narrator's experience, not just the facts they know or the opinions they hold. Always ask them to describe their own personal experience related to the subject you're exploring before you ask them to evaluate that experience or offer analysis.
- In general, don't interrupt the narrator. 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.
- Similarly, if a narrator pauses or is searching for words or thoughts, be patient: don't jump in right away to complete their thought or ask another question. The interview will be more complex and better reflect the narrator's experience if they've had time to think through their thoughts and feelings.
- With long-winded or rambling narrators, you'll need to provide more guidance and perhaps be more assertive than you would with other kinds of narrators. Be clear in your mind on the major themes you think the interview needs to explore, and when the narrator wanders off topic, in a friendly but firm way bring them back to those major themes.

- Your 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.)
- To avoid having the questions feel choppy and disconnected to the narrator, clearly indicate shifts in direction or, if it is not obvious, 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 . . .”)
- Don’t start the interview with highly personal or sensitive questions. As the narrator becomes more relaxed with the interview situation and with you as an interviewer, they will often open up more and be willing to discuss issues they might not have been willing to talk about at the beginning of the interview.
- Part of your role as interviewer is to challenge the narrator 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 raise those other aspects. This can generally be done in ways that don’t 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 have expressed criticisms or, in a more general way, to “criticisms at the time” or to “arguments I have heard.”

Further information about oral history methodology can be found on the following Web sites:

- [An Oral History Primer](#), created by the Department of History at California State University, Long Beach
- [Getting Started](#), an oral history guide created by the Oral History Society in Britain
- [Oral History Principles and Best Practices](#), oral history standards drawn up the Oral History Association
- [Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History](#), from the DoHistory website