

Oral History – Asking the Questions

Preparing for the recording

Before the recording you should:

- Have done some homework on the topics to be talked about. Depending on the circumstances of the recording this will vary from a thorough knowledge of the subject to a basic awareness of relevant terminology etc.
- Have put together an outline of the questions/topics you are going to ask about. Your guide or schedule (not usually a 'questionnaire') doesn't need to be huge, but should cover major topics and related issues.
- Have a think about the structure of the recording. Whether you are conducting one or more sessions, you will need to have an idea of whether you are going to let the interviewee decide the topics, follow a chronological path through certain events, or concentrate on specific topics.
- Be able to use correctly all your recording equipment.

Many interviewers like to draw up a check list of things they will need to take to the interview. For example:

- Directions and/or a map
- Some form of identification
- Recording equipment
- Spare batteries, cassettes etc.
- Notepad and pen
- Relevant documents/literature

Remember the four points everyone should have explained to them at the time you arrange the recording:

1. *This will take around an hour of your time*

2. *We will need a quiet place with no interruptions*
3. *It will be recorded*
4. *I will ask you to sign a release/consent form at the end*

The main point behind all the information about being prepared is that relaxed people make for good recordings. If you and the person you are recording know exactly what is going on, you will both be comfortable with the situation and the recording should go well.

Remember

Making an oral history recording is an unusual experience for most people. We all have preconceived ideas about interviews for radio, television, jobs, social services etc. that prepare us for what is going to happen, but this isn't always the case for oral history.

When was the last time someone said to you that they were so interested in what you had to say about something that they were prepared to sit and listen carefully, without interrupting, for as long as necessary for you to say everything on the subject? It probably hasn't happened too often!

By recognising this, you will be able to help the person you are recording tell their story as well as possible.

Asking the questions

A good interviewer keeps her/his voice out of the recording as much as possible but still looks interested. Eye contact and nodding the head are the best ways of doing this. Using open questions and following up for more detailed information will also help.

Main points for asking questions:

- Eye contact (if appropriate)
- Short questions, one at a time
- Clear, simple: avoid technical language
- Open not leading
- Move from general > specific
- Factual (what?) > motivational (how?) > reflective (why?)
- How did you feel/why did you feel?
- Clarify uncertain points
- Don't be afraid to ask
- Don't interrupt or butt in
- Respect people's opinions
- Be aware of tiredness

There is more detailed information on asking the questions at:

<http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/howtointerview/questions.html>

Upsetting memories

There is always the possibility that the person you are recording may become upset. When remembering the past we are recalling people who are no longer with us, events and experiences that may have affected us deeply for better or for worse. If your interviewee does become upset use common politeness; ask if s/he is alright, pause the recording, ask if s/he would like to skip the subject or carry on, wait until s/he is ready to proceed.

Going 'off topic'

A question often asked is about what to do if someone wanders off topic. One of the pleasures of oral history is that it does allow people to go off at a tangent, and this should be encouraged. Sometimes the digression is informative, sometimes not, but it usually doesn't take more than a few minutes. However, if someone is obsessed with the price of gas, or something unrelated to the topics at hand, you may have to practice a firm but polite, 'I can see this is an important issue for you, but we are straying from the subject and I would like to ask you to talk about...'.
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Information on other issues involved with interviewing at:

<http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/howtointerview/issues.html>

The video, '**How to Record an Oral History Interview**', which is also on the 'Building and Enriching Shared Heritages' website, covers setting up your equipment and good interviewing technique:

<http://youtu.be/jTCzxWt1RQk>

How well have you done?

One of the most useful things you can do is to listen back to your recording and learn from how it went. It will probably be fairly obvious where things have gone well and where they haven't but this table may help you to rate how you did:

(This table was compiled by Jess Boyden and Colin Hyde, and is based on a similar table in Valerie Yow's 'Recording Oral History, A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences' 2nd ed.)

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Oral History Self-Evaluation

What did you do?	Most of the time	Sometimes	Occasionally	Never	N/A
Listened carefully					
Followed the interviewee's pacing					
Used follow up questions					
Requested clarification when needed					
Interrupted the interviewee					
Gave the interviewee sufficient time to answer					
Asked open questions					
Asked a challenging question in a sensitive manner					
Kept repeating what the interviewee had just said					
Inferred something from what the interviewee had just said (e.g. I assume you felt sad about this)					
Failed to pick up on a topic the interviewee indicated was important					
Made irrelevant, distracting comments					
Failed to check the sound on the recorder					
Asked a leading question					
Let the interviewee side-track the conversation with a long irrelevant aside.					
Asked several questions at the same time					
Checked for noises or stopped for a noise to finish.					
Made the interviewee feel comfortable					

Showed appreciation for the interviewee's help					
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