CONDUCTING AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Before the Interview

1. Learn all you can about the subject{s} of the interview {community, organization, family, individual, etc.} by reading available written sources, both primary and secondary, and by talking informally with people who know something about the subject{s}. For an interview focusing on a community's history, try to learn about community institutions, locally significant places, networks of associations, historically important events and processes, etc., as well as the broader context of change over time. Try to discover what realms of experience seem important to people, e.g. work {or lack of work}, church, family, etc. The richer your background knowledge, the richer your interview.

2. Develop a list of suggested interview topics with possible subtopics under each. Don't phrase these as questions - to do so might inhibit the flexibility required in an interview. You will probably be revising this list throughout the entire set of interviews. However, the point is to develop a framework to your entire collection of interviews, one that will give focus, shape, and consistency to individual interviews.

3. Develop a file of potential narrators on your particular subject gleaned from your background research, the contacts you make, and referrals from others.

4. You will not likely be able to interview everyone in your contact file, so try to determine a priority order. Revise this order as necessary. It is impossible to define what makes a good narrator, but keep in mind the following criteria: a willingness to talk candidly and for the record; a certain reflectiveness about one's experience; an ability to understand one's personal experience in its social and historical context; a keen eye for details; an ability to talk easily and in a fairly orderly manner; an interest in remembering the past. In addition, try to get a balance among the following kinds of narrators: people with a long-time {though not necessarily current} association with your particular subject area{s} whose personal life histories might typify some part of the day-to-day experiences of people associated with the subject{s}; observers of the passing scene who remember "the old days;" people with insider information about some aspect of the history you are researching, especially institutions, organizations, businesses, community leaders, social networks, etc.; people with a critical eye.

Don't limit interviews to the important, successful, or prominent members of the community/family/group. Seek a balance of racial and ethnic groups, men and women, insiders and outsiders, longtime and more recent members of a community, those who have left as well as those who have stayed in a community, family black sheep - all have a legitimate piece of the historical story. It's (too) easy to rely solely on articulate, enthusiastic narrators. Ask yourself: Whom am I omitting? And then pursue those people.

5. Once you have decided upon a person to interview, contact him/her about the possibility of an interview. Explain your project, the subjects you wish to interview on, the uses to which the interviews will be put, the value of his/her participation, the place where completed interviews will be deposited, and the level of public access to these interviews. Explain that interviews will, in fact, be recorded, and that the narrator will be asked to sign a release form at the conclusion of the interview. If you already know the person, a phone call will be fine for this first contact. If not, write a letter {or email} first and then follow that up with a phone call. People are sometimes hesitant about consenting to an interview, so it may be helpful to mention the name of someone they know who has already been interviewed or who recommend them as a good
person to be interviewed, and who can vouch for you. In fact, you may as this other person to make the initial contact for you.

6. Have an in-person pre-interview conversation with the narrator {not a practice interview, however} to establish initial rapport and to gather basic biographical data. Ideally, this should be in person, but if that is not possible, then via telephone {e-mail is a less preferable option}. Go over the topics of the interview, taken from the list of interview topics you have developed and again review interview protocols. At this stage in the process, it is often useful to go over old photo albums, scrapbooks, etc. - these are wonderful memory jogs. In general, get to know the person as well as you can; establish rapport and find out what subjects they can be most fruitfully interviewed about.

7. Based on your pre-interview conversation and the list of interview topics you've developed {and, more fundamentally, your background research}, prepare an interview outline tailored to this narrator. This is not a list of 20 questions but an outline of the topics you want to cover in the interview. In general, try to structure the whole interview in advance, and even if it doesn't entirely work out - and it probably won't - some organization should be apparent in the final product. Most outlines are a combination of autobiographical and topic subjects. And most are structured more or less chronologically.

8. Set of a time and place for your interview. First consideration should be given to the convenience and comfort of the narrator. His/her home is probably the best place for an interview, but if that is not appropriate, the narrator's office, a room in a local institution, or some other place can certainly be used. Allow two-three hours for the session. You won't be conducting the interview the whole time, but you will need time to chat before turning on the tape recorder, to set up your equipment, and to take leave gracefully.

9. Be familiar and comfortable with your recording equipment. Practice, practice, practice the controls until their functions are second nature to you. And check the batteries. {A word about equipment: Try to obtain, through purchase or loan, high quality recording equipment. Use an external microphone. An excellent interview, hardly audible or marred by electronic noise because of poor equipment, is a disappointing waste of time and effort. And, as new media make the distribution of the spoken word increasingly easy and desirable, the quality of sound itself becomes increasingly important. The recorded interview, not a written transcript of it, is the primary document; every effort should be made to obtain a clear, clean sonic record of the interview.}

10. Put an introduction on the recording medium before you go to the interview, including your name, the name of the narrator, the subject of the interview, the place of the interview, and the date.

11. Bring to the interview an extension cord, capacity to record at least twice as long as you anticipate, a small notebook, and the necessary forms.
During the Interview

1. Arrive on time.

2. The key to a good interview is the rapport you as an interviewer are able to establish with the narrator. Your job is to create a mood of thoughtful engagement, so that the narrator is comfortable but not too relaxed. The goal is open and honest, reflective and expansive recall. Before beginning the interview, do all you can to make the narrator comfortable. Chat a bit with him/her, explain what is going to happen, show him/her how the recorder will work. And recognize that it will take some time to warm up to the interview - the first 20-30 minutes may well be rather stiff.

3. After recording for a few minutes, stop the recorder and play back what you have just recorded. This allows you to check on the quality of your recording and also gives the narrator the opportunity to get over the hump of hearing his/her own voice. Ideally, you should monitor the audio quality periodically via headphones.

4. An interview is a very lop-sided conversation. Let the narrator be the star. The whole point is to get him/her to tell you his/her story in his/her own words, not for the narrator to hear your story or your opinions. So, limit your remarks to questions to guide the narrator along. Don't turn the interview into a pleasant little chat. In general, and without behaving in any way that seems false or insincere, adopt a low key, receptive, respectful, nonjudgmental persona.

5. Go after categories of information rather than specific items. Ask broad, open-ended questions, not questions that require a yes-or-no or short answer. Stay with, "Why," "How," "What kind of," "Tell me something about . . .". Try to get the narrator going on one of your topics. Don't, however, ask questions that are so broad or complex that the narrator doesn't know where to begin to answer them. It's especially important to set the tone of expansive, lengthy answers at the beginning of the interview, so don't being with a litany of short answer questions like "When were you born?" "Where were you born?" "Who are your parents?" Etc.

6. Once the narrator has finished answering a question, ask follow-up questions--probe for more information, greater detail, more contextual data, values and feelings, using your outline subtopics as a guide. In general, get as much as you can on one topic before moving onto the next--don't jump from subject to subject. Think in terms of an inverted pyramid structure of inquiry: broad, general questions at first, and then moving to questions that ask for clarification and greater levels of specificity, detail.

7. Questions themselves should be brief and clear, to the point. Ask one question at a time; avoid compound questions - narrators will invariably answer the last question posed. Yet don't be afraid to think out loud in framing a question, either, to search for the right way of asking something - just so long as you conclude with a clear question.

8. A two-sentence approach is often a good strategy: The first sentence is a statement that establishes context {"I want to talk about your career as a historian."}; the second narrows it down with a question {"Tell me, how did you first become interested in history?"}.

9. Also avoid leading questions, questions that imply the answer, such as "Don't you think that . . . ?" or "Isn't it true that . . . ?" Either/or questions also limit a response, in that they suggest one of two options when, in fact, there may be yet another way of thinking about the subject. In general, don't phrase questions in a way that the narrator feels compelled, or finds it easier, to
answer the way you seem to expect. And distinguish between pointed questions and leading questions - a question that approaches a sensitive subject directly is not leading.

10. Once the narrator starts talking, don't interrupt. Let him/her finish what s/he's saying and then go back to clarify and fill in. Use your note pad to jot down your questions as they come up. It can be difficult to suppress a question when you don't exactly understand what the narrator is talking about - just wait, concentrate, and make notes; in fact, often clarification will come.

11. Avoid social noises, too - those verbal ticks that we all employ - "uh, huh," "yes," okay, "mmmm." They often obscure the words of the narrator, making it difficult to hear or transcription what has been said. They can also cut a narrator off.

12. Don't worry about pauses in the narrative. Recognize the difference between the true finish of an answer and uncertainty about how to continue, and don't cut the narrator off. Sometimes people do pause before they say something especially important. And sometimes, if you allow a pause, the narrator will think that you think s/he's not finished, and will say more.

12. In general, begin with the narrator's experiences, then move to feelings and attitudes, then to assessment. Try to stick to the narrator's own personal experiences, too, rather than generalities. Ask for specific, concrete information, examples, explanations. So if a narrator says, "families were closer years ago," ask about his/her family, ask what has changed, and ask how s/he explains the perceived changes.

13. Strike a balance between following your planned interview outline and leads the narrator opens up to you during the interview. Don't interrupt a good story just because you hadn't planned on talking about that subject; be flexible. If a narrator starts straying from the subject s/he is speaking about, gently guide them back - narrators generally understand that an interview is more structured and intentional than a casual conversation. But don't get stuck listening to the family medical history or a recounting of a grandchild's latest accomplishment, if that is not relevant - tactfully steer the interview back to a more relevant topic. If you find yourself confronted with a topic about which you know very little, go after the journalistic stand-bys: who, what, when, where, why, how. And don't be afraid of making the structure of the interview explicit in the interview itself, of working with the narrator, on tape, to define the next area of inquiry. Such negotiation is quite appropriate within an interview.

14. In general, read the narrator throughout the interview. Listen to where s/he is going in his/her remarks, be sensitive to his/her feelings and respond accordingly, though preferably non-verbally. Verbal expressions of understanding and encouragement may leave thoughts unfinished or a narrator's words unintelligible.

15. Start with more impersonal areas of questioning, or topics on which the narrator can speak with ease and comfort; then move into more sensitive areas as the interview progresses. People reveal themselves gradually.

16. Don't avoid sensitive or controversial subjects. Try to get "the whole story," not just "the good side." So, while you certainly need to be supportive in an interview, don't forfeit your critical sensibility, either. A polite, neutral stance often works best: You can ask difficult or challenging questions in ways that are not confrontational; you can give a thoughtful nod of encouragement without agreeing or disagreeing with a narrator. Yet, if rapport is especially good, if you are engaged in a lively give-and-take, you may adopt a pose of "agreeing to disagree," that is, using your points of difference to probe more fully a narrator's views.
17. If a narrator seems to be presenting a distorted or self-serving account or one that does not conform to available evidence, you can take an adversarial approach without destroying rapport. Simply state, in as noncommittal a tone as possible, that other sources you've consulted have taken an opposing view, and ask what the narrator thinks about that, or how s/he explains a contrary view.

18. The recorder is there - you can't hide it. The more comfortable you are with your equipment, the more at ease the narrator will be. And don't draw attention to the recorder by repeatedly stopping the recording during the interview. Try to avoid off the record information, also.

19. Two hours is about the maximum time for a productive interview (though surely some very fine interviews have gone on for longer than this). If an interview has gone for about two hours and is incomplete, set up an appointment to continue at a later date.

20. Each interview represents a series of judgment calls on the part of both interviewer and narrator - judgments about what question to ask at this particular moment and judgments about how to answer it. There are also numerous ways into a subject, numerous ways for a relationship between interviewer and narrator to develop. Each interviewer develops something of his/her own style, quite personal to them. This is fine - cultivate your own style and techniques.

21. After completing the actual interview, don't leave abruptly. Interviews often stir up powerful memories; at their conclusion both narrator and interviewer can feel drained, or a sense of euphoria. Give the narrator some time to "come down," to reenter normal time.

22. Before you leave the {final} interview, make sure the narrator signs a release form. Interviews are of no use to you or to others if they are not accompanied by a signed release form.

23. Ask the narrator if s/he knows of other potential narrators for your project; or if s/he has any photographs, written records, or material artifacts that might be useful to your study.
After the Interview

1. Thank the narrator for his/her participation in the project by phone or letter. Send the narrator a copy of the interview if your budget allows for it.

2. Download electronic/digital recording onto an archival hard drive for long term preservation. Make one or more use copies in currently acceptable formats and label them with the names of the narrator and interviewer, and the date of the interview. Place a back up copy in some place other than where the original and use copies are stored.

3. Briefly summarize the interview, using about ten key words that can be used as search terms if the interview is placed on the internet.

4. Write up a set of contextual notes for the interview, noting your evaluation of the interview's strengths and weaknesses, your assessment of the narrator's candor, veracity, etc; the setting of the interview; your relationship to the narrator, etc.

5. Develop a running summary of the interview by electronic segments. Be as comprehensive as possible in your indexing; even if the interview will be transcribed, the index will provide a useful guide/summary to the tape's contents in sequence. As you are indexing, review and evaluate your interviewing technique. Also note areas that need to be pursued, topics that need clarification in subsequent interviews.

6. Transcribe or arrange for the transcription of the interview if at all possible. Develop protocols for transcribing.

7. Develop a filing/archival system to organize workflow.

8. Place your interviews in a public repository where they will be preserved according to acceptable standards and made accessible for future use by other researchers. The methods of preservation and access are both various and changing rapidly in the digital age; try to place interviews in a repository where staff is knowledgeable about both technical and ethical issues and has sufficient resources to process your interviews.

9. Put your interviews to use if at all possible - write up a family history or series of articles on the community's history; develop a publication or web site using the interviews; organize a public program bringing narrators together with others to reflect upon the subject of the interviews.

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