



Oral or Video Interviews

Oral history is the systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences. It is not...folklore, gossip, hearsay, or rumors.

One of the most interesting ways to learn about your community's past is to interview long-time residents who remember what life in the community was like 50 or more years ago.

The Value of Oral History Interviews

- ◆ Preserves the first person aspect of an event
- ◆ Records a person's voice and body language
- ◆ Allows person to relive pleasant events
- ◆ Preserves the human aspect of an event
- ◆ Preserves endangered languages and dialects
- ◆ Gives people the pleasure of talking about their lives.

Negative Influences on Oral History Interviews

- ◆ The interview typically occurs sometime after the event...often many decades later
- ◆ The unreliable memory or recall of most people
- ◆ Interviewees inject their beliefs, experience, prejudices, and emotions
- ◆ The influence of time and subsequent events on memories
- ◆ Influence of conversations with others before the interview.

Planning the Interview

Equipment

- ◆ Digital Audio Recorder—these small, easy to use recorders can record up to 64 hours of audio and come with a USB connection to quickly download files to your computer.
- ◆ Digital Video Camera or Camcorder—choose a model with several hours or recording capacity and the ability to easily download the files to your computer. Camcorders have a wide price range, check the Internet for comparison data before choosing a model.
- ◆ DVDs or Flash Drives—have an adequate supply of DVDs or flash drives to use for duplicating the interviews, either for storage or supplying copies.

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Identify the Objective of the Interview

What do you want to learn from this interview? Do you want the person to:

- ◆ Tell you about a specific event?
- ◆ Describe what attending a one-room school was like?
- ◆ Talk about being in the military?
- ◆ Talk about farm life and their role?
- ◆ Describe family life?
- ◆ Recall family members?
- ◆ Compare something from the past to today; e.g. driving, banking, family activities, traveling, shopping?

Selecting the Interviewee

If the goal of the interview is to learn about a past event, place, or lifestyle you want to find a person with:

- ◆ Direct or first-person knowledge about the topic
- ◆ A person with good recall
- ◆ Someone willing to be interviewed and share the information.

Choosing the Type of Interview—Audio or Video

Whether you choose to do an audio or video interview depends upon the interviewee. Video interviews not only record the voice of the interviewee, they record their image and mannerisms. Unfortunately some older participants do not like to be photographed or videoed so an audio interview will be your only choice.

General Tips

- ◆ Talk with the person before setting up an interview to determine their interest and knowledge about the topic.
- ◆ Understand that memories alter facts and what they tell you may not be accurate and know how you will handle the discrepancies.
- ◆ Know what you plan to do with the results of the interview. If you want to use it for an article, be sure to ask and document their permission to do so.
- ◆ Determine, as soon as possible, whether they would prefer an audio interview or a video interview.
- ◆ For a video interview, you may choose to have “props” such as a book, diary, photos or other interesting elements in the picture with the person.

Note: It’s easier to interview one person than two or more. Two people, such as family members talking about the same incident will each have a different recollection and may argue over a point. Multiple people talking about their participation in an event (such as the war) is typically not a problem.

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Understanding Interviewee Traits

Keep in mind that the people you interview will have different backgrounds, knowledge, mental acuity, and physical abilities. For example, if the interviewee is:

Under age 40 they will probably:

- ◆ Be familiar with current terms such as selfie, Facebook, Twitter
- ◆ Be very knowledgeable about many types of technology
- ◆ Share information readily
- ◆ Have fewer comparisons for many events
- ◆ Express the views of friends on social media

Between age 40 and 60 they:

- ◆ May view events in the context of their impact on their family
- ◆ Might have limited time for the interview due to job or family activities
- ◆ May tailor comments to the interviewer's age by telling you what they think you want to hear
- ◆ Might be more cautious about sharing their views on topics.

Over the age of 60 they:

- ◆ May confuse dates and people involved
- ◆ May hold back information they feel is too personal
- ◆ May speak and comprehend slower
- ◆ May have a hearing impairment
- ◆ May be uncomfortable with some technology
- ◆ May not express or share emotions easily
- ◆ Might need memory triggers
- ◆ May not want to be photographed.

Remember: Family stories and local history legends abound. Most have been embellished and should be accepted for what they are. It is not recommended that you present the information as factual without substantiating the information with primary sources.

Preparing for the Interview

Before the Interview

Depending on the type of interview, you may prepare differently. For example, if you are:

- ◆ Interviewing someone about a particular event in the past, you may want to re-search the event to help you prepare questions to ask.
- ◆ If you are interviewing a person about a disaster, you need to be prepared to handle emotional outbursts, anger, silence, or a difficult or prematurely ended interview.

Preparing Interview Questions

Even when the interviewee is talking about their own life or a personal experience, they may “hit a blank wall” or run out of things to talk about. Be prepared to “prompt” them or get back on track with some specific questions.

- ◆ Prepare questions that require more than a one word answer.
Don't Ask: Did you lived on a farm?
Ask: Where was the farm located? What did you grow or raise on the farm? When was the farm established? Who was the first owner?
- ◆ If you are interviewing the victim of a flood, try to form the questions to elicit facts, not emotions, and use a positive format.
Don't Ask: How much did you lose in the flood?
Ask: What possessions were you able to save?

Don't Ask: Did you receive any help?
Ask: Who helped you during the flood and after?

Your Preparation Includes:

- ◆ Identifying a quiet location offering privacy for the interviewee. For an elderly person this may be going to their home.
- ◆ Setting a time limit for the interview – 30 minutes or 1 hour. The person may choose to speak for a longer time once they begin; leave that up to them.
- ◆ Composing a list of 10 questions about the topic of the interview to send to the interviewee one week ahead. These questions will help jog their memory and provide the information you want.
- ◆ Checking and testing your equipment. Ensure everything is working; pack extra batteries and, if possible, have a backup in case there is a problem.

Setting Up the Interview

With the planning step complete, it's time to select a mutually acceptable date and time.

- ◆ Contact the interviewee to set up the day and time
- ◆ Discuss the location, your place or theirs
- ◆ Confirm whether it will be an audio or video interview
- ◆ Ask them if they have any questions
- ◆ Give them your contact information in case they need to reschedule or think of other questions they want to ask you.
- ◆ Confirm the time and place with the interviewee three days before the interview.

The Day of the Interview

- ◆ Be on time for the interview
- ◆ Visit with the interviewee while you set up the equipment
- ◆ Don't rush the interview, be relaxed to put them at ease
- ◆ Do a quick test to make sure the equipment is working correctly, you don't want to find at the end that nothing has been recorded.
- ◆ Have the interviewee sign the consent form and explain where the interview will be kept and who will have access to it.

Conducting the Interview

- ◆ Begin the recording by introducing yourself and the interviewee. For example: "Today is April 25, 2016. This is Jane Green and I'm interviewing Mary Doe about what it was like to attend a one-room school in (the town). Mary, would you like to tell us a little about yourself?"
- ◆ Prompt with one of the questions you sent in preparation: What was the name of the one-room school you attended?
- ◆ Listen, try not to interrupt unless the person stops talking or you need to redirect them. For example, if they go too far off topic, ask another topic question to get them back on track. If they become emotional, pause and ask if they'd like a to stop for a minute or two before continuing. If they want to stop, turn off the equipment.
- ◆ Use non-verbal clues to show you understand and to encourage them to continue; you can nod your head, smile, or respond with a word or two.
- ◆ Don't be afraid to "pick up" on something they say that you want to learn more about. You don't need to stick to every question on the list you sent.
- ◆ If you've set up an hour long interview, watch for clues they're tiring, offer to take a break. Turn off the equipment.
- ◆ At the end of the interview, ask the person if there's anything they'd like to add that you didn't talk about.
- ◆ Close the interview. Say something such as: "I'd like to thank Mary Doe for telling us about her experience attending a one-room school." This is the end of the interview.

Some Recommendations

- ◆ Focus on the person. Avoid taking notes while they're speaking. It's okay to jot down a few words if you want to remember to ask about something they mentioned.
- ◆ Don't be afraid to stop to rest or share a refreshment; simply turn off the equipment and take a moment.
- ◆ Depending on the time of the interview, you might take a small fruit or bakery treat to share for that purpose.
- ◆ If you feel there's a lot more to cover, and they're willing, schedule a second interview at a later date.

Note: A relative or friend may be at the interview as support for an elderly person. Know ahead of time what you will say to that person if they interrupt the interviewee.

After the Interview

- ◆ Thank the person by phone, email, or letter for participating and give them a copy of the consent form they signed.
- ◆ Give them a copy of the interview.
- ◆ Remind them where the interview will be available and who will be able to listen or view it.

Note: If possible store the interview files on the town server which is backed up regularly and keep another back up copy on a flash drive.



Preserving Old Interview Tapes

As technology advances, hardware becomes obsolete. It is important to protect historical information by moving it to a current type of storage. If your office has old interview tapes, re-record them on a digital recorder to preserve the information.