

Oral History Guidelines

Some tips for students doing interviews

Oral history is a picture of the past in people's own words. Today it is associated with tape-recorded interviews, but oral history is as old as humanity.

The Interviewer:

To get the best results as an interviewer, you must try to:

- be understanding and sympathetic;
- show interest and respect for the person and what they know;
- listen carefully, not asking questions that have already been answered;
- not impose your own ideas and opinions.

Preparation:

Know the purpose of the interview. Are you interested in a person's life, a place, an object, an event or a theme such as migration? Find out as much as you can about the topic beforehand. This will help you to ask useful questions, and convince the interviewee that you have a genuine interest in the topic.

Preliminary Contact:

Contact your subject before the day of the interview; this will help **both** of you to be prepared. Explain the purpose of the interview and the sort of information you want to find out. Ask about photos, objects, newspaper cuttings etc so they can hunt them out before the interview.

Legal Release:

Legal releases are an essential part of oral history. They confirm to the interviewer and the interviewee that the information will be used in an agreed way. A simple release might look like this:

I, ... (Interviewee's name)... give my permission to ... (name of interviewer or project)... to use this interview, or part of it, for research, publication and/or broadcasting (delete one of these if required) and for copies to lodged in ...(name of library or archive)... for the use of other bona fide researchers.

Signed (Interviewee)

Date

Interviewer

Question Guide:

Once you know what you want to find out, plan some questions. A list of topics or heading may be all you need. Don't feel you need to stick to your guide; the interview may cover useful topics that you hadn't thought of.

Orientation Questions:

Most interviews need to begin with 'orientation' questions. These aim to obtain an overview of the personal history of the interviewee in relation to the topic being discussed. Here are some examples:

- What is your full name?
- When were you born? Where? When did your family come to Australia/this state/the district? Why did they come here?
- What is your family background? What were your parents' names? Where did they come from? What did they do?
- Can you remember your parents/grandparents describing 'the early days' to you?

Subsequent Questions:

The rest of the questions will depend on the topic of the interview, but should include at least brief questions about the interviewee's education, marriage, children, home and occupation during his/her lifetime. Plan your questions so that, firstly, the details of daily life (or work) are obtained, and secondly, a recording of the informal and personal aspects, the emotions and relationships are revealed. These can be overlooked in an interview concerned with 'hard fact'.

Avoid questions that can result in a "Yes" or "No" answer. Probe by asking "Why?" "How?" "Who?" "How did you feel when...?" "What did you think about?"

If possible, use memory aids like photos, objects, maps etc.

Here are some possible topics for the interview:

- Childhood and family: the home, relationships, jobs, games, health;
- The Locality: early memories, shops, farms, transport, roads, community events, local characters;
- School and education;
- Church;
- Teenage years and adult life: first jobs, courtship, marriage, childbirth, death;
- Work: description of workplace, duties, hours, pay, changes (new technology);
- (Towards the end of the interview) Looking back, what do you think have been the most important changes? What is better/worse?

Errors to avoid:

Try not to:

- Talk too much;
- Ask questions that have already been answered;
- Debate or argue with interviewee;
- Ask too many questions at once;
- Be clever and make the interviewee feel inferior;
- Ask for more information on a topic that is distressing to the interviewee;
- Fail to follow up with 'probes' at important points.

Ending the interview:

Don't rush off. Take some time to chat, perhaps over a cup of tea. This allows a natural winding-down of the session (this is especially important if emotional issues have been discussed).

Ask if there is anything else the interviewee wanted to discuss. If you feel you have not covered all you need to, arrange a date for another session.

Now is the time to ask the interviewee if they know of anyone else who might be able to help you. Finally, thank the interviewee for their time and assure them they have made a valuable contribution to your research.

Recording:

To record your interview, make sure you are confident with using the equipment. Do several practices beforehand. Use a separate microphone if possible (built in mics pick up mechanical sounds of the recorder). Do a quick test recording at the start of the interview.

After the interview:

After the interview, label the recording with the

- Name of the interviewer and interviewee
- Date and place of interview
- Number of tapes/disks used and position of each in sequence (eg first tape in a sequence of three is marked 1/3)

Listen to the recording and draw up an interview log. This provides a detailed summary of the interview, set out as follows. You will need a stopwatch.

This is Jill Smith interviewing Mrs Jane Black at 5 Brown St, Windsor on January 30, 2002, about her work as a nurse.		
Time	Subjects	Proper Names
0 mins	Personal details Born June 28, 1924 Moved to Gympie 1942	Jane Lucy Black (nee Smith)
5	Schooldays, nurse training	Jones Hill State School Glandore Hospital, Gympie
10	Marriage to Ken, children	Kenneth John Black

Finally, write a thank you letter to express your appreciation of the interviewee's time and assistance. If possible, provide them with a copy of the recording or transcript for further comments.