

Creating an interview outline

From your research notes, create a list of keywords and phrases representing the information you want to know. Writing out specific questions may hinder candid responses, prevent your following up for details, and impose a rigid agenda on what should be an open, flexible exchange.

During the interview, use your list of topics as a guide, like a road map, for directing the narrator's attention toward the topics you want to cover. Compose questions around each keyword or phrase that help interviewees recall the past and encourage them to tell stories in response.

Sometimes before the interview a narrator wants to know what you are going to ask. In that case, supply the list of topics that you have created to help stimulate memories and build trust.

When a narrator supplies information not on your list but worthy of further investigation, you may want to ask questions about the new topic right then. You can always bring the interview back to the next topic on your list once you have covered the new subject in full.

For example, an oral history with a former resident of a neighborhood that is the focus of a community history project might generate an interview outline similar to this:

Sandtown:

- description (boundaries)
- origin of name
- earliest memories
- what was there: residences, businesses, schools, churches, parks
- how people got around: modes of transportation
- times people got together: when, where, why (politics, sports, play, social life)
- racial/ethnic/economic makeup
- leaders, characters
- relationship to city and surrounding neighborhoods; reputation within the city
- holiday celebrations
- safety (health, crime, environmental concerns)
- effects of Depression, WWII, 1953 tornado; urban renewal; construction of interstate highway
- changes over time