

Getting the story

- ◆ Begin with a general introduction that serves as an audio label. For example:

“This is [your name]. Today is [month/day/year]. I am interviewing for the [first, second, etc.] time [full name of narrator]. This interview is taking place at [address; may include description, such as home of, office of] in [town, state]. This interview is sponsored by [name of organization, if applicable] and is part of the [title or description] project.
- ◆ Compose questions from your outline of topics. Be flexible; each interview is a unique exchange with a unique individual. Let the train of memory association run its course, even if it means ignoring your outline momentarily.
 - ◆ Ask open-ended questions first, waiting to see what unfolds.
 - ◆ Tailor follow-up questions to the narrator’s responses. Pursue in detail.
- ◆ Maintain a pattern of concentrated listening.
 - ◆ Provide feedback with silent encouragements: nod your head to indicate you are listening or smile when appropriate. Keep your feedback quiet, being aware that your sounds can override the narrator’s voice during the recording. Keep your feedback neutral (such as, “I see” or “uh-huh”), indicating neither agreement nor disagreement.
 - ◆ Jot down a few notes as the narrator is talking to remind you of subjects you want to cover in more detail. Rather than disrupt the narrator’s train of thought by asking for spellings of unusual words, jot down a phonetic spelling and a clue to its place in the story, then after the interview ask for the correct spelling.
 - ◆ Give the narrator time to answer each question fully and finish her/his train of thought, then just sit quietly for a few moments. Chances are excellent that the narrator will think of something else to add. Silence is an integral, important part of the oral history interview process.
- ◆ Give the narrator a chance to think through difficult subjects.
 - ◆ Challenge accounts that you think may be inaccurate, but do not question the narrator’s memory or honesty. If you feel you must, refer to other accounts or interpretations you know, asking the narrator for a response or clarification.
 - ◆ Avoid “off the record” information or switching the recorder off and on. Assure the narrator that sensitive information may be restricted.
- ◆ Be aware of the narrator’s age and physical condition when deciding how long to continue an interview. Sixty to ninety minutes is a good average length for an interview. Concentration diminishes if the interview becomes lengthy.
- ◆ Make sure that the narrator has signed a release for the interview. The interviewer must also sign a release form in most instances.
- ◆ Continue to demonstrate respect for the narrator. If you rearranged the furniture, return everything back to place before you leave. Send a thank-you note following the interview. Promise only what you actually will do, such as returning to visit again or furnishing copies of recordings or transcripts.