

DO

- Put the narrator at ease: Try to seem at ease yourself.
- Begin with conversation: introduce yourself, talk about the project, etc.
- Begin by asking easy, factual questions (name, place of birth, etc.).
- Maintain eye contact with the narrator
- Nod and smile in agreement
- Show appreciation for the narrator's help
- Listen carefully
- Ask the speaker to recount stories, and strive to learn specific information
- If a statement is unclear, ask for clarification after the narrator has finished speaking
- Try to slow down a narrator who talks too fast, gently and tactfully
- Explain reasons for changes in topic (transition to a new topic thoughtfully)
- Ask probing questions when sensing that the narrator is hesitant to talk
- Ask follow-up questions when necessary
- Try to have the narrator talk in specifics, rather than generalities
- Honor pauses and silence, and give the narrator an opportunity to continue
- Discreetly check several times to make sure the recorder is running

oral history

INTERVIEWING

DO NOT

- Ask "yes/no" questions, as they limit responses
- Ask leading questions (Did that make you mad?). Instead, ask open-ended questions (How did that make you feel?).
- Ask more than one question at a time
- Hurry the narrator
- Repeat or summarize what the narrator has just said
- Interrupt the narrator
- Complete the narrator's thoughts/sentences
- Summarize or restate the narrator's statements after they have finished speaking.
- Talk over the narrator's voice
- Make distracting noises with rattling papers, shifting chairs, etc.
- Talk at length about yourself or your own experiences
- Make irrelevant or distracting comments
- Nervously fill silence

HOW TO DEAL WITH PROBLEMS

- *For those who are nervous or don't want to talk because they believe they have nothing valuable to contribute, you have to convince them otherwise. Stress that their opinions and experiences are valuable to your research.*
- *Some narrators talk too much off-topic. Try to use the natural breaks in conversation to redirect questions. Interrupt only as a last resort.*

a short guide to

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

1. Contact the interviewee and set date/time/place for the interview.
2. Call back to confirm the interview 48 hours in advance.
3. Prepare questions and familiarize yourself with them before you begin the interview.
4. Gather all equipment, including the recorder and microphone, any required storage media, extra batteries, a power cord, the list of questions, and a notebook and pen. Be sure to test your equipment before leaving.

BEGINNING THE INTERVIEW

1. Find a place where your subject is comfortable, and background noise (cars, fans, etc.) is minimized.
2. Make your subject comfortable by introducing yourself, explaining your equipment, and asking if they have questions regarding the interview.
3. Ask the subject to sign an interview release form, and make sure that they understand what it means.
4. Test your equipment – play back the recording to make sure it recorded your voice.
5. Begin the recording: identify yourself, date and time, location, subject's name, and interview topic (Ex: This is April Grayson, and today is Saturday, November 5, 2016, at 4 p.m. We're in Biloxi, Mississippi, at the home of civil rights activist Sally Brown. I'm here today to speak with Ms. Brown about her work with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.)
6. Verify, on tape, that the subject knows s/he is being recorded and that people will be able to listen to the recording and read a transcript of the interview. (Ex: Ms. Brown, do you understand that this interview is being recorded? Have you just signed a release form giving us permission to use this interview?)
7. Have the subject state his/her name and address, on tape, for the record (spelling any necessary words).
8. Begin the interview.

INTERVIEWING

1. Look the narrator in the eye, and listen carefully.
2. Do not voice verbal agreement (“uh-huh”) – instead, nod your head in silent agreement.
3. Be careful not to ruffle papers, squeak your chair, or make other noise audible to the recording.
4. Jot down follow up questions while the narrator is speaking. Do not interrupt the speaker.
5. Do not check your watch or phone for the time, but periodically glance at the recorder to make sure that it is operating.
6. Conclude the interview on tape. (Ex: This concludes our interview with Ms. Brown. Ms. Brown, thank you so much for your time and for sharing your story.”)



AFTER THE INTERVIEW (ON SITE)

1. Thank the subject for his/her time.
2. If using physical media, such as videotape, label the recording before packing up your equipment.
3. If you rearranged the room or unplugged anything, restore the room to its original condition.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW (OFF SITE)

1. Write down your impressions of the interview (a short, one page reflection will do). Include any information that might help a listener understand the interview better (descriptions of place, clothing, etc.).
2. Make a list of key words from the interview that might be helpful to an audience using a research guide (i.e. Freedom Rides; Jackson, MS; civil rights movement; Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee).
3. If using physical media, such as a videotape, make duplicate copies of the interview, clearly labeling these copies DUPLICATE.
4. If required for your project, transcribe the interview: Listen to the recording and type the full interview. Be sure to document questions and the time location where each is asked (Ex: Background, 1:16).