

HOW TO HAVE A GOOD INTERVIEW

Some information taken from:

The Oral History Manual by Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan

Consultant: person being interviewed

Interviewer: person with the recorder & the one who asks the questions

PRE-INTERVIEW PREPARATION:

Gather the items you will need for the interview:

- all forms
- interview research notes
- all supplies such as pens, pencils
- your recorder AND extra batteries
- a digital camera or your cell phone to take a picture of the consultant for your files

Make sure all your equipment is working

BE ON TIME FOR THE INTERVIEW: The consultant's time is just as important as your time.

RECORDER SET-UP:

- set up in a location where there are no distractions
- sit no more than 6 feet from the consultant, and sit so that you are facing them
- have a table between you and the consultant to hold the recorder
- if you are using a dining room table, be mindful not to place papers near the recorder
- sit in a chair that does not squeak or make other funny noises

The following sounds will be picked up by your recorder microphone:

- air conditioners and electric fans
- ringing phones and doorbells
- chiming clocks
- animal barks, meows, and chirps
- ice cubes in water glasses
- cups being placed on saucers
- soda cans being opened up
- papers rattling
- outdoor equipment such as lawn mowers
- kitchen faucets
- refrigerators and dishwashers

Please listen for these sounds and relocated the interview if necessary.

THE INTERVIEW:

Complete all your forms and make sure the Consultant has signed the release form.

Never ask for addresses, phone numbers, birth dates while the recorder is on. This personal information is already on the demographic form and is for their file.

- Begin the interview with an introduction that includes the following:

- name of interviewer
- date of interview
- location of interview
- name of consultant

Example:

“This is Donna Wojcik. Today’s date is June 1, 2018.
I am interviewing James Eggers at his home in Las Cruces.”

- Questions beginning with how, what, where, when, why and who introduce a subject, clarify an answer, and elicit further information.
- Ask only one question at a time. In doing so, you will not puzzle the Consultant.
- Remember, you are there to collect the Consultant’s story, not to tell your own. Do not show off your knowledge. Your opinions are not the focus of the interview.
- Listen carefully without interrupting. The goal in an oral history interview is to collect long answers from well-focused, clearly stated, open-ended, and neutral questions.
- Concentrate on what the Consultant is saying. Wait until he/she has finished speaking to ask follow-up questions for clarification to develop new information that did not emerge in your research.
- Use a list of names and dates as necessary to help the Consultant put events in context. Pictures, maps, drawings, and other items you gathered during your preliminary research are useful aids, although these require a careful verbal description of each. You may know what you are looking at, but the person listening to the recording cannot see the item you are discussing.
- Remember to ask for specifics of place names, names of people, and dates. Ask the Consultant to spell place names or names of people if you are unsure how they are spelled. These are important when transcribing the interview.
- Try to establish where the Consultant was and what his/her connection to the story was at each major point. This helps to differentiate firsthand information from reports given by others.
- Encourage the Consultant’s responses with your own body language and eye contact. Smiles and nods are often effective.
- Discourage requests to turn off the recorder at any time during the interview unless you are taking a break. ONLY the information given during the recorded interview will become part of the historical record.
- Take breaks. Allow time to stretch, leave the room, get a drink, or quickly review the topics to be covered in the next part of the interview.
- Observe the Consultant’s body language. He or she may be uncomfortable with a line of questioning, want to take a break, or become tired. Be sensitive to the situation.
- Use a notebook to keep a running list of proper names mentioned in the interview. It is a good idea to ask the Consultant to review the list and correct any spelling errors at the end of the interview. This list should be kept in the interview master file.
- Keep track of the time to make sure that you do not extend the interview past a reasonable limit.

- Re-check the paperwork to make sure it is filled out and signed.
- Gather up all forms, equipment and supplies.
- Always convey your appreciation and thanks to the Consultant for taking part in your project.
- It is often useful to ask the Consultant if they know anyone else that they think should be interviewed.
- ABOVE ALL, ENJOY YOUR TIME WITH THE CONSULTANT. YOU ARE A PART OF THE PROCESS THAT ENSURES THAT OUR HERITAGE IS CARRIED ON FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.