

Extract from University of New South Wales Oral History project

Source: http://www.recordkeeping.unsw.edu.au/Collections/oral_history.html

The Interview

3 Planning for the Interview

3.1 Research

To ensure a satisfying interview, it is essential to prepare background material. The more information you have gathered about your interviewees, their historical context or particular topics you are interested in, the more they will tell you. Treat the project as you would if you were undertaking historical research for a book or an article: read relevant documentary material (both primary and secondary sources), make notes or compose preliminary questions as you go along. But, above all, allow yourself enough time to research and think about the interview—its structure, possible questions—before conducting one.

3.2 Preliminary interview

This provides an opportunity to meet the interviewee and establish a rapport. Use the time to discuss the interview topics in general and advise interviewees of the legal agreement and possible future uses of the interview. It can be worthwhile asking the interviewee if you might look at any old photographs, relevant articles, newspaper clippings or other documentary material which might prove helpful for research. Provide the interviewee with a receipt for any items which you borrow or which have been donated.

3.3 Interview topics and questions

After the preliminary interview, prepare a list of interview topics and send a copy to the interviewee so that they can see what areas you wish to cover. Having seen the list of topics, the interviewee may be more likely to follow this general direction of inquiry without too much prompting from the interviewer.

It's a good idea to create a set of questions for the interview. These can be listed in thematic or chronological order on a sheet of paper or written separately on note cards. Use them flexibly, but be aware that rustles of paper make noisy recordings.

Allow a half-day for the interview, but keep the interview within a 2.5 hours maximum so that it does not become too tiring. About 1.5 – 2 hours of tape should be generated in this time. It is usually a good idea not to depart as soon as the interview is completed. Instead, stay for a cup of tea (if invited), or take the person to lunch if that is appropriate. Interviewing means focusing attention on a person by encouraging them to see their experiences as important. Abrupt departures can be disorienting for the person being interviewed.

4. Checklist of Procedures

- Equipment check before the interview: check microphones, recorder, batteries and spares for microphones, extension cord, a good supply of tapes, recording machine.
- Test: record levels, microphones, batteries, tape. Clean machine heads after every 8 hours with commercial cleaning kits/tape.

- At the beginning of the tape, verbally record the names of the interviewee and interviewer, the date and place of the interview. This can double as a test to make sure the equipment is recording correctly.
- Write the tape number, names of the interviewer and interviewee, place and date on the tapes.
- Immediately before beginning the interview, adjust and check record levels. This is particularly important to ensure good quality sound reproduction.

Consider where you record the interview. Most people will not have access to a recording studio, so carefully check if other sounds are likely to be picked up by the microphone. For example, dogs barking, traffic noise (especially car alarms), banging and any other constant background noise will adversely affect the sound reproduction. Even low background hums, such as air conditioning units, can ruin a recording. Also, recordings in rooms barely furnished and with high ceilings can produce a hollow sound.

To determine whether background noise will affect the recording, use earphones to listen to a test recording.

- When the interview begins, watch the record levels to make sure that the volume is adequate; check to see that the reels are rotating.

5 Interview Techniques

- Start with easy questions which will put the interviewee at ease. Ask the interviewee about their birth date, place of birth and where they grew up, family, occupation of parents. Answers to such questions provide background to the interviewee's experiences, and are an easy starting point.
- Follow approximately the prepared questions, but be alert for new areas of discussion or interesting new 'leads.'
- An interview is not a dialogue. The whole point of an interview is to get the narrator to tell their story. So keep questions and comments short and to the point.
- Ask one question at a time.
- Start with non-controversial questions; save the delicate questions, if you have them, until you have become better acquainted and the interviewee has had a chance to relax into the interview.
- Don't worry if your questions are not beautifully phrased. A few fumbled questions may even put the interviewee at ease.
- Try not to interrupt interviewees unless they have, for example, lost their train of thought, are talking about something totally irrelevant or are repeating themselves.
- Ask questions that require more of an answer than 'yes' or 'no'. Start with 'why', 'how', 'where', 'describe'.
- Try not to talk at the same time as the interviewee, because both voices may become indecipherable to a transcriber or researcher.

- Don't be flustered by periods of silence or a gap between your question and the interviewee's answer. Some people take a longer time to think of their answers, and a thoughtful response will often be forthcoming.

6 After the Interview

- Make sure that tapes have been labelled clearly—with name of the interviewee, interviewer, date and place of interview, number of tapes and interview sequence, eg 3/5 (to identify the third of five tapes). Standardise labelling. Write 'original' on the original recordings. If the original recording is a cassette, remove the push-out safety tabs on the back to prevent accidental reuse of the original.
- Make two copies of the original tape: one to be used as a working copy, the other to be sent to the Interviewee.
- Send a thank you letter to the Interviewee and make sure they have signed a copyright/agreement form. If appropriate, take this opportunity to inquire about historically relevant material (photographs, newspaper clippings) which the interviewee might like to loan or give the Project. At this time or as soon as possible, a set of cassette copies of the original tapes should be sent to the interviewee.
- If possible, store tapes centrally (in an archives, for example, or perhaps a willing local history library) so that they can be made available to researchers. How the tapes are stored will affect how long they last.
- After the interview has been transcribed and edited, send a copy of the transcript to the Interviewee for corrections (of factual material, names, places and so on) and necessary amendments.