How to Do Oral History Podcast Series:

Podcast #3: Preparing for the Interview & Doing Individual Research

Hi, I’m Bekka.

And I’m Joe.

I’m Jenni.

And I’m Monica. And we’re here to tell you about preparing for your interview and doing individual research.

These are the steps we’re going to follow. Take a quick look and we’ll review them in more detail.

Give your narrator information about the project.

Once you have chosen who you will interview, it is important to get in touch with that person, your narrator, right away. Contact your narrator by sending a letter with the Biography Form so that he or she can complete and mail back to you, or do an “initial interview” with the narrator using the Biography Form to guide you.

In your letter or initial interview, you should introduce yourself to the narrator, explain the purpose of this project, the things you hope to learn by interviewing him or her, and the timeline for completing the interview and the final project.

You should also schedule a time for the interview —allowing at least one month for you to do your research before the interview.

Make sure to explain what the narrator can expect for the interview. For example, explain that it will be about an hour long, and that you will be using it for videotaping for use in a documentary or to donate it to the local library. You may not always know the final destination of your project, but you should explain that it may be used for public purposes.

Gather information about your narrator.
Some people prefer doing an initial interview instead of sending a letter, because this short 20 minute meeting allows you to get to know your narrator a little bit before the interview.

This is also a good time to invite the narrator to share any artifacts that might be relevant to the interview—like old photographs, uniforms, awards, or other mementos. Ask the narrator if you can take photographs of the items. These items could be helpful in doing your research, but you don’t want to be responsible for valued family items. If you are not able to take photos then write down any information you can from these artifacts, and ask the narrator to have them out on the day of the interview.

You could also contact the narrator’s family members to see if they have any artifacts that could be useful for the interview.

Always keep in mind that your narrator should be treated with respect, because he or she is volunteering personal time to help you complete a project. Each person has a unique story that will give you a richer understanding of the topic you are studying. You should treat the person and their story as a gift.

**Review What You Know About Your Narrator**

Look over the Biography Form that your narrator completed, and review the videotape from the initial interview (if you have one) so you can identify which topics you need to investigate further before the final interview.

When you have some sense of what your narrator will be talking about, then write a list of topics that you think you will need to learn more about.

Also, you will be sending out a list of possible interview questions and/or topics before the interview.

**Learn Where to Go For Information**

You need to familiarize yourself with how to do research using different sources of information like databases, reference tools, search engines, local libraries, county historical societies, and appropriate websites.

You should also be able to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of different kinds of primary and secondary sources, and know how these sources can give you a better understanding of the time period and topic you will address in your interview.

**Begin Your Research!**
Once you have identified the topics to research and the best sources for information, it is time to begin your research.

Make sure to take good notes about what you discover and where you found this information, and keep your research notes organized.

Research and preparation is the most important part of the oral history process. The more you know about your topic in advance, the better questions you will be able to ask and the more you will learn from your narrator.

In the next podcast we’ll walk you through how to write good interview questions and how to create a “script” for your interview.