How to Do Oral History Podcast Series:

Podcast # 6: Writing Interview Questions and a Script for the Interview

Hi, I’m Bekka.

And I’m Joe.

I’m Jenni.

And I’m Monica. And we’re here to tell you about writing interview questions and a script for your interview.

In the last podcast we discussed how to approach doing research on your narrator and any topics that may come up in the interview. Now you are ready to write your interview questions.

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

Write your interview questions.

You want to start by brainstorming as many questions as you can think of. Sometimes interviewers do this individually, and sometimes it is done with an entire class or group of people. The more questions you can generate, the easier it will be to put together an interview script that fits your specific narrator.

Let’s start with some general guidelines for writing good questions for an interview.

The first thing to remember is that questions should be short and easy to understand.

Although your questions should be short, you want the answers to be long! The idea is that your narrator should do most of the talking. With that in mind, ask questions that will require more than a one-word answer. Don’t ask questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no. For example, instead of asking, “Did you become a citizen?,” you could ask, “Why did you become a citizen?”

You want your questions to be open-ended, beginning with one of the five Ws and an H: who, what, when, where, why, and how, or with statements like “Tell me about...” or “Describe...”
Make sure you are asking neutral questions. Neutral questions are phrased in such a way that the narrator does not know what your personal views are, and does not feel pressured to answer one way or another. This interview is a chance for the narrator to tell his or her story without being influenced by what the interviewer (that’s you) thinks.

You will have done research on many topics related to experiences that your narrator had in his or her lifetime. Use that knowledge to ask questions that will allow your narrator to talk about how his or her life intersected with major things going on during that time period, and make sure to get specific details.

Ask questions that establish the narrator’s connection to important events in history and ask for specific names, dates, and places.

In addition, people generally think chronologically about their life, so you should try to ask your questions in chronological order.

Once you have a long list of possible interview questions, you want to review them and organize them into logical categories. This will help you narrow down your list and select those questions that you think would be best for your interview script.

**Send the interview questions to your narrator.**

It is also a good idea to send the list of possible interview questions to your narrator before the interview. This allows him or her to think about the questions ahead of time, and to pull out any artifacts or photos that might be relevant to the interview.

**Assemble your questions into a script.**

Any interview is basically broken into three separate parts: the beginning, the middle, and the end.

The beginning section will include simple questions, like those relating to the narrator’s background. These questions should be easy for the narrator to answer, and will set your narrator at ease as you move on to more difficult questions.

You can always use memory clues, like photos, to help the narrator get started. When looking at a photo, ask the narrator to first describe a person’s appearance, and then ask for a description of the person’s character or personality traits.

Next you will move on to the middle of your interview. The middle section is where you will ask most of your interview questions, following the script that you created. The middle section is
also where you ask the deeper questions to really get at the narrator’s story, and how it related to important events and eras in history.

Finally, the end section of your interview will be mostly “thought questions.” These thought questions ask the narrator to reflect on experiences that give their views about things that have happened in their lifetime.

You will probably have covered a lot of different topics by the end of the interview, so this is a chance for the narrator to sort of summarize his or her life experiences by answering questions like, “Of all the experiences that you have had in your life, which do you think shaped you the most?”

Always remember that the purpose of your interview is not to ask your narrator for information that you could find in other sources, like newspapers and books. Instead, you want to record information that will add to what is already out there. This is the purpose of oral history, to add this person’s firsthand accounts to our historical records.

Let’s review some of the main points on writing interview questions and a script.

Interview questions should be:
- Brief and easy to understand.
- Neutral.
- Non-controversial.
- Open-ended questions that start with things like “Tell me about...” or “Describe...”

Interview questions should also:
- Require more than a one word answer.
- Begin with who, what, when, where, why and how.
- Establish the narrator’s connection to important events in history.
- Be asked in chronological order.
- Ask for specific names, dates, places.

Follow this basic outline for assembling your questions into a script:
- The beginning, which is your introduction and simple questions about the narrator.
- The middle, which is most of your questions and deeper questions about the narrator’s experiences.
- And the end, which is the thought questions.

In the next podcast we’ll be discussing tips for conducting the interview itself. You’ve got some great questions, now you need to figure out how to ask them. Goodbye!