How to Do Oral History Podcast Series:

Podcast #5: Conducting 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 conducting your interview.

Although you might have a great list of questions to ask in your interview, there are some things that you should know about how to do the interview itself.

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

Set up the interview environment.

The first thing you should do is to set up a controlled interview setting for recording.

The interview space should be well-lit from in front of the narrator, be free from distracting noises, and allow the interviewer and narrator to sit about 6 feet from one another, which is a comfortable distance for talking.

Interviews work best when it is just the two of you, the narrator and the interviewer, but it is also acceptable to have a third person operating the recording equipment.

You may want to ask the narrator to repeat your questions before answering. This allows you to completely remove the interviewer’s voice from the final video. However, some narrators find this too awkward. If this is the case, then just proceed without having the questions repeated.

Respect the narrator.

Your narrator is volunteering time for your oral history project, so be sure to go the extra mile to show respect for your narrator.

Common courtesies include being on time for the interview and dressing appropriately, according to what would be socially acceptable to your narrator. An outfit that works for a
school dance today might not be right for an interview with someone who grew up wearing much more conservative attire.

Remember that your goal is to have the narrator do most of the talking, so resist the temptation to talk about yourself once the interview has begun.

Before the interview, inform the narrator of potential uses for the material gathered in the interview. Even if you don’t know exactly what you will do with the final project, make sure that the narrator knows that it might be used for public purposes before you begin the recording.

**Tips for the interview.**

Your job as the interviewer is to be a careful listener and observer. As an active listener, you must maintain eye contact with the narrator and show that you are engaged in what he or she is telling you. Respond silently with smiles and nods when the narrator is talking, rather than with words that break up a narrator’s story.

You want to not only listen to the answer but also watch the narrator’s body language. If it looks like the narrator is still thinking, then you don’t want to interrupt. Instead sit quietly and wait to see what other thoughts will come. After the narrator has had a few moments to think more about the question, these are often the comments that are the most powerful.

Don’t be afraid of silence or moments where the narrator gets emotional. You are asking them about important moments in their lives, and it is perfectly acceptable for them to get choked up as they remember those memories.

In addition, make sure the narrator understands that he or she has the right to refuse to discuss certain subjects. Respond respectfully if he or she seems uncomfortable with a certain question by moving on to another question.

Don’t worry if you stumble over your words or if your questions are not as beautifully phrased as you would like. In natural conversations people pause and say “um” a lot. That’s OK in an oral history interview.

Give the narrator an opportunity to respond as freely as possible. Don’t subject him/her to stereotypical assumptions based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, or any other social or cultural characteristic. For example, do NOT say something like, “Well, as a woman, I’m sure that you could identify...”
What do you do if your narrator goes off on a tangent? If your narrator does ramble, wait for a pause and try to pull him or her back to the subject at hand. You can always go back to your script and move on to the next question.

What do you do if the narrator says something that you think is wrong?

“And Germany I believe was doing really well in the war at that time.”

Do not challenge accounts that you think are inaccurate. Allow the narrator to tell his or her story, and then tactfully point out where his or her account differs from that of others.

“Well, actually I had read that Germany was…”

Begin by saying, “I have heard that...” or “I have read...”

“Well, maybe you’re right, at that time…”

**Follow a structured, well-researched interview format.**

Use the script that you have created as a guide.

Here’s the basic outline to follow for your interview:

**Beginning:**
- Record an intro.
- Record purpose.
- Ask simple questions.

**Middle:**
- Ask deeper questions.
- Ask follow up questions.

**End:**
- Ask thought questions.
- End on time.
- Wrap-up after interview.

In the introduction, you should state the name of the interviewer and the name of the narrator.
“My name is Sarah Becker, and today is June 5, 2010, and I am interviewing Charlotte Johnson...”

Also state the date, time, and place of the interview.

Finally, explain why you are interviewing this person. Remember that you are doing this interview to record it as part of history. If someone were to find your interview 10 years from now, how would he know why it is important and what it is?

Begin with easy questions, such as those relating to the narrator’s background. The purpose of this is to get the narrator talking, and to gather some background information that will help set the context for the time period or topic of the interview. If necessary, you can use “memory clues” (like photos) to get the narrator talking. In addition, you want to set the narrator at ease for the interview, especially as you move on to the more challenging questions. It is important for you to establish a certain level of trust with your narrator, so this beginning part of the interview is very important as you establish your way of relating and interacting with one another.

The middle section is where you will ask MOST of your interview questions, AND 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. This is where you get into the whole purpose of the interview, why you are sitting here with this person, what you came to learn.

Follow the script that you wrote, but don’t feel like you need to follow it exactly. Although you have a script with an orderly list of questions, your job as an interview is also to ask follow-up questions that may not be on your script. Your narrator might start talking about something interesting that is relevant to the interview, but that you did not include on your list of questions. Take advantage of this as an opportunity to learn more, and ask the narrator a follow-up question to invite them to talk further about this.

However, avoid “off the record” information. A narrator is not comfortable giving information or telling a story as part of the oral history. If this is the case, then it is better to politely decline than to run the risk of accidentally including this in your published oral history later.

End with “thought questions”. These thought questions ask the narrator to reflect on experiences and give their views about things that have happened in their lifetime. You will have probably 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.

Keep track of time during the interview. Take breaks if you need to. End the interview in a reasonable amount of time, which is generally between one to two hours. You can always arrange for a follow-up visit if necessary.
Wrap-up after the interview.

Once the interview is over you want to review your notes and make sure that you have correct spellings for names and places mentioned during the interview. The last task is to have the narrator sign the Legal Release Form for the interview.

We’ve covered a lot of tips for conducting an interview, so you may want to review the handout provided on the website. It seems like a lot to worry about, but if you follow these guidelines oral histories are a fun and interesting way to collect first-hand historical accounts. Goodbye!