

Conducting an Interview

Oral Histories as Primary Sources

Just like photographs or newspapers, oral histories and narratives are primary sources. They provide a record of a person's past in their own spoken words obtained through a planned interview. As an interviewer, you are just as much an active participant in the creation of this source as the interviewee. Whether it is a long anecdote about an adventure, or a set of data/statistics, the information communicated during an interview must be recorded and analyzed with the same intent as any other primary source.

Naturally, oral histories have both strengths and limitations:

| Strengths | Limitations |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Personalize history• Provide information that may be missing from formal documentation• Convey emotions• Contain spontaneity and candor• May contain dialect/speech patterns• If living, interviewee may be consulted for clarification | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fallible memory of interviewee• Includes bias (intentional/unintentional)• Interviewee may censor self, resulting in an incomplete/distorted record• Interviewer may influence interviewee's responses• Interviewer may also inject bias |

Before you begin:

- Write down as much about the interviewee as possible: name, date of interview, location, personal association to interviewee.
- Include your own information as well.

Prepare and Organize:

- Determine the interview topic and list at least five basic questions to ask. Avoid simple Yes/No questions.
- Set a specific time and location to meet the interviewee. Establish a length for the interview.
- If you plan on recording audio/video, keep in mind the aesthetics of the location. (Will it be noisy?)
- Practice interviewing someone else beforehand.
- If you are recording, test the sound levels of the device before you begin.

During the Interview:

- Begin the interview by stating (or writing) the time, place, date, and the names of yourself and the interviewee.
- Give plenty of time for the interviewee to respond to your questions.
- Respect the wishes of your interviewee at all times. If your interviewee does not want to answer a particular question, don't push. Be sure to thank your interviewee after the interview is finished.

Analyzing the Interview:

- Transcribe the interview as soon as possible.
- Create an index of terms, places, themes, data, or other notes during the interview for reference later. Consider these questions as you create this index:
 - What people, places, and dates does the interviewee mention? What topics are covered? What sort of emotions does the interviewee exhibit?
 - What sort of vocabulary does the interviewee use? What does this reveal?
 - What was the relationship of the interviewee to the events described? How were they affected?
 - How does the interviewee's narrative fit into the broader history? Can certain points be verified? Are any previously unknown?