

ORAL HISTORY GUIDELINES

1. A successful interview requires previous research on the life and activities of the interviewee. The interviewer should come to the interview with a list of prepared questions or topics to be covered. Some interviewees will request to see the list of questions ahead of time so that they can be better prepared to talk.
2. The interviewer will often want to start the interview by getting some general background and family information from the interviewee. The interview can then proceed chronologically or by topic.
3. The interviewer should be flexible enough to be able to explore unexpected information or a new trail of inquiry not covered by the prepared questions if one should suddenly appear. This is why a good grasp of the subject being discussed is so valuable.
4. A basic purpose of oral history is to fill in gaps in manuscript or printed sources or to elaborate on them. Manuscript material is considered to be archival when it has permanent historical, administrative, or religious value and will be used by researchers in the future. The same criteria apply to oral history interviews.
5. Before the interview begins, the interviewer should discuss with the interviewee any restrictions the interviewee may want to place on the use of the tapes. Archives generally prefer not to have any restrictions, but are willing to accept reasonable restrictions on access or copyright if the restrictions have a definite time limit. A letter detailing any restrictions should be sent with the interview to the archives. Upon receipt of the tapes, the archives will send a Deed of Gift to the interviewee, if one hasn't been signed at the time of the interview.
6. The interviewer should be friendly and courteous.
7. The interviewer may want to do more than one interview if the subject warrants it and the interviewee is agreeable. Several shorter sessions (2 hours or so) are better than long sessions that tire both the interviewer and interviewee.
8. The interviewer should phrase questions carefully and keep them short so that the interviewee is free to express his or her own ideas and knowledge. The interviewer should avoid leading questions.
9. A letter of appreciation should be written afterwards.
10. The interviewer should keep careful records on who is interviewed, when, and where. Each tape should be labeled with the names of interviewer and interviewee, place, and date. Record a short introduction at the beginning of the tape, including this information, before the interview begins.

11. Place the tape recorder in a position so that the interviewer can easily see the progress of the tape, and keep a close eye on time so that the tape does not run out, causing lost material. Keep a pen and paper handy to jot down additional questions that come to mind in the course of the interview.
12. It is generally a good idea to avoid interviewing two or more people at a time. It is easier to keep subjects focused on the questions at hand, there are fewer interruptions and distractions, and this avoids people “walking” on each other by talking at the same time.
13. Following the interview, be sure to ask the interviewee if he she has pertinent documents or photographs related to the interview that they would like to donate to the archives either for permanent retention or for duplicating purposes.
14. When the interview is transcribed, include a brief biographical sketch of the person at the front of the interview, a list of topics discussed as a table of contents, and an index of key words at the end of the interview. Appropriate documents and photographs can be scanned and included in the interview.