

Interviewing Tips

Maybe you are interested in starting an oral history project, or you're just planning to interview a relative or neighbor about their experiences! Use the tips below to get started with any interview.

1. **Get historical context BEFORE your interview** – remember that you want your interviewee to share their stories and personal perspective with you, not necessarily provide you a history lesson. However, feel free to ask questions to clarify terms or concepts you don't understand if you can't understand it from context clues.
2. **Don't interrupt** – let your interviewee finish their train of thought before moving on to a follow-up question. Write down any questions or thoughts you have and ask them when they pause or towards the end of the interview.
3. **Ask open ended questions** – very few questions should have yes/no answers. Instead, questions should encourage interviewee to tell a story or explain a concept. Phrases like “Can you describe...” or “Tell me about...” can be effective.
4. **Find common ground** – use some shared experiences to get them talking toward the beginning.
5. **Consider the interview like an inverted pyramid** – begin with broader questions about your interviewee's experience at the beginning and get more into the details later.
6. **Do not begin the interview with highly personal questions** – if an interviewee is willing to talk about personal matters, allow them to bring them up on their own.
7. **Don't get stuck on a certain question** – let the conversation flow between yourself and the interviewee. You can always come back to the question you were interested in later in the interview, but try to avoid completely changing the subject.
8. **Only ask one question at a time** – interviewees may get confused or forget a point if asked several competing questions at once.
9. **Focus on what your interviewee felt about their experiences** – don't only ask questions about how they felt the larger population was reacting or about the specific historical details.
10. **Save your experiences for another time** – give your interviewee their time to tell their story and share your own stories and knowledge after the interview is over. The more you share, the less the interviewee will be able to share.
11. **Don't be judgmental** – keep your opinions to yourself, and remember that keeping an open mind during the interview will help the interviewee share their experiences more freely.
12. **Silence is okay** – if your interviewee needs a moment to collect him or herself or takes a lengthy moment of silence, be patient.
13. **Respect the wishes of the interviewee** – if they want a story off the record or if there's something they don't want to talk about, respect their wishes.