



Three Ps of an Oral History Interview

1. PREPARATION

Before the Interview

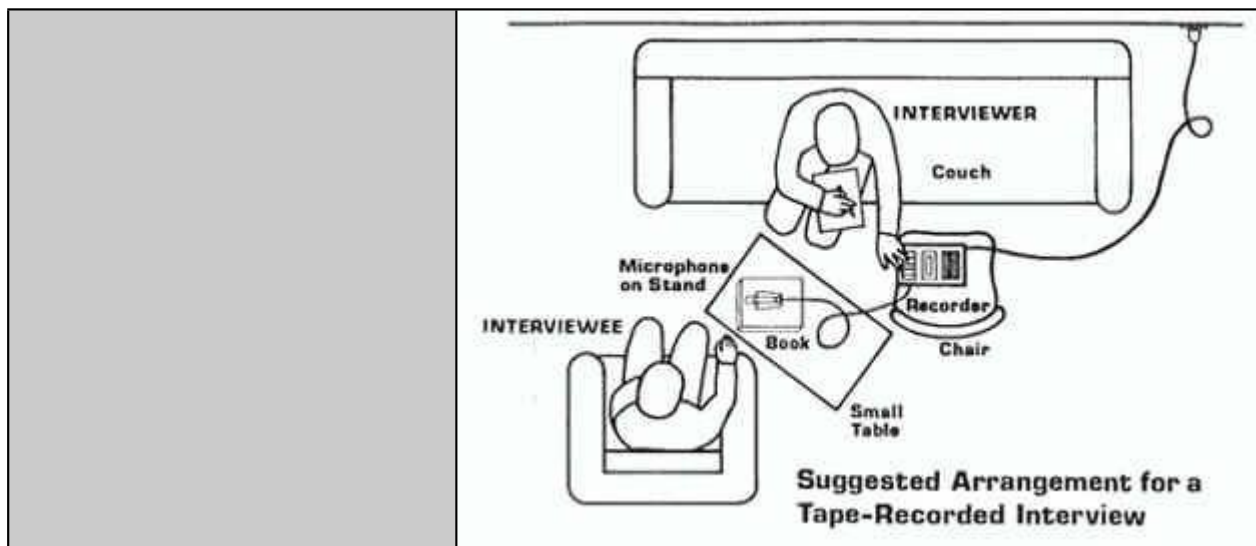
1. Research the topic/person to become familiar with important dates, people, issues, and events. Know as much as possible about your Narrator and the subject matter of the interview.
2. Schedule an appointment. Who, where, when, how long? Select a time of day that is best for the Narrator. For elderly persons, morning hours are often best. Ninety minutes is a good average length for an interview. Both interviewing and being interviewed are tiring, and attention spans diminish if the interview is too lengthy. Select a location that is convenient and comfortable (neutral) for the Narrator and where minimal distractions will occur.
3. If appropriate or requested, prepare and send a brief framework of questions. These questions are not the ONLY questions you will ask, but this initial list accomplishes a couple of goals:
 - a. The questions get the Narrator to think about events they need to recall, events that may have happened a good many years ago. The questions give Narrators time to do some research into their own memories before they sit down for the interview. The questions may remind Narrators of artifacts they have, such as photographs, news articles, letters, or recordings. The artifacts may jog memories, which will enhance the interview, and the Narrator may share the artifacts with you, perhaps even asking you to archive them.
 - b. The questions ease some of the Narrator's fear of the unknown (what will I be asked about?) which in turn makes the Narrator less nervous. Answers to these questions will raise more questions as the interview unfolds, as trust is built, and as your conversation deepens.
4. Prepare your equipment and documents/forms before you arrive for the interview.

Setting Up for the Interview

1. Choose a quiet place where you are unlikely to be disturbed or distracted, where competing, background noises will not interfere with your recording. When you arrive at the location for the interview, listen for background noises: fans, television, radio, air conditioner/heater, dishwasher, etc. Minimize these as much as you can. Bring an extension cord if you plan to use A/C current for power. Bring extra batteries just in case. Test your

equipment before the interview begins. Use an external microphone on a stand and place it closest to the Narrator (no more than 12 inches away). You can control the projection of your voice but don't want to interrupt them to do so. Have the recorder close to you for ease of monitoring.

2. At the interview, obtain signed interview consent form, gift form, photo release form. The Narrator has the option of restricting the interview (option of retaining literary rights and/or restricting access for 10 or 20 years).
3. Ask the Narrator to complete a Biographical Survey before the interview begins.
4. Either before or after the interview, take several photos (at least 3) of the Narrator to include with his/her file.
5. Talk to the Narrator about the interview. Let him/her know what to expect and how it will be archived and used. Express your appreciation.



2. PROCESS

Recording the Interview

1. Record a general introduction (ID tag) to the interview. Include location, date, names of interviewee and interviewer, name of project (if applicable), others attending the interview, and a brief statement of purpose. The ID tag should be recorded as you begin the interview. For example: "Today is Monday, January 1, 2012. This is Jon Do with the Vietnamese American Oral History Project and I am interviewing Ms. Jane Nguyen. We are at her home in Westminster, California. Also present is her son, Joe Nguyen."

2. Ask standard biographical questions up front:
 - “Would you state and spell your name?”
 - “Where and when were you born?”
 - “What are the names of your parents?”

These initial, easy questions give the Narrator a chance to relax, if nervous; give you a chance to build rapport with the Narrator; give you a chance to be an enthusiastic listener who is engaged in the process; give you a chance to set the tone of interest and to create an ease and a settling in.
3. How to ask the questions: Ask open-ended questions—how, when, what, and why—to see where they lead. Tailor your reactions and follow-up questions to the responses of the interviewee. Pursue detail – “Tell me more about that.” “Describe in your own words.” When a new question arises in your mind as the Narrator is speaking, jot the question down. When the Narrator stops talking, ask your new question (always one at a time).
4. Use non-verbal responses so as not to interrupt but show interest.
5. Use silence and be patient. Give people a chance to think.
6. Be an active listener. You should simultaneously monitor the recording equipment and quality of what the Narrator is saying while also listening for clues about areas to explore with follow-up questions.
7. Avoid giving your opinions. Don’t ask leading questions that suggest answers. Rather than, “Did you have a hard childhood?” Ask, “What was your childhood like?”
8. Don’t assume other listeners know what you know. Ask for explanations that those outside of your culture or generation may not understand, including what may be arcane in 100 years or more.
9. Avoid starting with controversial or emotional topics. Begin with broad, easy questions then progress to narrow your focus. Approach emotional topics with questions like, “How did that make you feel?”
10. As a rule, don’t challenge accounts you think may be inaccurate. You are facilitating an oral history from your Narrator’s viewpoint and perspective. If the Narrator seems to be denying a historical fact, you can say to them, “Some people have said that...what do you think about that?”
11. Ask for examples and anecdotes as illustrations.
12. Do not end abruptly. Last question of the interview: “Is there anything I have not asked you that you feel is important to add at this time?”



3. PRODUCT

After the Interview:

1. Check that you have the agreement forms signed and dated.
2. Avoid making promises you may not be able to keep.
3. Thank the narrator by mail or email.
4. Either download copy of audio recording to flash drive or burn a CD of audio (used when creating Time Logs). Use File Naming Conventions outlined in this packet.
5. Make a list of proper names (Proper Name form)
6. Create Time Log
7. Create Field Notes
8. Create Document and/or Photograph Description
9. Transcribe audio recording
10. Translate transcript (if your interview is in a language OTHER than English).
11. Create Index of Keywords (important terms, places, names, events, or topics that came up in the course of the interview—e.g. Little Saigon, nail salon, boat people, Camp Pendleton).
12. Write a 1-paragraph abstract to summarize the Oral History Interview.
13. Save textual documents and/or images to CD (see detailed instruction page) for submission

**Adapted from the University of Southern Mississippi's Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage and California State University Fullerton's Center For Oral and Public History.*