

STORYTELLING HANDBOOK



Interviewing



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This handbook will guide you in interviewing people for your project. You have to do proper research on your subject and the interviewee to craft questions that will lead to compelling content, and you have to pay attention to your interviewee's answers in order to respond to them with more than just the next question. Sometimes you have to prompt them to dig deeper and cover uncomfortable topics. The tips in this handbook will help you prepare for and lead a great interview.

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Hearing from experts on a topic or people who have lived through a particular moment can help unearth new facts and aspects of your story.

The following tips will help you conduct successful interviews.

- 1 Plan.** Know what you're asking for. What is the topic you plan to cover? Who are the best people to cover that topic? Research on the internet or reach out to local contacts to find the best person/people to interview.
- 2 Contact potential interviewees.** Write a short, clear email that tells them who you are and why you are contacting them and what format the interview will be in and what it will be used for. Offer a way to contact you in person – usually a phone number is best.
- 3 Write well-researched questions.** Research your topic so you can create educated questions that cover the things most relevant to the topic you've chosen. Do not ask for basic definitions and statistics you could have found somewhere else. Take the time to fully understand the person you are interviewing. Search for interviews they've done in the past to get a feel for their style and to more fully understand their work.
- 4 Group questions into topics of discussion.** Arrange questions in a way that allows experts to build on their answers to your previous questions. And mentally learn to treat an interview like a discussion on a topic instead of a Q&A period.

5 Conduct the interview. Introduce yourself, explain the project, give a general overview of the topic you have chosen, and request permission to record the conversation before starting your recorder or camera. Most important – relax! This isn't scary. You are prepared and your interviewee is interested in participating in your project. They want to help you by answering your questions.

6 Listen. Focus on what's being said by the speaker rather than on your list of questions. When you provide a strict set of questions, you can miss out on huge opportunities to build rapport and investigate responses. When you interview, consider their responses. Don't mindlessly ask your list of questions. Participate in the conversation.

7 Become comfortable with silence. After you ask your question, your interviewee may need time to think about their answer. Let them think. It's tough, but don't rush them.

8 Ask permission to follow up. You may find when reviewing the interview that you didn't cover everything. Get their permission to contact them for further clarification and perhaps a follow-up interview.

Interviewing a person about their experiences during a time period or about a part of their life is called an oral history. The following tips will help you create effective oral history interview questions. You can learn more from UCLA's *Interviewing Guidelines*: <http://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu/interviewGuidelines.html>

- 1 Ask large questions first.** Questions that begin "Tell me about . . ." or "Can you describe . . ." are good ways of stimulating the interviewee's memory and describe his or her experiences at length.
- 2 Focus on the interviewee's experience, not just facts or opinions.** Always ask the interviewee to speak in terms of their concrete experiences and not simply about what they think people in general felt or did.
- 3 Do not interrupt.** Interruptions disrupt the flow of narrative, break the speaker's concentration, and they may never return to what they were about to say. Wait until the interviewee completes a story or train of thought to ask a follow-up question or introduce a new topic. If they are long-winded or rambling, you may need to jump in very quickly when a story is completed.
- 4 Be ready with follow-up questions.** Much of your role is to be alert to what the interviewee does not say and to help him or her expand the story so that it is more meaningful for others – ask them for greater detail, context, clarification, and evaluation.
- 5 Questions should be concise and focused.** Try to be as precise as possible, and ask only one question at a time.

6 Avoid having the questions feel choppy and disconnected. Clearly indicate shifts in direction or how one question relates to another. For example, use the following transitions: "We've talked about X, but now I'd like to move on to . . ." or "I'd like to follow up on something you said previously . . ."

7 Yes-or-no and leading questions should be avoided. Only use yes-or-no questions when clarifying specific details of a story. And leading questions – those that begin "Don't you think that . . ." may prevent an interviewee from sharing their own thoughts on an issue.

8 Don't begin with highly personal or sensitive questions. As the interviewee becomes more relaxed with the interview situation, they will invariably open up and often be willing to discuss issues they would not have been willing to discuss at the beginning of the interview.

9 Challenge the interviewee when necessary. If you feel there is more to a story than the interviewee is telling or that the interviewee is glossing over negative aspects, politely but firmly challenge the interviewee. This can generally be done by simply asking for explanations of facts that do not fit with your understanding or by calling attention to other ways of perceiving the situation. Such challenges often appear less confrontational if you refer to other sources that disagree with the interviewee or, in a more general way, to "criticisms at the time" or to "arguments I have heard."

Recording and Photographic Release Form

INTERVIEWING

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There is no time limit on the validity of this release nor is there any geographic limitation on where these materials may be distributed.

By signing this form I acknowledge that I have completely read and fully understand the above release and agree to be bound thereby. I hereby release any and all claims against any person or organization utilizing this material for educational purposes.

Full Name _____

Postal Code/Zip Code _____

Email Address _____

Signature _____ Date _____

If this release is obtained from a presenter under the age of 19, then the signature of that presenter's parent or legal guardian is also required.

Parent's Signature _____ Date _____

Laws pertaining to the recording of sound differ from state to state. Best practice for recording conversations, and for the purpose of this project, is to get the consent of all parties. For more information on your state's laws on recording conversations, you can reference the Reporting Committee's *Reporter's Recording Guide*: <http://www.rcfp.org/reporters-recording-guide>.

Use the form on the opposite page (page 8) to gain written permission from anyone you record – audio or video – for your project.

