

**East Midlands
Oral History
Archive**

Information Sheet
#2

Conducting an
oral history
interview

This sheet will
explain:

- Who you should interview.
 - How to prepare for an oral history interview.
 - Common problems to avoid.
 - What sort of questions you should ask.
 - What to do after the interview.
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**How do I
conduct an oral
history
interview?**

Your project

When planning a project you will have to ask yourself the following questions: Why am I doing this? What will the end result be? How many people should be involved? What sort of resources are available? Who should I interview? You will also have to gain access to some recording equipment and learn how to use it.

Who should you interview? Try to get a good cross-section of the population you are looking at – men/women, workers/management, clerical/engineering etc. Bear in mind that someone who is shy and retiring may have just as much to say as the louder, more outgoing person. Estimate the amount of people you will interview. Take into account the time you will spend planning, conducting, and writing up each interview.

Contacts can be made by word of mouth, through the media, or via local groups. One interview often leads to another by word of mouth, although you may not wish to go too far down this road as, depending on your project, you may want to seek out people with different points of view and different backgrounds.

Before the interview

If possible, a preliminary telephone call will enable you to chat to your interviewee briefly about the subjects you want to cover, arrange where and when your interview will be, and make sure they can identify you and you them. You can also decide how much time is available to you both.

Should you do any research before the interview? You should certainly know something about the subject you are going to talk about. If the subject is your local village then you probably won't need to do any extra research, but if it's bee-keeping it would be polite and useful to have a quick look through a book on the subject. The only danger with knowing something about the topic is that you may not ask certain questions because you think you already know the answer.

Finally, before you set off for your interview, make sure you have told someone where you are going and when you expect to be back. Your safety is very important and if at any time you feel uncomfortable in a situation, you should make your excuses and leave.

The interview

Have you got everything? Directions to where you are going; recording equipment (including microphone); power supply/batteries; cassettes/mini discs; paperwork; something to prove your identity.

First impressions are important. If you are presentable and polite it will make a big difference to the proceedings. Chat before the interview but try to avoid the interviewee telling you any anecdotes that would be better told during the recording.



Starting the interview

Check your interviewing environment – is there a potential for sounds that will interfere with your recording? Clinking tea cups, panting dogs, chirping budgies, chiming clocks, even traffic passing by can disrupt a recording.

Ask who, what, where, when, why, and how.

If possible, try and choose a quiet environment. If you can, position the recording device out of sight of your interviewee. Always test sound levels – this may alert you to any failing batteries or poor connections. At the beginning of the interview you should record details of who you are talking to and when. If you subsequently lose all the paperwork the basic information should be on the tape/disc.

Asking questions

A schedule or list of questions is a good idea at the start of a project although you may find you don't need one as time goes by. Be careful not to stick to a list of questions too rigidly, let the conversation flow naturally.



- *Ask 'open' rather than 'closed' questions.* Easy to say but not always easy to do. An example of a closed question – a question which invites a yes/no answer – would be 'You felt terrible didn't you?'. An 'open' question would be 'How did you feel?' followed up with, 'Why did you feel like that?' if necessary.
- *Use plain words and avoid suggesting the answers:* 'How did you feel about working as a housemaid?' rather than 'It must have been awful having to be a servant', and 'Can you describe your childhood?' rather than, 'I suppose your childhood was poor and unhappy?'
- *Maintain eye-contact.* This shows you are interested and enables you to encourage your interviewee with visual cues rather than speaking over the recording.
- *Clarify odd words* or things you are not sure about – phrases like 'cutting the vamp' (the boot and shoe trade). If you don't ask at the time you may never know!
- *Don't be afraid to ask*, but don't interrupt or butt in. Make a mental or physical note to ask later. Particularly with older people, leave a pause at the end of their sentences as they may not have finished speaking.
- *Respect people's opinions* even if you don't agree with them. This is not the time for you to debate your political or cultural opinions with someone.
- *Be aware of tiredness* – not just the exhausted 96 year old you have been grilling for three hours, but your own tiredness as well. Take a break or come back another day.

People's memories are not perfect. It's easy to confuse events and dates, people and places. If what you are told doesn't seem to make sense you should try to clarify it. As an interviewer you should be critical, but not confrontational.

Most importantly you should listen to what you are being told.

After the Interview

If possible, it is polite to have a chat after the interview. You can confirm any future appointments, explain what is going to happen to the interview, and say what the plans for your project are.

You should ask the interviewee to fill in the copyright form. Label the cassettes/discs and write up a summary or a transcript of the interview. Think about storing the material you have collected and *make a copy* of the tape/disc. You could also write a letter of thanks to the interviewee and offer them a copy of the interview.

Above all, listen to the interviews you do with a critical ear and keep interviewing!