

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Helpful Hints for Interviewers



1. Before you go to the interview, learn everything possible about the person to be interviewed and the material you hope to cover. Confirm interview date in writing and by phone. Arrive and depart punctually.
2. Take the whole process seriously. Plan in advance for the interview. Have questions jotted down that you want to ask in addition to the general list for all specialties.
3. Be sure you understand the workings of your recorder. Practice a bit with it before you actually interview. Bring an extension cord to avoid depending on batteries. Use only high quality tape. **Please use a good recording system or regular size audio cassettes not the mini ones. Please place the microphone nearer your narrator than to yourself! Please do not do the interview in a noisy room or outdoors.**
4. Remember that your narrator is giving the information. Don't inject yourself unless absolutely necessary. Look interested—be a visibly good listener. Nod, etc.
5. Don't argue with your narrator and don't turn the whole thing into a pleasant little chat. Should something be said that you can't understand, ask questions until you clarify it, and follow up interesting leads.
6. Be very polite to your narrator. S/he is doing you a favor. Keep in mind, however, that you are also doing a favor for your narrator. You are granting him or her a little bit of immortality. People will hear or read these words long after his or her death. This is no small thing.
7. Before beginning the interview, do everything possible to relax the narrator. This is the time for your chat. Explain what is going to happen. Let the narrator pick the location.
8. The recorder is there. You can't hide it. However, be careful to keep it unobtrusive.
9. Take notes as insurance against garbled tape and recorder failure. Also this will help to take the focus off the machine. If new questions occur to you during the interview, add them to a separate list you can consult as needed—this will also prevent uncomfortable pauses or abrupt interruptions.
10. If the narrator drifts off the topic don't stop him or her. You can always pick up your subject later. Sometimes terrific things emerge by accident. However, utter trivia should be halted as soon as possible.
11. Try not to let the narrator forbid the use of a recorder at the last minute or insist on turning it off periodically. Simply explain that no note taking can be as complete. The tape can always be destroyed after the transcript is typed. (If the recorder is turned off for an anecdote, etc., please try to reconstruct the issues discussed during that period from your memory and give us the notes or the topic, and remember to turn it back on!)
12. **PLEASE ASK FOR A C.V. if possible—this turns out to be a crucial component of the file— AND a photo of your interviewee, please.**
13. Disregard any of the above if you find something more applicable. Develop your own judgments and techniques. Interviewing is a personal thing and that which works for one may not work for another.

NOTE: PLEASE have your narrator sign the release form AT THE END OF THE SESSION. (Otherwise we have gone 20-25 years with misplaced copies, etc.) Please explain that the transcript will be sent and corrections solicited, and that sections can be closed by request, etc. No researcher has yet asked to listen to a tape; all researchers to date have used only the transcripts. FAIC usually is able to pay for the transcription.

SEND TAPE AND RELEASE FORM TO:

Joyce Hill Stoner, c/o Winterthur Museum, Rt. 52, Winterthur, DE 19735 USA