

**So...you want to do record some oral history?  
Here's some practical interview advice**



## **Preparing for Interviews**

Start with an overall plan: a clear idea about what you want to find out and a list of questions on the theme of your project.

Group the topics you want to cover in a logical way. Often a chronological order is best – that’s a date or time order with oldest being first.

You can also refer to this list later to help you compare what people have said.

However, do not stick rigidly to your list. It is not a script; it is there to jog your memory. Be flexible by giving each person the space and time to say what they think matters. The best interviews flow naturally and some of the most interesting things you discover will be unprompted. Of course, if the interview drifts too far from the theme, you can use the list of questions to get the interview back on track.

Before the interview it is useful to do some background research, but make sure that you do not lead the interview with your knowledge. You want your interviews to be lively and spontaneous, vivid and insightful. The best piece of advice is to allow people to be themselves.

## **Conducting Interviews**

Few of us are good at remembering dates and we sometimes merge similar events into a single memory. We also tend to add things we have been told by other people or have read about. So when we interview people it is important to get them to tell us about direct personal experiences rather than things that might have been heard second hand. Your interviewees are likely to feel nervous, so be reassuring, unhurried and sensitive. Put your interviewees at ease by talking about the project; what you are doing, why you are doing it and what will happen to the recordings once they have been made.

- Interview people one to one in their own homes. If possible chat to your interviewees by phone beforehand. Take issues of personal safety seriously.
- Choose a quiet place to make the recording and get the microphone close to the speaker.
- Keep your questions short and clear (e.g. “What can you remember about your grandparents?”) and avoid asking leading questions that suggest answers (e.g. “I suppose you must have had a poor and unhappy childhood?”)
- Do not interrupt – the aim is to get your interviewee to talk.

- Listen carefully and maintain good eye contact.
- Nod and smile; positive body language is very effective. Avoid verbal encouragement during recording, or there are lots of 'yes' and 'ums' to be edited out.
- Ask questions that encourage description and reflection: Why? How did you feel? What sort of person was she? Will help explore the interviewee's motives and feelings.
- You may also need some closed questions that encourage precise answers eg. Where did you move to next? But do not press for this information if the interviewee is struggling to recall this.
- Be aware that interviewing can be an emotional and tiring process.

## Photo Tips

- Find a good light – falling on the person, not behind them
- Don't be afraid to ask to move a few things around before the photo.
- Backdrops of relevant items can look good, but avoid too much background clutter.
- Giving a bit of depth to a photo can be good, so avoid sitting the subject directly against a wall – this will also reduce the problem of flash shadow.
- People generally hate having their photo taken, so take a few in very quick succession to get a more relaxed shot.

## Equipment

- You might have access to digital recording equipment like a Zoom and lots can be found on internet sites like Amazon or Maplin and they are easy to use and come with instructions but nearly everyone has access to a smart phone or tablet these days and the voice recording apps on these work really well and you can save and the send the files easily, so providing you read the tips above you should have a great recording.

**Most of all drink tea, eat cake, keep relaxed and have some fun ...**