

**Youngstown State University
Oral History Program**

Oral History Interview Techniques

Oral history can be defined as “collecting spoken memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. An oral history interview generally consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange on audio or video tape.”¹ Conducting interviews is an art and the best way to learn the art is to do it. Here are some basic “dos” and “don’ts” to keep in mind:

DO

1. Make sure your equipment works and you know how to operate it
2. Be a good listener
3. Start with easy questions
4. Make your questions open-ended
5. PURSUE IN DEPTH—remember the who, what when, where and especially why of history
6. Act relaxed and at ease with your equipment
7. Make sure your questions elicit a response—rephrase them until you get an adequate answer. However, DO NOT badger the interviewee
8. Employ cues—Be specific
9. Avoid off-the-record information. Explain that you can not turn the recorder off and that the interviewee has a right to restrict access to that portion of the interview later if he or she feels strongly about it.
10. Cross reference with questions about information obtained from other sources. This is particularly important where you are relying primarily on oral sources for your information
11. Get spelling of complicated names during the interview
12. Have the interviewee sign the deed of gift at the end of the interview or series of interviews

DON'T

1. Interrupt. Keep a note pad handy to jot down questions which come to mind as the interview talks and refer back to them at an appropriate time
2. Let the interview get off track too much
3. Ask compound questions; they won't be answered
4. Let the interviewee get away with exaggerating or outright lying to you. Let him or her know in a subtle way that you have read or heard otherwise
5. Ask leading questions
6. Interview for longer than two hours at a stretch if possible. Even if you are not tired, the interviewee may be
7. Interview more than one person at a time. Besides the problems this causes a transcriber, the interview can often degenerate into arguments and discussions between the interviewees.

¹ Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 1.

Checklist: Equipment for Interview

1. audio or video recorder
2. external microphone
3. blank tapes (only if using analog)
4. extension cord
5. pen and note pad
6. interview questions
7. requisite forms
8. fresh batteries or fully charged battery pack

Introduction to Interview

Upon beginning the interview, tape an introduction. The following is a sample:

“This is an interview with _____ (interviewee name) _____ for the Youngstown State University project on _____ (project name) _____. The interview is being conducted at _____ (place) _____ on _____ (date) _____. My name is _____ (interviewer name) _____.

Tape Processing and Identification

When the interview is completed, do not forget to **Thank** the interviewee for his or her time and contribution to the project.

Label the tapes or cds with the following information:

Project or title; Interviewee name; Interviewer name; Date of interview; Sides.

Sample Oral History Questions

Open-Ended

What did you think of Franklin Roosevelt?

Describe your first day at school.

What were you doing when you heard that John Kennedy had died?

Describe your first day at work.

How do you think the civil rights movement has changed the U.S.?

Describe a typical day in the steel mill.

How did you feel about the union?

Describe the neighborhood where you grew up.

What was your mother like?

Closed

Did you like Franklin Roosevelt?

When did you begin school?

Did you like John Kennedy?

Where did you hold your first job?

Do you support civil rights?

Did you like working in the mill?

Did you join the union?

Where did you grow up at?

What was your mother's name?