

**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 interviewee 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?

Interview Agreement

The Youngstown State University Oral History Program is a project of the Youngstown State University Center for Historic Preservation. Tape recordings and transcripts resulting from interviews conducted for the Program are deposited in the Oral History Collection and Maag Library at Youngstown State University where they are made available for historical and other academic research and public dissemination. Interviews are regulated according to any restrictions placed on their use by the interviewee and/or interviewer.

Participation in the Program is entirely voluntary.

We, the undersigned, have read the above and voluntarily offer Youngstown State University Oral History Program full use of the information contained on tape recordings and in transcripts of these recordings. In view of the scholarly value of this research material, we hereby assign rights, title, and interest pertaining to it to the University.

_____ Name of interviewer	_____ Name of interviewee
_____ Signature	_____ Signature
_____ Address	_____ Address
_____ City State Zip	_____ City State Zip
_____ Date	_____ Date

Should any of the above signatories have questions concerning their rights in this research initiative or as human subjects, they may contact the Oral History Program, Center for Preservation, at Youngstown State University, One University Plaza, Youngstown, OH 44555, (330) 742-3452.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY

DONOR RELEASE FORM

I, _____, do hereby give to the Youngstown State
Name of Donor

University Oral History Program for such scholarly and educational uses as the Director of the Oral History Program shall determine the following tape-recorded interview(s):

recorded on _____ as an unrestricted gift and
Date of Interview

transfer to Youngstown State University legal title and all literary property rights including copyright
This gift does not preclude any use which I may want to make of the information in the recording myself.

Signature of Donor

Date

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interviewee Life History Form (Attach Resume if available or applicable)

Name:					Sex	
		Last	First	Middle	Race	
Maiden Name if Applicable						
Marital Status						
		Spouse's Name		Date of Marriage		
Current Address						
	Street		City	County	State	Zip
Telephone:	() -	Date of Birth	Mo.	Day	Year	
Place of Birth (include county of birth)						
Parents Name	Father					
	Mother					
	Education	Institution	Dates attended	Degree(s)		
	High School					
	College					
Work Experience	Employer			Dates		
Retired (if Applicable)	From			Date		
Veterans Status						
	Branch	Dates Served	Discharged			
Honors, awards, or other recognition:						
Church:						
Organizations:						
Special interests (Hobbies, etc.)						

If necessary continue information on back.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Proper Word Form and Interview Summary

OH#	Topic		
Tape Length	Minutes	(List length of side A and B of each tape)	
Interviewee Name			
Interviewer Name		Date of Interview	
Place of Interview			
<p>Description of interview. (Include topic(s) covered in the interview). Was there anyone else in attendance, what noise might be heard on the tape, etc.</p>			
<p>Proper Words: It is very important that we have correct spelling of Proper names and places. Be sure to list any words that may be unclear.</p>			

For Office Use Only

Transcription (Transcriber's name, date)			
Audit-Edit Clerk (Collator's name, date)			
Final editing (Editor's name, date)			
Proofreading (Proofreader's name, date)			
Indexed (name, date)			
Final corrections and index typing			
Copies made of transcript sent to:	Library	Interviewee	Others
Copies made of tape and for whom:			
Other information pertinent to this interview (documents included, final copy cited in published works, etc.):			

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Interview Cover Sheet and Checklist:

Name of Interviewee			
Address:			
Telephone Numbers(s)	(Home)	(Work)	
Date and time of interview			
Place of Interview			
No. of original tapes		Approx. Length of interview in minutes	
Name of Interviewer			

Please complete this checklist. Return the checklist along with the tapes (original and copies) and the related materials to the Youngstown State Oral History Department.

_____ Push in tabs on the original tape(s) and label each according to Program standards.

_____ Arrange with the Program office to have original tape(s) copies.

_____ Release Form _____ Proper Word and Summary Form _____ Life History Form or resume of interviewee _____ Vitae or resume of interviewer

Does the interviewee have photographs that we should/may copy? _____

Does the interviewee have papers or records that we should/may consider for archival collection?

Would the interviewee like a copy of the tape(s)? _____

Comments (special circumstances of the interview session, quality of the recording, etc., of which the Program should be aware):