
HOW TO DO A

FAMILY ORAL HISTORY



1. Make a list of what you already know about your family (origins, significant stories and events)
2. Write down a list of what you want to know. Ask yourself, what are the gaps that exist in our family story?
3. Identify the elders who can shed light on your family history and who are accessible and available to sit for an interview.
4. Make initial contact, explain your project, and set up a preliminary interview. Use preliminary interview to discuss logistics, gather information, develop rapport and trust.
5. Conduct background research: preliminary interview, examining family photos, locating vital records, documents, newspaper clippings, journals, and any written or visual documentation you can find. Also, research the time periods or eras that the family member has lived through.
6. Make equipment choices (audio or video). Base your decision on your resources and final plans for interviews.
7. Make sure you have each interviewee sign a release form granting permission to be recorded.
8. Take copious notes, maintain accurate records, names, dates, and biographical information.

Tips for the Interview

Honor the sacred space of the interview. The oral history interview is built on mutual trust and respect. Be prepared for deep listening.

You will need a quiet place to conduct the interview. Remind your interviewee that you will need to silence the phones, and any other distracting noise that can be controlled.

Always begin with an opening announcement. State your full name, the date, time and location of the interview. Have the interviewee identify themselves by their full name. Make sure you repeat this information each time you stop and restart the interview for any reason (bathroom break) Say: We took a brief pause, this is the continuation of the oral history interview between.....

Make eye contact, look interested and engaged. You may nod for emphasis, but avoid responding verbally to the interviewee. Remember, you are recording.

Your list of questions is only a guideline. Be prepared to ask other questions as they arise. Go with the flow, while also not allowing your interviewee to ramble.

Ask open-ended questions that begin with, “What”, “Why”, “Where” rather than leading or yes or no questions. Ex: What was the experience like? Or How did it feel? Rather than, did you enjoy the experience?

Ask follow up questions to elicit detailed sensory descriptors. What did the experience look, smell, or sound like?

Ask reflective questions at the end, such as, “How would you like to be remembered?” or “What are you most proud of?”

Pay attention to the alertness of your interviewee. Elders often get tired. When this happens, it is best to stop and begin again another time, if possible. Ideally, plan for multiple interviews.

Whatever equipment you are using, make sure you are comfortable using it. Have a dependable power source (battery or AC), and enough memory on your SD card for the interview (60-90 minutes is a good estimate).

Don't forget to thank the interviewee for sharing their time and memories. Always follow up with a written thank you note.

After the Interview

Immediately, create at least one back-up copy of your interview. There are many possible uses of a family oral history. You may decide to make copies or transcribe the interview for family members. Make sure you have a secure location for the master copy.

For more information about recording equipment and all things oral history, see the Oral History Association website: www.oralhistory.org



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