

KentuckyHistoricalSociety

Kentucky Oral History Commission
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Conducting an Oral History Interview

Pre-Interview Preparations

1. If the interview will be part of a larger oral history project, identify the scope of the project. Think about the organizing components of the interviews you will be conducting. Limit your focus and be able to articulate a clear description of your project.
2. Conduct library/archival research to establish your frame of reference.
3. Compile a set of core questions relevant to the scope of your project.
4. Think about the unique questions that you will use for this particular interview. Which of the core questions will you use for this interview? Create an outline for the interview. Be careful if you use a list of questions, too often this becomes a script and you only ask the questions on your list. This tends to yield a generic interview.
5. Begin writing field notes—including personal expectations and hopes for the project/interview. This will carry on throughout the fieldwork process and will help you organize your thought and process the materials you collect.
6. Decide who will be interviewed for your project.
7. Make initial contact with interviewee/narrator via telephone, letter or email. Introduce your project, state why this person is important for your project.
8. Schedule interview in advance. Give the interviewee a frame of reference for what it is you want to talk about in the interview. Do not provide questions in advance or, more often than not, you will get written or rehearsed answers in return.
9. Create a checklist. Do you have everything?
 - Recorder + Cables
 - Microphone + Cables
 - Release forms
 - Paper/pencil
 - Batteries (if needed)
 - Appropriate media for recorder (tape, compact flash card, CD etc.). Do you have enough for a 4 or 5 hour interview? You probably won't need it, but you may.
 - Camera (If needed)
10. Check the recording equipment before leaving home. Is it working today? Have you practiced recording on this machine?

The Interview

1. Review your purpose of the interview.
2. Arrange for an optimal recording situation. Setup: locate recorder and microphone(s) in appropriate place.
3. Explain the purpose of your project, explain interviewee's relevance to your project, explain the archival donation form (to be signed at the end).
4. At the beginning of the recording, create an audible header for the interview.
5. Begin with a simple, general question: "Tell me a little bit about yourself?"
6. Ask one question at a time, keep the questions fairly simple.

7. Phrase questions in an open-ended manner, steer clear of yes-no questions. Very Important!
8. Don't interrupt; don't challenge the information being provided.
9. Write down potential questions while the narrator is talking. Take notes, but not too many notes.
10. Be an active listener. Ask follow-up questions which develop the ideas being expressed in the interview. Remember, this is an interview not a dialogue.
11. Don't forget about your recorder. Is it recording? Are the levels appropriate? Now, don't obsess about the recorder.
12. Don't hesitate to follow up on interesting digressions. Allow yourself to be led by the interviewee to some degree. When digressions stray too far, find appropriate segues back to your primary scope.
13. Take note of names mentioned in the interview who could be potential interviewees for your project. Interviewing is great networking for your project.
14. Close with a contemplative question such as "What one thing has affected your life through the years? Don't be afraid to stay and chat afterwards.
15. Only one interview per medium or data file.
16. Get the release form signed.

Post-Interview Procedures

1. Label recording in accordance with the system setup by you or the repository you are working with. If you don't have a labeling system, create one immediately. If you have recorded to a digital file, change the filename after you have transferred the recording to the computer. If you are working with digital files, it is especially important to have a consistent naming convention for your files.
2. Fill out your interview information sheet while the interview is still fresh in your mind (See sample).
3. If you are using a field diary, bring it up to date while the memory of the interview is fresh. Were your expectations fulfilled? How did they change over the course of the interview? How might you "better" conduct future interviews with this person or on this subject? What have you learned about basic human interaction as an oral historian? How did you feel about the interview?
4. Send a thank you note expressing your appreciation for their willingness to participate in the interview. Reaffirm your intentions to fulfill all promises to the interviewee (i.e. to have copies put on CD or DVD and sent back to them promptly). Do not make unrealistic promises.
5. Promptly fulfill all promises made during the interview.

Ethics of Oral History

1. Informed Consent—Explain your project focus, the future repository of the project's interviews, as well as how they will be used visitors to that repository. Nothing should be hidden from the interviewee.
2. Be sensitive to individual's concerns about usage of materials.
3. Honor all conditions and restrictions requested by the interviewee

Legal Concerns

1. Interviews are subject to U.S. copyright laws.
2. Written release must be present for public use of tapes and/or transcripts.
3. Interviews subject to libel and slander laws.