

Tips for Conducting an Oral History Interview

Oral History Kit



- Choose a quiet locale and properly position your microphone.
- Ask one question at a time. State your questions as directly as possible.
- Ask open-ended questions—questions that begin with “why, how, where, what kind of,” et cetera.
- Start with non-controversial questions. One good place to begin, for instance, is with the narrator’s childhood, or where they grew up. Have them describe it.
- Understand that periods of silence will occur. These are useful periods of reflection and recollection for your narrator.
- Avoid interrupting the narrator.
- If the narrator strays away from the topic in which you are interested, don’t panic. Sometimes the best parts of the interview come about this way. If you feel the digression has gone too far afield, gently steer the narrator back to the topic with your next question.
- Be respectful of the narrator. Use body language to show you are interested in what he or she has to say. Remember, the narrator is giving you the gift of his or her memories and experiences.
- After the interview, thank the narrator for sharing his or her experiences. Also send a written thank-you note.
- Don’t use the interview to show off your knowledge, charm, or other attributes.