

## **Oral History - some guidance**

### **What is Oral History?**

Oral history is a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting historical information through recorded interviews with people, communities and participants in past events and ways of life. Those interviewed do not have to be famous or of historical importance; they can be everyday people talking about their ordinary lives. Oral history is both a research technique and a method of preserving history. It provides a method to research personal perspectives and gather detailed information on a wide range of subjects. It provides one way to uncover the kind of history that often goes unwritten. As a method of historical and cultural documentation, oral history provides a way to preserve the kind of verbal information and storytelling which has existed since before recorded history.

### **How can oral history be used?**

Oral history can be used to study just about any subject or branch of history you can imagine. You just have to find the right people and ask the right questions. Personal interviews can be used to discover a perspective not found anywhere else, or to track social, cultural and other issues that were never documented. Oral history can be used to research social history, cultural history, political history, military history, community history, and economic/business history.

### **Pre-interview**

The oral history interview/s may be for completely personal or family use, or it may be intended for use in a particular project. It is the duty of the interviewer to make sure that the potential interviewee understands how the material may be used especially how the material will be accessed

### **Formulate a central question**

- Read local newspapers and online resources. Maybe, a local, much-loved institution is closing, used by generations by locals.
- Explore potential topics by browsing through books, doing internet research or watching documentaries.
- Sometimes the interview candidate(s) help you to discover a topic, rather than the other way around.

- You may know or be introduced to someone with a fascinating story to tell. With a little investigation or after talking to this person, you may identify other individuals to interview on the same topic.
- Use all available resources to do the historical groundwork: libraries, newspapers, microfiche, internet, archive records office, museums and private collections. Be resourceful in finding those historical resources, you will be pleasantly surprised with what you will find.
- Armed with facts and knowledge in the chosen area of your project, you can go into the interview prepared. The interviewee also is relaxed by the interviewer's knowledge of the subject.

### **What questions shall I ask?**

- Generally, have a list of topics in mind, not specific, word for word. However, to warm interviewee up, general questions are a good way to start and even a little chitchat. 'It's a lovely day out there, isn't it?'
- Develop a rapport by asking non-demanding questions first. Once developed, start asking those more challenging questions.
- Don't be intimidated by silence.
- Maintain eye contact, be warm, a good and active listener, using body language, nodding, smiling, encouraging.
- It is difficult, but avoid 'uh huh', or 'really' when recording.
- Be flexible. Watch out for and pick up on promising topics.
- Compose questions on the spot from your topic list, adapting the questions to the narrator's individual experience with the topic.
- Ask open-ended questions e.g. tell me about . . . , why . . . ? Why not. ? How . . . ?
- Probe for details - 'Can you describe . . . explain . . . how often . . . tell me more about . . . '
- Avoid leading questions that reveal your biases and suggest you have already formed an opinion of what the answer might be e.g. Not: 'I suppose all farmers think the badger cull is a good thing'. but rather: 'How do you feel about the proposed badger cull?'

- Restate or summarise e.g. 'you mentioned earlier about the cinema. Can you tell me more about that.'
- Ask for definitions and clarifications. E.g. 'tell me what you mean when you talk about a green market and a red market.'
- Follow up with - 'What else . . . ? Who else . . . ? What other reasons?'
- Turn things around e.g. 'Some people say . . . What do you think about that?'

**Also:**

- Ask one question at a time.
- Be prepared to get off the topic, and then gently bring the narrator back to the subject.
- Use the silent question. Keep quiet and wait.
- Ask the interviewee if there's anything else they would like to add.
- End with an expression of appreciation e.g. 'It's been great to hear what life was like when you were younger.' or 'Thank you for sharing your stories with me, it's been really interesting.'

**The Interview**

The interviewer must maintain complete control of the interview session despite the rank or status of the interviewee. Before starting, relax and put the interviewee at ease. Briefly explain how the session will be conducted. Try to make the interviewee feel comfortable in the presence of a recorder.

Start the interview with a brief introduction that identifies the interviewee.

- Be confident and relaxed. Your background research will have prepared you.
- Make sure the interviewee understands the purpose of the interview and how you intend to use it. This is not a private conversation.
- Be a good listener, using body language such as looking at the interviewee, nodding, and smiling to encourage and give the message, "I am interested."

- If necessary, use verbal encouragement such as "This is wonderful information!" or "How interesting!" when you are sure they have finished speaking. Be careful, however, not to pepper the interview with verbal encouragement such as "uh-huh," said at the same time that the interviewee is speaking.
- Be flexible. Watch for and pick up on promising topics introduced by the interviewee.
- Take notes. Interview notes are useful for indicating when follow-up questions are needed, for organising one's thoughts, and for preparing a preliminary word list of items requiring verification.
- Writing key words and topics as they are mentioned during the interview is also helpful for preparing a subject index of the tape. However, do not become so immersed in taking notes that it distracts the interviewee or interferes with the conduct of the interview.
- Eye contact is very important. It signals that you are giving your interviewee all of your attention.
- Wrap up the interview with lighter talk. Do not drop the interviewee abruptly after an intense interview.
- In general, don't count on photos to structure your interview, but you can use them as initial prompts. Carry large envelopes for borrowed and labelled artefacts such as photos.
- Have the interviewee sign the release form before you leave. Check again that the interviewee understands about the potential uses of the recorded interview and where the material may be accessed.
- Ensure the interviewee that they have the right to change their mind about the use of all or part of their interview.

## **Post-Interview**

Ordinarily, an interviewee is kept 'in the loop' through emails, text or 'phonecalls about the progress of a project or intended use of the interview. The interviewee may insist on advance warning of any use of the interview, or may change their mind about giving permission for the use of part/all of their interview. This must be respected. For more information about interviewing using video, consult our *Catcher Media Pack for iPad* pages 24-26.

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