City Lore Interviewing Guide

Interviewing is an exciting way to gather information about people, places, and events. An interview is like a conversation, except that the interviewer does most of the listening, and the person being interviewed (the narrator) does most of the talking. Your job as an interviewer is to put the narrator at ease, listen carefully to his or her responses, and ask questions that elicit rich detail and interesting answers and perspectives on the topic you are researching.

What interviews/oral histories can provide

- Learning about an event, either historical or contemporary, through the eyes and experiences of ordinary people makes the story more compelling.
- We gain insight into the perspectives of ordinary people who are often not in our history books or interviewed in our newspapers or television/radio shows.
- Accounts of events from people who witnessed those events gives us different perspectives.
- Multiple perspectives reveal attitudes toward events, not just the facts. (What people think influences what they do, so this is important).
- These primary source materials provide rich material for writing and for artistic expression.
- Interviewing helps develop listening, speaking, and writing skills, as well as skills in being interviewed.
- Interviewers get an opportunity to get to know people they see every day but with whom they have not had a long conversation, including their own families.
- “Oral history is not only about wars and national events, but also about people who struggled to meet the day-to-day challenges wrought by difficult times as well as the joys brought on by realized dreams.” – Homespun

Preparing for the Interview

- **Think about the purpose your interview.** Ask yourself, “What do I want to know?” “Who is the best person to interview for the information and perspectives I need?”

- **Do background research** on the topic before the interview.

- **Prepare a set of focused questions** from your research and a list of topics to cover. Find out as much as you can about the person you plan to interview. If you are conducting the interview to produce some kind of product (such as an essay, radio program, exhibit, visual arts project, song writing, etc.), keep in mind the kind of information you will need as you prepare your questions.
• **Talk to the person you plan to interview ahead of time.** Briefly describe your topic, why you chose him or her to interview, and how you plan to use the information. Giving the person a few days to think about the topic may result in a richer interview. Reassure the person that you’re not looking for an expert on your topic, but rather for his or her perspective, personal experiences, and memories.

• **Test your equipment.** If you plan to record or photograph the interview, test your equipment before you go to the interview; charge batteries and take extra batteries; take blank CDs, memory cards, or jump drives; have a backup extension cord.

• **Prepare a release form.** Interviewees must sign an agreement that you may use the stories, recordings, and images that you collect for presentation in an educational setting. After they sign, make sure to keep the release form with interview materials.

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**Conducting an Interview**

• **Ask Good Questions**

Two types of questions are essential to a good interview:

1. **Closed-ended questions** get "yes" and "no" or one or two-word responses and help you gather basic information. These questions often begin with the words:

   - *What* (is the name of the town where you were born?)
   - *Where* (were you stationed during the war?)
   - *When* (did your family come to the United States?)
   - *Did* (your family enter the United States through Ellis Island?)

2. **Open-ended questions** give the narrator a chance to talk at length on a topic. Devote more time to open-ended questions, which often begin with the words and phrases:

   - *Tell me about* (your experiences working in the mine)
   - *What was it like* (living on the Lower East Side at that time)?
   - *Describe* (a typical day of work on the farm).
   - *Explain* (how you shear a sheep).
   - *How* (did you feel leaving your family behind)?
   - *Why* (did you decide to take a job in the factory)?

• **Inform your narrator** about the purposes and uses of the interview. Respect their right to refuse to discuss certain subjects.
• **Listen carefully** to your narrator’s responses and **ask follow-up questions** to clarify or probe more deeply into a topic or to get more specific and detailed information.

• **Avoid asking leading questions**. Ask questions that encourage the narrator to answer in a way that reflects the narrator’s thinking, not your thinking. Instead of asking: “Don’t you think the town was wrong to close down the factory,” ask in a way that does not reveal your opinions: “How did you feel about the town’s decision to close down the factory?”

• **Ask the narrator for specific examples** and stories to illustrate the points he or she makes. In response to a narrator’s statement, “We used to get in trouble for playing games in the alley,” you could ask, “Could you describe some of the games you played in the alley?” or “Why did you get in trouble and with whom?” or “Can you describe a particular incident when you got in trouble?”

• **Ask for detailed descriptions** of people and places and events.

• **Use your list of prepared questions as a guide**, but be flexible and change the order, ask new questions, or explore different topics that come up during the interview. If the narrator starts to talk about subjects not relevant to your topic, politely move back to the topic with a new question.

• Especially if you plan to publish parts of the interview, **ask your narrator to sign a release** giving you permission to use the material.

**Interviewing Etiquette**

• **Be a good listener**. Show that you’re listening by making eye contact, not repeating questions, waiting until the narrator is finished answering before asking another question, and asking good follow-up questions that show you are interested and paying attention.

• **Don’t be afraid of silence**. Inexperienced interviewers often rush to the next question when there is silence. Give the narrator and yourself time to pause, think, and reflect.

• **Think of your interview as having a beginning, middle, and end**.

  - Before the interview, talk informally to help both you and the narrator relax and feel comfortable talking. Explain your topic and how you plan to use the information (even if you already have done this on the phone).
- Begin with easy questions that are not too personal or threatening. This gives the narrator time to get to know you, understand what you want to learn and decide if he or she trusts you enough to share personal information.

- Move to more open-ended questions and questions that probe more deeply into your topic and your narrator’s personal experiences.

- When you have finished, ask, “Is there anything you would like to add?

- **Thank the narrator** before leaving and ask if he or she would mind if you call for additional information after you have had time to look at your notes. Follow up with a thank-you note.

**After the Interview**

- **Label the data.** Unlabeled data is easily lost, recorded over, etc. Label with names of the narrator, date, CD or file number (if more than one is used), and other information relevant to your situation.

- **For recorded interviews,** listen to the recording and make a list of the key topics. If you have time, transcribe the interview, or outline the interview and transcribe only interesting quotes and information that you may want to use in your final project.

- **Analyze your notes.** Look for evidence of the narrator’s point of view, thematic connections between different parts of the narrative, interesting quotes, connections between the narrator’s personal story and larger historical narratives.

- **Contrast and compare** the perspective and experiences of this narrator to others you have interviewed and to written records. This will help you to check for accuracy and also to see how unique or broadly representative this narrator’s experiences and perspectives are.

- **Treat the evidence with care.** Apply the same standards for citation and use of oral history materials as you would with other types of historical evidence. You have a responsibility not to misrepresent the narrator’s words or take them out of context.
Learning Interviewing through Practice: Learning to Listen

One of the most important skills in interviewing and one of the most difficult for inexperienced interviewers is how to listen carefully and how to make the interview feel like a conversation even though one person is doing most of the talking. The activity below – the first one we use with students—helps develop those skills.

Procedure:

1. Divide the class into pairs.
2. Designate one member of the pair as A and the other as B.
3. Tell students that they’re going to listen to each other talk for two minutes about a particular topic. Select a topic that relates to the lesson theme. For an immigration study, for example, you could ask students to describe a memory of having to leave or say good-bye to a person or place that they thought they might never see again, or you could ask students to describe an event in their family’s immigration/migration history.
4. Tell students that while A is talking, B is to listen only and not take notes nor ask questions. When two minutes are up, ask the pairs to reverse roles; B will talk for two minutes and A will listen.
5. Ask pairs to stand or come to the front of the class, one pair at a time. Ask A to say his/her name and introduce his/her partner, then to describe to the class what B talked about. Then A should ask B if there is anything that was left out that B would like to add. Reverse roles and have B do the same for A.
6. Discuss the experience with students. What did it feel like to listen and not ask questions? What is difficult or uncomfortable? Was it easier to listen or to talk? Did anything surprise you? What did you learn? What would you do differently if you did this again?