

Oral History Guide

**Southern Institute for Education and
Research at Tulane University**

INTRODUCTION

In 1987, I began my career as a self-appointed, free-lance journalist in public radio. I carved out a niche in that world by doing stories tied to the 50th anniversaries of the major events that occurred before and during the Second World War. Every time there was a 50th anniversary of a landmark event, such as the bombing of Guernica, the Nazi seizure of Austria, the abandonment of Czechoslovakia, the ‘Night of Broken Glass,’ and the Nazi and Soviet invasions of Poland, I visited the site of the landmark event and interviewed everybody I could about what had happened fifty years ago and what had happened since. I then knocked on the door of public radio and tried to sell the stories. I lived in the capitals of Europe and traveled to villages in the distant hinterland. I interviewed heroes, villains, and bystanders. In 1990, I returned to my native Louisiana and produced stories on the neo-Nazi and Klansman David Duke; he ran for the U. S. Senate and won 55% of the white vote. I found myself again interviewing heroes, villains, and bystanders – but this time in the most distant hinterland of my homeland. It’s important to record the voices of those who witnessed history, particularly those who have been forgotten by others. Many of these people are old, time is not on our side: ‘When an old person dies, it’s as if a library has burned down.’ The task of gathering oral history is rewarding beyond measure. Students are required to listen closely, to step outside of themselves, and to learn how it was for others.

- Plater Robinson

PROCEDURE

Make copies of this guide and give a copy to each student.

FORM A GROUP

The first thing the students should do is separate into groups of four. Each group serves as a team. Each person on the team is assigned certain duties: two are assigned to record the interview, each with a separate means of recording (video recorder, tape recorder, pencil, or pen); and two are assigned to conduct the interview, the ones who ask the questions. It is imperative that two people record the interview. Invariably, something breaks, something is forgotten, something goes wrong. The backup is needed.

GET THE INTERVIEW

Call and make an appointment to do the interview. I have always felt distinctly uncomfortable calling someone out of the blue and asking them for an interview. I always feared they would react angrily, shout that their thoughts were not of my concern, and slam the phone down. This has never happened. People are generally very kind. Don't be afraid to pick up the phone and call. Most people are eager to talk. Everybody has a story to tell.

Explain the assignment. Tell the person exactly what you're interested in, and why. Ask the person for an hour of their time. Most people don't cringe at the thought of an hour. Set the day, the time, and the place for

the interview. It's best if you go to their house. Once the time and place are established, repeat this information aloud so that there is no doubt about what has been agreed on. It's also important to ask the person for directions to the interview locale. Once you've written this information down, repeat it aloud to correct any mistakes. If you take time to be careful, you'll save time later on.

If the interview goes well, you don't have to stick to the hour deadline, but you do have to ask politely for permission to exceed the deadline.

Don't be late for the interview. I make sure I'm outside the person's house a few minutes before I'm due. There are few things less considerate or more disconcerting than being late for an interview. It gives the wrong impression at the wrong time.

BE PREPARED

Interviewing a person is a responsibility not to be taken lightly. You are asking the person to step back into a time where the memories might not all be pleasant. Be respectful. The way to be respectful is to be well-prepared.

Before the interview, each group of four students should learn as much as possible about the interviewee and about the period of time in which the interviewee lived. Make an outline of questions you want to ask. Use a single page. You don't need to ask a lot of questions. But you need to go into detail with the questions you do ask. List the questions in chronological order - from the beginning of the person's life until the present-day. The best questions are one sentence long. Be clear, be concise, and be direct.

If you do not prepare yourself with knowledgeable questions before the interview, you insult the person you're interviewing and bring discredit on yourself.

BE A GOOD LISTENER

Be comfortable with silence. The interviewee may pause and pick up again. The gems of memory often tumble from those pauses. Don't step on them in the haste to ask another question. Be a good listener.

Don't blindly follow your list of questions. If the opportunity demands, break from the list and pursue a question out of order.

There might be times when the interviewee is overcome with emotion. The best response is respectful silence. When the interviewee has regrouped, the interview can continue.

Don't interrupt. Rather, don't interrupt unless the interviewee is clearly getting off the subject. You will have to transcribe the interview afterwards, a laborious task. You will want to transcribe only *relevant* material. Good editing during the interview will save you time later on. Have eye contact with the interviewee. It's important to pay attention, and to look like you're paying attention.

BE HONEST ABOUT BEING CONFUSED

If you don't understand something, speak up. If it's not clear, speak up.

This is no time to be timid. You have to be able to say, “Excuse me, but I don't quite understand that. Would you explain it again?” People don't mind repeating themselves.

Be forthright about what you don't understand. You'll have to explain the contents of the interview to your teacher and to your fellow students later on. First, you'll have to understand it yourself. Make sure you get it straight in your own mind before you leave the interview.

Remember what Mark Twain said: “I was gratified to be able to answer promptly, and I did so: I said I didn't know.”

BEGIN IN THE BEGINNING

I always begin an interview with the same question: “Would you please tell me your name, where you were born, and when?” Immediately, at the beginning of the tape, or at the top of the page, you have the biographical information from which the rest of the story flows. Remember that some people are sensitive about revealing their age. If this is the case, apologize and move on.

FOLLOW THE CHRONOLOGY

Conduct the interview according to the chronology of the interviewee's life.

The first series of questions should be directed at the interviewee's youth. A key question to consider: when growing up, who were the people you admired? Why did you admire them? How did they influence you? Can you remember the exact moment when this person did

something or said something that influenced you?

Always zero in on the precise moment. Avoid generalities.

Other possible questions: What were the key moments in your life? When did you have to demonstrate moral courage and/or physical courage? What events determined the course of your life? What would you do differently?

The decisive moments in a person's life often emerge during an interview. Recognize them as such, and let the interviewee address the subject fully. Ask for details. Ask them to describe. Explore the thought. One event in a person's life can say more about the person than his or her entire life story.

If it's interesting, follow it.

SEIZE THE ANECDOTE

When the interviewee provides you with an interesting or illuminating story, explore it. Don't rush on to the next question. Remember, you don't have to follow the outline. Listen closely, and seize the anecdote ("a rare entertaining fact of history or biography").

SPELL THAT, PLEASE

You will save yourself a lot of trouble if, when a name or place is

mentioned, you ask the interviewee to *spell* that name or place. That way you are assured that the transcript will be accurate.

CONCLUDE THE INTERVIEW

I always conclude an interview the same question: “Is there a question you would like to answer that I didn’t ask?” This gives the interviewee an opportunity to make a point that might have eluded your questions. It also gives the interviewee a chance to summarize, or to reach a conclusion, about his or her life.

When you have concluded the interview, don’t get up and leave immediately. Turn off the video recorder or tape recorder, or put down your pen, and just sit in pleasant conversation with the interviewee. It is likely that an important piece of information will drop into your lap. There is something about the end of the interview that relaxes the interviewee. You can then turn on the video recorder or tape recorder or pick up the pen and continue the interview.

TRANSCRIBE THE INTERVIEW

Afterwards, each group is responsible for transcribing the interview. I recommend transcribing the entire interview verbatim, but, as that is a very time consuming task, it is acceptable to transcribe only those parts of the interview that are most important. This is where good editing comes in. After transcribing the interview, the group should break it down and analyze what has been said.

GO BACK

When you have transcribed the interview, edited it, discussed it, debated it, and summarized it, you might realize that you still have questions. It is sometimes a good idea to ask the interviewee for a second interview. The second time around, you can clarify previous answers, ask other questions, and catch earlier mistakes.

CLASS PRESENTATION

Each group makes a presentation to the class. The students must explain who the interviewee is and what the interviewee experienced. In addition, the students must select two important stories from each interview. The first story must cast light on the interviewee; the second story must cast light on the period in which the interviewee lived. Finally, the students must answer questions from fellow students about the interviewee and the interviewee's life. The students must demonstrate knowledge and poise in answering questions.

AN ARCHIVE OF RICH ANECDOTES

In conclusion, the most enlightening of the key points and rich anecdotes gleaned from the interviews by all the students should be compiled into a single notebook. This notebook will serve as a valuable historical archive.

In ways that apply to oral history, the late historian Barbara Tuchman described the duties of a writer: “Select the essential, discard the

irrelevant --above all, discard the irrelevant.”