

3. Interview Guidelines

PREPARATION:

Preparation is the key to successful interviewing. Your background research into the subject shows respect for the information the narrator can offer, and it helps you to formulate questions that will lead to useful responses. Complete two forms before beginning your interview: one is a biographical questionnaire for information relevant to the subject of the interview, the other is a release form which must be signed by the narrator. The narrator has the right to restrict the use of the interview; any restriction[s] should be noted on the release. Usually, the only restriction is that the narrator will have opportunity to listen to the recording or to read the transcript. Inform the narrator that he/she eventually will receive a rough draft of the transcript and will have opportunity at that time to make minor corrections, deletions, and additions so that the transcript accurately reflects what was said. We will also give the narrator a copy of the final corrected transcript.

EQUIPMENT:

Your checklist of items to bring to the interview includes: tape recorder, microphone(s), an ample supply of good-quality 60-minute audiocassette tapes, extension cord, three-prong adaptor plug, two sets of the correct size batteries (if needed), camera, pen, paper, and your outline of topics. Familiarize yourself with the equipment prior to the interview; practice!

RECORDING:

Whenever possible, record your formal introduction on the tape before arriving at the interview location, then rewind the tape and play back your intro to check the equipment and the sound quality. Remember to leave space for the leader at the start of the tape; forward the tape past this blank leader before recording anything. The format of an introduction on an interview is as follows: This is an interview with _____, [present/ former/ retired title:] _____, who now lives in [city & state:] _____. [Then give a one-sentence biographical sketch containing information about the narrator which is relevant to the topic of this interview:] This interview is being conducted on [date:] _____, at [place of interview:] _____. The interviewer is _____ representing the _____.

Be sure that the recorder is actually recording; most recorders require that you push the record and play buttons simultaneously. Plan to arrive at the interview location in plenty of time. Select a location that will put the narrator at ease: the living room or den would be appropriate. If possible, disconnect the telephone and avoid television, radio, and other distracting sounds for the duration of the interview. Avoid an audience if you can, because an audience can distract both you and the narrator; an exception is that it might be appropriate to include the narrator's spouse. In the event of interruptions such as a visitor or a phone call, use the pause button to turn off the recorder temporarily. Wherever possible, plug into electrical current rather than using batteries. If you must use batteries, be sure to bring a second set as backup. When using a remote microphone other than the preferred lapel-style mike, prop it up on a stand or on a soft surface (not on a hard surface, and away from the recorder). Remember the mike's on-off switch. Stop after the first few minutes to check the quality of the recording, then be sure that it is recording when you resume. After you have set up your equipment, ensure that it is working, and noted when it will be time to turn the tape, pay as little attention to it as possible.

ROLE OF THE INTERVIEWER:

Your primary responsibility is to make the narrator feel relaxed, to elicit useful information, and to guide or direct the interview where appropriate. Your chief task is to listen. The best interview will have the narrator doing virtually all of the talking. Usually, it is best to proceed in chronological order from the earliest reminiscences to the most recent. Remember to ask open-ended questions, not ones that can be answered in a word. Avoid direct, specific questions. Ask broad questions which elicit a lengthy response. If the narrator mentions unfamiliar names of people and places, make a note of them and ask for correct spellings at the end of the interview. As you listen, take one-two word notes for future questions. Before the start of the interview, advise the narrator that this is what you will be doing. Listen creatively, thinking of where the information can lead you. After the interview, write a brief summary of the topics discussed, noting the indicator number at the start of each new topic, having pushed the indicator button to start at 000 at the

beginning of the tape (you could do this rough indexing during the course of the interview, but this option is apt to be distracting). Also, it should be standard practice to (1) take a photo of your narrator and (2) discuss the location of historical records (photos, manuscript collections, diaries, etc.) and offer to accept donations or secure permission to copy materials having research value.

When you have finished, make sure to label the cassette with the narrator's name, your name, and the interview date. Punch out the two tabs in the back of the tape to prevent recording over it, and return the cassette to its protective plastic case. Remember to turn each microphone switch to off--otherwise the batteries will die.

Thank you! Have fun listening!