Tips For Interviewers

1. An interview is not a dialogue. The whole point of the interview is to get the narrator to tell her story. Limit your own remarks to a few pleasantries to break the ice, then brief questions to guide her along. It is not necessary to give her the details of your great-grandmother's trip in a covered wagon in order to get her to tell you about her grandfather's trip to California. Just say, "I understand your grandfather came around the Horn to California. What did he tell you about the trip?"

2. Ask questions that require more of an answer than "yes" or "no." Start with "why," "how," "where," "what kind of ..." Instead of "Was Henry Miller a good boss?" ask "What did the cowhands think of Henry Miller as a boss?"

3. Ask one question at a time. Sometimes interviewers ask a series of questions all at once. Probably the narrator will answer only the first or last one. You will catch this kind of questioning when you listen through the tape after the session, and you can avoid it the next time.

4. Ask brief questions. We all know the irrepressible speech-maker who, when questions are called for at the end of a lecture, gets up and asks five-minute questions. It is unlikely that the narrator is so dull that it takes more than a sentence or two for her to understand the question.

5. Start with questions that are not controversial; save the delicate questions, if there are any, until you have become better acquainted. A good place to begin is with the narrator's youth and background.

6. Don't let periods of silence fluster you. Give your narrator a chance to think of what she wants to add before you hustle her along with the next question. Relax, write a few words on your notepad. The sure sign of a beginning interviewer is a tape where every brief pause signals the next question.

7. Don't worry if your questions are not as beautifully phrased as you would like them to be for posterity. A few fumbled questions will help put your narrator at ease as she realizes that you are not perfect and she need not worry if she isn't either. It is not necessary to practice fumbling a few questions; most of us are nervous enough to do that naturally.

8. Don't interrupt a good story because you have thought of a question, or because your narrator is straying from the planned outline. If the information is pertinent, let her go on, but jot down your questions on your notepad so you will remember to ask it later.

9. If your narrator does stray into subjects that are not pertinent (the most common problems are to follow some family member's children or to get into a series of family

medical problems), try to pull her back as quickly as possible. "Before we move on, I'd like to find out how the closing of the mine in 1935 affected your family's finances. Do you remember that?"

10. It is often hard for a narrator to describe people. An easy way to begin is to ask her to describe the person's appearance. From there, the narrator is more likely to move into character description.

11. Interviewing is one time when a negative approach is more effective than a positive one. Ask about the negative aspects of a situation. For example, in asking about a person, do not begin with a glowing description. "I know the mayor was a very generous and wise person. Did you find him so?" Few narrators will quarrel with a statement like that even though they may have found the mayor a disagreeable person. You will get a more lively answer if you start out in the negative. "Despite the mayor's reputation for good works, I hear he was a very difficult man for his immediate employees to get along with." If your narrator admired the mayor greatly, she will spring to his defense with an apt illustration of why your statement is wrong. If she did find him hard to get along with, your remark has given her a chance to illustrate some of the mayor's more unpleasant characteristics.

12. Try to establish at every important point in the story where the narrator was or what her role was in this event, in order to indicate how much is eye-witness information and how much based on reports of others. "Where were you at the time of the mine disaster?" "Did you talk to any of the survivors later?" Work around these questions carefully, so that you will not appear to be doubting the accuracy of the narrator's account.

13. Do not challenge accounts you think might be inaccurate. Instead, try to develop as much information as possible that can be used by later researchers in establishing what probably happened. Your narrator may be telling you quite accurately what she saw. As Walter Lord explained when describing his interviews with survivors of the *Titanic*, "Every lady I interviewed had left the sinking ship in the last lifeboat. As I later found out from studying the placement of the lifeboats, no group of lifeboats was in view of another and each lady probably was in the last lifeboat she could see leaving the ship."

14. Tactfully point out to your narrator that there is a different account of what she is describing, if there is. Start out by saying, "I have heard ..." or "I have read ..." This is not to challenge her account, but rather an opportunity for her to bring up further evidence to refute the opposing view, or to explain how that view got established, or to temper what she has already said. If done skillfully, some of your best information can come from this juxtaposition of differing accounts.

15. Try to avoid "off the record" information--the times when your narrator asks you to turn off the recorder while she tells you a good story. Ask her to let you record the whole things and promise that you will erase that portion if she asks you to after further consideration. You may have to erase it later, or she may not tell you the story at all, but once you allow "off the record" stories, she may continue with more and more, and you will end up with almost no recorded interview at all. "Off the record" information is only useful if you yourself are researching a subject and this is the only way you can get the information. It has no value if your purpose is to collect information for later use by other researchers.

16. Don't switch the recorder off and on. It is much better to waste a little tape on irrelevant material than to call attention to the tape recorder by a constant on-off operation. For this reason, I do not recommend the stop-start switches available on some mikes. If your mike has such a switch, tape it to the "on" position--then forget it. Of course you can turn off the recorder if the telephone rings or if someone interrupts your

session.

17. Interviews usually work out better if there is no one present except the narrator and the interviewer. Sometimes two or more narrators can be successfully recorded, but usually each one of them would have been better alone.

18. End the interview at a reasonable time. An hour and a half is probably the maximum. First, you must protect your narrator against overfatigue; second, you will be tired even if she isn't. Some narrators tell you very frankly if they are tired, or their spouses will. Otherwise, you must plead fatigue, another appointment, or no more tape.

19. Don't use the interview to show off your knowledge, vocabulary, charm, or other abilities. Good interviewers do not shine; only their interviews do.

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