

## Approaching the person

### Gaining consent

The person you want to record may be reassured if you do the following things:

- Talk in terms of ‘chat’ or a ‘conversation’, rather than an ‘interview’
- Stress that you’re not trying to capture the ‘whole’ life –that would be a huge job
- Emphasise that you’ll ask questions and guide the conversation – the person won’t need to come up with a monologue
- Say that they don’t need to talk about anything they don’t want to talk about.

Don’t be discouraged if the person only shows a modest degree of enthusiasm for the project. People approached about recording their life stories frequently say that they have nothing interesting to say (after all, they already know their own life story). Your interest and enthusiasm is therefore the key to kicking the project off.

Most people, however, actually find the process of recounting their memories very enjoyable.

If you anticipate reluctance from the person, you could start by seeking agreement just to record one particular aspect of the person’s life that you know engages the person (‘I really want to hear about your childhood in Cuba’). A good starting-point is an aspect of the person’s life that they are proud or happy about..

### Issues to clarify

Oral historians often use the term ‘informed consent’. The person being interviewed should consent to giving the interview with a clear understanding of the process and the end result of the recording. So when talking to the person you want to record, you should explain:

- **The purpose.** Why are you doing this? What you want to learn? What do you want to get out of it?
- **The topics you might cover.** Is it the whole chronological life, or a particular job, event, place or experience?
- **The process.** Are you going to ask questions? Will the person need to prepare?
- **How you will deal with sensitive issues.** You might want to stress that the person need not answer any questions if they don’t want to.
- **What you will do with the recording.** Who will have copies? Will it be edited? Will the person get the chance to listen to it before anyone else does?
- **The arrangements.** How long will the recording(s) last? In what venue?

After you have explained everything that you need to explain about your plans, check whether the person has any questions.

Oral historians frequently report that – even when they think they have made the purpose and process of the interview very clear – the person is still uncertain or has misunderstood. So you might want to run through some or all of these issues again, just before you begin the recording.

### **Points to think about**

The generation currently in their 20s, 30s and 40s has a different idea of autobiography than some previous generations – far more emotionally revelatory; far more confessional and intimate. So if you're interested in these kinds of issues, remember that it might not be appropriate to get beyond an older person's reticence to talk about certain subjects.

Some people's motivation for interviewing members of their family is to 'dig' – to ask the questions they've always wanted answers to. The role of interviewer confers a lot of power, and it's doubtful whether it's a good idea to use a recording for this purpose. (In fact, it can end in tears!)