

Preparing for the recording

1. Preparation and research

For the interviewee

The interviewee may want to do some preparatory thinking.

One option is to give the person a list of 'memory-jogging' questions related to the topics that you're hoping to talk about. These will not necessarily all be used in the interview; the idea is simply to stimulate the memory.

Some people want to write screeds of detail when preparing for an interview. Do not encourage this, suggest they just come up with headings; or maybe a list of important events; or single significant words.

Some people cannot cope with trying to contain all the details beforehand but they do enjoy reading the questions and thinking about their memories. It becomes a stimulating and enjoyable exercise for them. The important thing is to reassure them that you will be able to lead them through the recording.

For the interviewer

The most effective tool in preparing for a life story recording is a preliminary conversation with the interviewee to find out the major facts and events in the person's life. Make sure you don't cover all the minute details; just elicit the basic outline information. This 'preliminary chat' should take 20-40 minutes at the most.

You could also consider doing some preliminary research about historical events or contexts related to the person's life.

2. Planning the interview

It is important to develop a system that enables you to have full control of the conversation. You need to be able to direct the recording along a clear path.

One method is to divide the recording time into sections and, using cards, note down what topics to cover in each section, with perhaps a couple of specific details. In a two hour recording, for example, use a card for each half hour and put headings. It will help you get the shape of the interview in your mind beforehand and will be a prompt as you go along. Keeping a person on the subject in hand is not always easy.

You may find in the pre-interview chat that for some people their very early life is of far greater interest than post-war. Maybe their working life gives them most pride. Take all this into account and let it shape the interview. Make sure you know about any topics that are sensitive.

Be realistic about what can be achieved in the time. It is impossible to fit 80 years of a life into an afternoon's recording session. Think of it as a snapshot, not a blockbuster.

These notes are based on advice from Lorna Baker, who records individual life stories through her company Real Life Recordings