

Questioning techniques

Just before the interview

You might want to run over again the purpose of what you're doing, and what you plan to do with the recording (see the handout on 'Approaching the person').

In particular, you could say again that if you happen to ask a question the person doesn't want to answer (or doesn't find it easy to answer, because nothing comes to mind!), then there's no need to answer it.

Tell the person not to worry if they make a mistake, or can't think of anything to say, or want to repeat something. They can stop and correct themselves or start all over again.

Some professional oral historians 'tag' the tape by saying, right at the start of the interview: 'This is Jack Latimer interviewing Martha Williams about her life on 12/4/98 at her home in 12 Mountrouy Terrace, Brighton.' The advantage is that if the tape goes astray from its cover, any stranger would know what the tape is about. On the other hand, oral history guru Paul Thompson calls this a 'formalizing, freezing device' which will get the interview off to a bad start. You could always record this identifier before the interview (or after, if you leave a blank space at the front of the tape).

It might be a good idea to give the person warning of the first question

The first few questions

A first interview usually begins with apprehension on both sides. The interviewee is thinking: 'Will I be able to answer the questions? Can I do this?' The interviewer is thinking 'How will this go?'

So you could begin with routine, uncomplicated questions. Most people find it easiest to remember in a chronological sequence.

'When In doubt' says Studs Terkel, a famous American interviewer, 'lead with your trump. That means, ask about their childhood. That's always a good jumping-off point.'

Another oral history author says that non-threatening questions include:

- Date/place of birth
- People significant in childhood
- Favourite games

Speak at a sedate pace, clearly and slowly, and wait for answers. The pace and tone you set will generally be echoed by the interviewee.

Types of question to use

Mix of closed and open questions

You will need some 'closed' questions that encourage precise answers: "Where did you move to next?"

But you also need other questions which are ‘open’, and invite descriptions, comments, and opinions:

- "How did you feel about that?"
- "What sort of person was she?"
- "Can you describe the house you lived in?"
- "Why did you decide to change jobs?"
- 'What did you think/feel about that?
- 'Can you describe/explain/expand on/discuss/compare....'

The journalist's friends

You might find the journalist's quintet of questions useful for exploring a topic thoroughly. The journalist's friends are: 'who, what, why, when, how'/'

Some useful words

Useful words are: 'describe, recall, remember, know about, first impressions, detail, example, typical'

Using prompts rather than questions

If you're planning to edit out the interviewer's voice, it's very useful not to ask questions at all, but prompt the person with sentences and instructions:

- 'Tell me about the house where you lived as a child....'
- 'Let's move on and talk about your father's side of the family....'

This makes it more likely that the person will respond with a complete sentence, such as: 'The house was very old and big....'. If, on the other hand, you ask: 'What was the house you lived in as a child like?', the person may answer: 'It was very old and big'. The listener then doesn't know what 'it' is.

Probing

There are times when you want to push beyond an initial answer.

You might need to seek explanations of terms that the listener might not understand, even though you and the interviewee might know what they mean. This applies to casual references to people you both know. 'Michael always thought the same...' is incomprehensible unless Michael has been previously introduced.

You also need to clarify expressions like "that big" and "this house". For example, if the interviewee says: "The fish was that big.", the interviewer might add: "About eighteen inches." If the interviewee says: 'And I've lived here ever since', the interviewer could add: "In Lymington Road in Cambridge'.

Sometimes you will hear a cue from interviewees that he or she will expand on a topic if you're interested. For example, he might say, "Oh, that wasn't much of a problem, although I can think of several times where it was.". It's then your cue to say: "Would you like to tell me about those times?" This shows you're listening and enhances rapport with the interviewee.

One good tactic for probing is the therapist's technique of simply repeating a phrase with a questioning intonation. 'You said he was a colourful character.....?'

Types of question to avoid

Double questions

For example: 'What was it like living on an island? Did you get lonely?' Usually only the second question is answered and it's the less interesting question.

The exception is if you deliberately want to give the person the option of not answering the first question. 'Tell me about some of your worst and best times.'

Leading questions

For obvious reasons, you don't want to impose your own ideas on the interview. Rather than ask, "Did you find it very difficult when you first joined the army?", you could ask: "What was it like when you first joined the army?"

How to listen

Try to avoid verbal responses

The usual sounds we make to show interest (like 'uh huh', 'mm', and 'I see') will soon get very irritating for the listener on the recording. It's better to show interest with alert eye contact, nodding and smiling.

Allow silence

After you ask a question, stop...and wait for the answer, even if you have to sit in silence for several seconds. Subjects often need several moments to think about the questions you ask.

Managing the flow of discussion

Scene-setting, stories and reflection

Some creative writing books tell people who are writing their life stories to combine three types of material in their writing:

1. Scene-setting: background information about the broad sweep of a person's life
2. Stories: particular episodes or incidents
3. Reflection: commentaries on how particular episodes made the person feel, or what the episodes meant to the person

If you're thinking of the person's life as a film, you could think of these three elements as:

1. The long shot, which establishes where the action is taking place
2. The close-up, which gives a detailed view of the action
3. The voiceover, which describes the significance of the event, or how the narrator felt about it in retrospect

You might want to help your interviewee strike the same balance. In particular, if you're only hearing the facts, you might try to get the person to comment on the facts by asking: "How did that make you feel?" or 'What impact did that have on you?'

Changing topics

When you're changing the topic, explain why you're doing it. Let the person know your train of thought:

"We've talked about your father's side of the family. What about your mother's side?"

"I'd like to go back and talk some more about the time before you left school. What were your ambitions for the future then?"

This has been described as the 'two-sentence' format. The first sentence explains why you want to change the subject. The second sentence launches the new subject.

Don't go on too long

Especially with older people, you need to keep an eye out for signs of fatigue. Interviewees are often too polite to tell you enough is enough.

Common dilemmas

How do I stop the person rambling?

This is tricky, particularly if you're not planning to edit the material for listeners.

The usual advice is to let people talk to the end of their strand of thought and wait for an opening patiently. Cutting them off gives the impression that what they're saying isn't important to you. If you cut off a story that's not interesting to you, you cut off lots of subsequent offers of other stories that might be interesting to you.

On the other hand, long unintentional digressions will bore the listener – and the person you're recording may feel embarrassed when they listen back to the tape, and wonder why you let them continue.

One way of cutting in is to use a variation of the two-sentence technique described above (see 'Changing topics'). The first sentence picks up on some point in the digression; the second sentence steers the person back on track: 'So you obviously did a lot of travelling in those days. And back at home, you were saying how you came to buy your first house....'

It's also possible to use body language to show that you'd like to come in with another question. The person may bring their digression to a halt to let you do this.

What if the person gets upset?

The usual advice to oral historians is as follows:

1. Be silent while the person recovers.
2. Apologize for stumbling onto subject that was painful.
3. Ask if the person wishes to continue the interview.
4. Start on another topic.

What if the person seems reluctant to talk about something?

Keep alert for clues that the interviewee is uncomfortable with a question or line of questioning. This is more often clued in by body language than verbally. If you sense discomfort, leave the subject and try coming back to it later in the interview, perhaps from a different angle.

How do I broach difficult or sensitive subjects?

If you know you're going to broach a sensitive subject, plan the wording of the question before the interview.

Start with questions that are not controversial. Aave the delicate questions, if there are any, until later in the interview.

If asking about mistakes or failures in a person's life or career, ask about triumphs and successes first.

What if the person dries up?

Have your next question ready.

The closing question

It's good to have a strong final question prepared in advance.

A common closing question is to ask if the interviewee has any final message they would like to give to the people who will be listening to the tape.

Near the end of the interview you might also ask: 'Is there anything else you'd like to add?' or 'Any final thoughts?'

Just after the interview

Turn off the recorder but don't pack it away immediately. The person sometimes starts talking about some episode or comment about their lives that is very interesting, and you may be able to turn the recorder back on (with their permission) to capture those final thoughts.

After the interview is finished, don't rush away. Take time to thank them and talk about yourself.

Make it clear what will happen next. For example, when will the person get a copy of the recording?