

THE ORAL HISTORIAN'S CHEAT SHEET

■ <http://library.csuci.edu/collections/oral-histories.htm>

Before the Interview:

1. Make contact in writing at least two weeks prior; confirm one week prior. Tell the interviewee about the project; make sure he or she knows that the interview will be transcribed, be put on the Web, or both. (These details must be in the donor agreement.)
2. Be very familiar with the recording device, make sure it has new batteries, and note how long it records for.
3. Draft your questions (do your research) and send them to the interviewee, along with the donor agreement for his or her review.
4. Bring a notepad, the recording device, and the donor agreement to the interview.

At the Beginning of the Interview:

1. Be aware of potential noise issues and correct them.
2. Have your interviewee sign the donor agreement.
3. Chat briefly with your interviewee – discuss his or her input on the questions. Let the interviewee know that he or she can offer information; you can't possibly know everything to ask.
4. State the date, location, and names of the interviewee and interviewer on the recording device, before you start the interview. If the interview stops for restroom breaks, etc., note that on the recording.

During the Interview:

1. Always make eye contact. Look interested!
2. Keep a quick eye on the recorder throughout the interview to make sure it is recording.
3. Ask your open-ended questions (who, what, where, and why), listen to the answers, and ask additional questions based on those answers. Don't rush. Ask questions that you think the listener of the recorded interview would want to know. Paint a picture for them, using questions that ask for descriptions, thoughts, and feelings. Give your interviewee time to answer, rethink, and answer again.
4. Don't offer your opinions or your own experiences. Little comments here and there are fine.
5. Ask for the spellings of names, if you don't know.
6. Start the interview by asking the interviewee about his or her childhood – follow a chronological timeline of life. Begin with the general. Move on to specifics – to your topic or subject. End the interview by asking the interviewee what he or she envisions for the future. Remember, an interview is like a book – with a beginning (an introduction to your interviewee), a middle (details on the subject that you want to cover) and a conclusion (what does the future look like for the interviewee?).

After the Interview:

1. Thank the interviewee directly after the interview and also send a thank-you letter.
2. If you have used a digital recorder, copy the files to two different places, in case one is accidentally deleted.
3. Transcribe the document according to professional standards (<http://www.loc.gov/vets/transcribe.html>).

The FINAL and MOST Important Things to Remember:

1. The interviewee will look to you to guide them. He or she won't know if you've made a mistake, unless you tell them, so take charge and act as though you know exactly what you are doing. Because you do.
2. Treat your interviewee with respect; behave and dress as you would for a job interview. Be professional.