

General Tips for Conducting Oral Histories

1. Phone the interview subject in advance to confirm their participation and set up a time and place for the interview.
2. Know how to use your tape/video recorder. Practice using the equipment before the interview, checking the microphone to make sure it works. Practicing with a friend or family member can help you feel more at ease during the interview itself. Be sure to speak slowly and clearly.
3. Compose a list of questions to ask your subject before the interview. Use questions that require more than a “yes” or “no” response. Some questions should be broad, “What was it like growing up?” while other questions should be specific, but open-ended; “How did the war affect your life?”
4. Be on time for your interview. Bring a pencil and paper to take notes, extra batteries for your tape recorder, and two blank tapes. Also, you’ll want to bring along your questions for reference during the interview. Start your tape with your name, your subject’s name, and the date. Write this information on the outside label as well.
5. Always treat your informant with respect and politeness. Be sure you and your subject speak clearly into the microphone. You may want to test the microphone with the informant before beginning the actual interview—making sure that the volume level is appropriate and the recorder is positioned in the right place.
6. Remember that your list of questions is only a guideline. Sometimes your informant will want to tell a story, or will elaborate beyond your question—sometimes even answering additional questions before you’ve asked them. This is always ok, and often enhances the oral history itself.
7. Keep your interview to 30-40 minutes. Sometimes an informant can get enthusiastic about telling stories, and may want to extend the interview. If necessary, set up an appointment to continue the interview at another time. Interviews that last longer than one hour can be tiring for both the interviewer and the subject.
8. Make sure to thank your subject when you have finished the interview. Keeping them informed of your projects following the interview is also a nice way of letting the subject know that you appreciated their time and cooperation. A written thank you note, sent a few days following the interview, is also a good way to do this.