

# CAPTURING HISTORY: Oral History Interview Guidelines



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## GATHERING ORAL HISTORY

Baylor University's Oral History Institute defines oral history as “a sound recording of historical information, obtained through an interview that preserves a person's life history or eyewitness account of a past experience.” These guidelines will help you become more comfortable and confident in setting up and conducting an oral history interview.

## GETTING READY

Before recruiting a willing family member or friend, you will need to consider how to record the audio interview sessions. Most smart phones are equipped with a recording device and various apps (such as Anchor, Voice Recorder, and Recording Studio) that allow varying levels of editing of any audio clips you record. Once you record the clips on a device, take it a step further by uploading your audio clips to more advanced editing software on your computer using programs like Audacity and GarageBand. If technology isn't cooperating, simply record your participant's responses in a journal using the following tips:

- Label the top of each page with a theme which reflects the types of questions you'll ask on that page (Early life, Career, Schooling, Relationships, Hard times, Triumphs).
- Write out 2 or 3 questions on each page with plenty of space between them to record responses and reactions to your questions. Perhaps the most important thing to remember is the questions you ask and the way you ask them are your own.
- Start off the interview with an easier question to help make your subject comfortable. For example, “Tell me about some of your favorite memories of school when you were growing up.”
- Work your way up to a harder, more open-ended question that does not have a yes or no answer. For example, “What steps did you take to overcome a challenge in your life?”
- Ask your own follow-up questions when your participant mentions something interesting.

## ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Good interview questions are ones that are specific, but leave a lot of room for a variety of answers. Imagine that you're talking to a family member about the successes and challenges of living right now, in our rapidly changing world. Instead of asking, "What is your daily routine like?", a better question might be, "How has your daily routine changed given recent events?" The latter question allows the participant to think about the specifics of life right now, and talk about any differences from their past routine.

## HELPING YOUR PARTICIPANT BE SUCCESSFUL

It is important your participant is fully invested in order to receive the best responses. One way to help achieve that is to make sure s/he feels very comfortable in the interview situation. It's helpful to explain your reasoning for conducting the interview, the types of questions you might ask, and how you'll be asking the questions. For example, "I will ask a question and will not interrupt until you're finished. Then I may ask a follow up question about your response." Also, consider giving your participant the interview questions a day or so in advance so they can have time to think about the answers. Organize your pre-interview questions either chronologically or thematically. Finally, consider breaking your oral history sessions into chunks. If you spend 30 minutes on one question because it takes interesting turns, consider taking a break before you begin a new set of questions.

## PRESERVING THE STORIES

The Texas Historical Commission is dedicated to the preservation of stories and places across the state of Texas. Preserving the recorded interview is important in maintaining it as a historical resource. Use the following steps to guide you in the preservation process:

- **Make sure the stories are safe.** If you recorded the interview in a journal, take pictures of the responses as a back-up. If you recorded them digitally, save them on a USB drive or other source.
- **Make them accessible.** If are journaling, be sure your handwriting is legible. Consider typing out the responses. If you recoded digitally, try using audio editing software to clean up the responses. Finally, make sure the file is in a format you can share digitally.