

CAPTURING HISTORY: Oral History Etiquette

The word *etiquette* (EH-tih-kut) means the manners and rules that are followed in social settings. During your oral history interviews, here are some tips for using good etiquette with your participant:

- Be polite and thank them for participating. Ask them to sign any releases if needed.
- Help them get comfortable. Ask about their day before you begin. You can also ask if they have questions about the interview process.
- Speak clearly.
- Allow wait time after you ask a question. It may take them a little while to remember details. Count in your head to five before you ask a follow-up question.
- Maintain eye contact.
- If your participant is giving short/yes or no answers, ask the question in a different way or move on to a new question.
- Have fun! Enjoy the process of capturing history!

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Here are some situations you might experience during an interview. Think about and discuss how you would handle each one.

Your participant is having trouble hearing you. You are outside because the weather is nice, but the wind is causing some problems with your recording equipment. You don't want to move inside because the lighting is poor and you already have your equipment set up outside. What do you do?

You have about 20 questions to ask your grandmother. However, you are only five minutes into the interview, and you are already asking question number 10. How might you adjust?

You are conducting an oral history with your neighbor who has lived in your neighborhood for 40 years. He is very knowledgeable about the area and people, but he keeps interrupting you when you try to ask a question, and never really sticks to the questions you do manage to ask. How might you adjust your approach?

You are doing an oral history with a family member who is a war veteran. You have several questions about his/her time in service, but s/he gives very short answers and seems uncomfortable talking about some experiences. How could you gather the information you want to preserve while making her/him feel more comfortable talking about these subjects?

During the interview, your participant won't stay off the cell phone and gives you only one or two sentence answers. How do you address both the phone and the short answer issues?