Overview:

Everyone loves the idea of conducting oral history, but often every best intention gets in the way of actually getting an interview done. Ideas of the “perfect” way to record the interview, the dilemma of traveling to set up an interview, and other logistical considerations can actually work against those who wish to conduct oral history. “I don’t have a digital camera to film the interview,” or “I don’t know how to ask questions in an interview”-- these are some of the statements that are stumbling blocks to conducting oral history.

My point of view is: conducting an interview can be inexpensive, easy, and very gratifying. Imagine, if you will, if we had a taped conversation with Martha Washington or Harriet Tubman! Even if the recording was not the highest quality or the questions were not “perfect,” such an interview would be of immense value.

So the first point is: Don’t let concerns over being perfect stand in your way of conducting an oral history interview. That is not to say that you want to conduct an interview without any thought or structure to it. But it is to say, “go for it!” Get out there and start asking questions!

This guide is designed to help you on your way.

Equipment:

Professional oral historians frequently discuss and debate the best methods for recording oral histories. At one time, those conducting interviews relied on no more than making notes on a piece of paper to record an interview. Later, tape recorders were seen as essential tools. Today, the range of digital equipment available is truly mind-boggling.

While professionals debate whether to use audio only or audio/video to record an interview, there is agreement on one thing: the record of the interview, whether taped or videotaped, must be accessible for future generations.

The point of an oral history is to record a person’s narrative and to preserve it for the future. It may be used in a variety of ways, but the idea is to make it useable (and useful) for those who come after us.

Unfortunately, this makes the choice of a recording method complicated. Years ago, audiocassette tapes were used to record interviews. Today that technology is outmoded and the tapes themselves are subject to disintegration. Even the act of playing an
audiotape is fraught with difficulty. First, one must have an audio tape player, and second, the tapes are fragile and can be easily damaged (especially as they age). Even today’s most cutting edge technology (digital recordings) may well be antiquated in the future. The most important aspect of doing oral history is thus not only to record the interview, but also to create a transcript (written or typed version) of the interview after it is complete. A printed page, (along with a file on a computer) will last. And it can be read for generations.

With all this in mind, my recommendation is that participants in an oral history program should use a digital audio recorder. True, such a method means that there is no visual record of the interview, but it will provide an easy means to produce a record of the conversation. These small, inexpensive devices offer fine sound quality, and the files can be transferred on to a computer. Transcription, which is usually the more difficult task associated with conducting oral history, can be done directly from a computer, after the interview is done. Professional transcription services are also available and the files can be sent through the internet (using programs such as dropbox, yousendit, weTransfer, etc.).

Smart phones have digital audio recorders which one can use, provided one has enough memory. Digital audio recorders, such as the Sony ICD-AX412 Digital Flash Memory Voice Recorder, are available for less than $100. Before purchasing such a recorder, one should make sure that the files can be transferred to a computer, using, for example, a usb cord.

Setting Up the Interview:

When setting up an interview make sure you:

Explain the intention of your interview, i.e., to learn about the interviewee’s life experiences. You will want to note that while the interview will feel like a conversation, it will become part of an official archives. (Interviewees may choose to restrict their interviews. This option can be discussed more in depth when the need arises.)

Provide a list of several questions (or general topics) in advance. (One to two weeks are sufficient.) This is not always necessary, and some believe having a more spontaneous conversation is preferable. But allowing the interviewee to prepare and reflect on some of the general questions and topics can help the conversation. It is probably best not to provide too many questions, however. That can be overwhelming to the interviewee and make her feel like she or he must prepare well in advance. Therefore, sending out a few general questions covering the areas you wish to talk about should suffice. Just let your interviewee know that you are providing some general areas you’d like to cover. Also note that you welcome subjects and stories she or he would like to talk about as well.

Let the interviewee know that you will record the interview. Ask if for permission to do so.
Ask the interviewee if he or she will be willing to sign a release form after the interview.

Both parties should agree to the approximate length of the interview in advance. Most interviews last 1 to 1.5 hours. Let the interviewee know that if necessary there can be a second interview.

**Interviewing Question Guidelines:**

Remember that the interview is not a personal conversation. Its specific focus is to create as complete a record as possible for the benefit of others.

The style of an interview may resemble a conversation, but it is very one-sided. It is sometimes called “a guided monologue.” The interviewer is there to facilitate and encourage the interviewee to tell her or his story. The point is not an equal “exchange” of information. Remember: most people love to talk about their experiences, so conducting an interview can be a real gift.

You should let your interviewee know that you’d like her or him to feel free to introduce topics throughout the interview process. Often the narrator provides highly significant information on subjects you might never have thought of pursuing.

Shape your interview by starting the session with brief establishing questions. Then introduce easy topics and let the interviewee (also known as the “narrator” in oral history) run with them. In this way you will ease into establishing a pattern of in-depth responses and recollections. The narrator is then able to structure her or his narration of an experience in ways that indicate those factors that she or he feels are most significant or important. They will also likely overcome the natural, initial anxiety an interview can produce in some people and feel more comfortable once they have spoken at length about something they knows well.

Ask clear, brief open-ended questions requiring detailed answers, particularly at the beginning of the interview, so that the narrator will be encouraged to relax and talk freely.

When asking what might be considered sensitive questions, do not assume an adversarial role. The tone of voice and the way in which a question is phrased convey your intentions.

Ask simple questions! As a rule, try to keep your questions clearly focused. Avoid complicated multi-part questions.

Fact check through asking biographical or chronological questions. Don’t assume that you have correct information. You might want to frame a question like this: “You went to college at the University of Maryland, College Park, is that correct?”

Ask so-called “ naïve” questions; they convey to the interviewee a sort of subtext, that you are uninformed and want to know details. The rule is never to assume you know any
answer to a question you pose. So using the naïve approach is useful. Don’t say, “Was your experience in college was very important for you.” Instead, you might ask: “How do you feel about your college experience?”

The point above is related to the opposite phenomenon: the leading question. Don’t ask leading questions that suggest answers. For example, instead of asking “Wasn’t your college considered one of the best?” Ask instead: “How would you describe your college’s reputation?”

At times you might find your interviewee not answering the exact question you asked. They may veer off in another direction or not satisfy your desire to hear a given response. This is all a part of the interview. It is up to you to maintain your focus and circle back to any area you might want to learn more about when the moment arises. But you should also keep listening. Part of what happens in an interview is that information is revealed that the interviewer could never anticipate. Closing yourself off to hearing that information emerge can make for a fairly shallow interview.

You should not direct the interview as if you were directing a movie. Part of the beauty of oral history is that it is organic. You need to relinquish some degree of control as the interviewee talks.

Given a comfortable and relaxed environment, an interview can be an opportunity for you to help an interviewee recapture their own memories and original perceptions of events and experiences. While the interview can serve as a unique opportunity to summon up old memories, it can also offer the opportunity to revisit the past and articulate present feelings and perceptions of it.

Ask open-ended questions which can be developed at length by the interviewee. Remember the ideal oral history interview is a guided monologue and not a conversation. The interviewer’s unobtrusiveness and attention are essential.

Sample open-ended question: “Could you tell me about your college years?” Now that you have posed the question, listen. Don’t interrupt. Jot down follow up questions as you listen attentively to the interviewee. When a natural pause is reached you may then say, “Your recollections have brought a great number of subjects/topics to my mind that I would like to know more about . . .” Never overwhelm with multiple questions. Take your time and never convey hurry or impatience.

Remember to respect the rights of interviewees to refuse to discuss certain subjects, to restrict access to the interview, or, under certain circumstances, to choose anonymity.

**Pre-Interview Preparation:**

Prepare for the interview by finding out about your interviewee. (Look online for biographical information; etc.) You should not interview others about your interviewee prior to an interview, however.

Compile a list of topics or questions.
Provide questions or selected topics to your interviewee in advance.

Verify your appointment a day or two before the interview.

On the day of the interview, give yourself extra time to get there.

Test your equipment, make sure you have your recorder, a copy of the questions, a watch to keep track of the time, and venture forth!

**The Interview:**

Before you start recording, find a quiet undisturbed location. For example, if the recording session is taking place at the interviewee’s home, choose a room that is farther away from the street to cut down on noise created by traffic.

Never record secretly. Bring out the recorder and place it between the two of you, ideally close and equal distance to each other.

Make a test recording to make sure the recorder is working properly.

Prior to beginning the interviewer, provide a brief overview of the length, scope, etc. of the interview. Ask your interviewee if she or he has questions. Remind her that you will ask them to sign a release at the end of the interview. Tell them that you will provide a transcript to them as well.

At the start of the recording, make a brief opening announcement that specifies date and place of the interview, names of the interviewer and interviewee, and the general topic of the interview. For example:

*Today is Wednesday February 26, 2019, and this is the start of an interview with [Name] at her home at [Place]. My name is Jenny Thompson and I am the interviewer. This interview is being done in connection with [project name or class]. We’ll mainly be talking about [interviewee’s] recollection of life experiences.*

This is very useful information that can be used to identify the basic circumstances of the interview later on.

Keep the audio recorder (or video camera) running throughout the interview. Don’t turn it on and off except when asked to do so or when an interruption requires it.

Let the interviewee know that you will be going over the prepared questions but are happy to talk about any subject or question that comes up.

Start with less probing questions (see above for guidelines). Ask more probing questions later in the interview.

Learn to listen very carefully. You want the interviewee to develop in as much detail as
possible the area of inquiry. Convey your interest by establishing eye contact or nodding when appropriate.

Don’t be afraid of silence. Sometimes the interviewee needs a few moments to think and collect his or her thoughts before responding.

Don’t interrupt your interviewee as he or she talks. Let them finish their responses completely (even when they might hesitate at a given moment.)

Don’t fill in the blanks or finish a sentence as an interviewee speaks. You may not be correct in your assumption and it can derail a train of thought.

During the interview, it is fine to make notes, but try to limit the time you spend looking at your questions or adjusting the recording equipment.

Clarify names mentioned. If your interviewee mentions, “Alice” or “Rodger” ask for their full names.

Try to keep your opinions out of the interview.

If necessary, use verbal encouragement such as “This is wonderful information!” or “How interesting!” Be careful, however, not to pepper the interview with your own responses such as “uh-huh,” said at the same time that the interviewee is speaking.

Ask for definitions and explanations of words or concepts that the interviewee uses that you don’t understand.

Rephrase and re-ask an important question if necessary. Ask follow-up questions and then ask some more.

Be flexible. Watch for and pick up on promising topics introduced by the interviewee, even if the topics are not on your list of questions.

Ask for specific examples if the interviewee makes a general statement and you need to know more. “Can you give me an example?” is a great follow up. Or you might say, “I don’t understand. Could you explain that in more detail?”

Use follow-up questions to elicit more detailed information. Useful follow-up questions include: When did that happen? Did that happen to you? What did you think about that? What are the steps in doing that? What happened next?

Be prepared to let your interviewee take the discussion off in different directions. This can sometimes lead to unexpected and exciting discoveries.

Make the recording as complete and accurate a record of the interview as you can. If you are using only an audio recorder, remember that it has no visual aspect. Therefore, if the interviewee makes a significant gesture — holds her hands apart and says, “It was about this long,” for example — be sure to follow up with a question that allows the information
to be captured on the recording verbally: “So, was it about two feet long?”

Keep your interviews to agreed upon length. Have a watch or a clock handy so that you can see it without turning away from the interviewee. It is the interviewer’s responsibility to determine if the interview should be concluded because the interviewee is becoming tired or for any other reason. And don’t be afraid to check in with your interviewee during your interview. (You can ask to take up the interview again, if necessary.)

Sometimes an interviewee will need to stop the interview for a bit while she takes a phone call, uses the restroom, etc. This is fine, but just make sure you talk into the recorder, noting the break. Be careful of conversations that often start up when the recorder is not on! Sometimes an interviewee will begin telling a story during these breaks, so you will want to make sure to have the recorder back on before she continues.

Wrap up the interview with lighter talk. Do not drop the interviewee abruptly after an intense interview.

Record a brief closing announcement at the end of the interview. For example:

*This is the end of the February 26, 2019 interview with [interviewee’s name]. The interviewer was [name].*

Carefully save the recording so it can be retrieved later on. This may involve placing a copy of a digital recording on a hard drive and giving it an accession number that will allow it to be readily identified out of the other interviews made during the project.

Ask the interviewee to sign a release form. This will clearly establish that the interviewee has agreed to take part in the interview and allow the recording to be used in accordance with the stated goals of the project.

If you are with the interviewee, you might want to take a photograph at the end of the interview.

Asking the interviewee to pose for a photograph or two is a wonderful idea for closing your interview. Particularly if the interview has only been recorded as an audio file, having a photograph of your interviewee is a useful record.

**Post-Interview:**

Write a thank-you note and send it to the interviewee.

Transcribe the interview. This is always a tough job. It takes a long time to type an hour’s worth of conversation; some estimate it takes about 4 hours per hour of talking. There are services to get an interview transcribed.

If possible, provide the transcript to the interviewee and ask that she or he review it for accuracy. If you have questions or need clarification from the interviewee about some aspect of the interview, this is a good time to ask. You can then record your notes and add
it to the interview file.

Provide a copy of the interview and transcript to your school, library or other repository.

Carefully review the recording of the interview later on in order to prepare for future interviews, and improve your interviewing technique.