

Guide to Oral History Interviewing

Julia Brock, Ph.D.

jbrock2@ua.edu

Preparing for the Interview

- Identify someone whom you'd like to interview. Ask if they are willing to be interviewed and recorded for your project.
- Use your school or public library and the internet to do careful research on the topic of the interview (consult books and articles written by historians and other scholars and, if consulting the web, try to use websites that end with .edu).
- Determine a time and place for the interview—plan for up to two hours of interview time. Find a place the interviewee will be comfortable (their home, a room in the public library) and try to ensure that the space is quiet. Confirm the time and place with your interviewee by email.
- Build rapport with your interviewee before the interview by visiting them or having a phone call where you ask them about their biography. It helps you to develop questions if you know a little bit about their life beforehand.
- Write a list of 10-15 and make sure at least some of the questions are open-ended. Open-ended questions start with the phrase “Please describe...” or “Please tell me about...”
- Practice using your equipment, even if it's your phone. Make sure you know how to record on your phone, whether using the phone's built-in voice recorder function or an app you download (Voice Record Pro is a good, free app for iPhone and Android).
- Have two copies of your consent form ready to go.

The Interview

- Check equipment before you go and when you get there—if you're using your phone, bring a charger and turn your phone to Airplane mode.
- Make sure you are on time for the interview.
- Bring your question list and a pencil or pen to take notes—during the interview, you can jot down questions you may want to follow-up on and the names of people or places that you don't know how to spell (you can ask your interviewee to spell them for you after the interview).
- Bring two copies of the consent form and review it with your interviewee before the interview begins.
- Check that you have comfortable furniture and that your narrator is comfortable
- Put the recorder midway between you and the interviewee on a table to capture your questions and their answers.
- Let them know when you've turned the recording on, and, once it's on, ask if you have their permission to record.
- As you begin asking questions, make sure you are being a present listener. This means you're listening closely to what they say so you can ask follow-up questions. Listening and watching carefully also allows you to pick up on any nonverbal cues—is the interviewee getting uncomfortable in their seat? Are they getting tired? Are their memories bringing up emotions? You may need to stop the recorder and give them a break.

After the Interview

- You and the interviewee should sign both consent forms. Leave one copy with them and take one with you. Create a file for your interview at home that has a copy of the consent form (you can later add the transcript, too).

- Explain to the interviewee what happens next. If you will transcribe the interview, let them know that you will share a copy of the transcript for their review. If you will create a podcast, let them know you'll share a draft of the podcast before it's published. The interviewee has a right to control how their voice is used publicly.
- When you arrive home, save a copy of the interview audio file to your computer and a separate copy on the Cloud (like Google Drive or iCloud).
- Send a thank you email or card to the interviewee. Remind them of the value of their story.
- Send the interviewee a copy of the audio file and transcript. If making a podcast, send them a draft of the podcast before you publish. Allow them to suggest edits.