

Creating Oral Histories



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Introduction [\[edit source\]](#)

Family history interviews are a good way to capture memories before they are lost. They help you verify and preserve names and dates—the sort of information you would typically record on a family group sheet or pedigree chart. These interviews are also one of the best ways to preserve a wealth of stories, testimonies, thoughts, and feelings. The process of doing a family history interview is really very simple and you will learn it best by practicing. Most people feel very comfortable with it after only one or two interviews. This lesson will help you gain enough confidence to conduct your first interview. The information is general, and you should adapt it to your individual circumstances.

Whom to Interview [\[edit source\]](#)

Your first task is to decide whom to interview and why. You may want to interview someone who can provide information about a particular ancestor. Or you may want to do more general interviews with perhaps your oldest living relative, another member of your family, your town's oldest resident, a neighbor, or anyone who may have ties to or information about your family. You should usually conduct interviews one on one. Some situations, however, such as extended family gatherings, may provide a unique opportunity to capture the memories of several people at one time. In this sort of situation, you might simply set up your video or tape recorder and introduce a discussion topic to the

group, such as inviting them to share their favorite memories of Grandma. As the group shares their memories, individuals will tend to remember more than they would if they were interviewed alone. Keep in mind that you may not always be able to distinguish who is saying what on the recording on the group session, particularly if you only have an audio recording. And group noise may make parts of the interview inaudible. You can compensate for those disadvantages by using more than one recording device and by identifying the different voices as soon as possible after the recording session.

Expert Tip: Face-to-face interviews are usually the most effective. If the person you want to interview does not live close to you, however, a telephone interview is an alternative. See appendix A for information about various recording options. Also see Digital Sound

Before the Interview^{[[edit source](#)]}

Once you have chosen one or more people to interview, you need to ask them if they are willing to be interviewed. Explain the purpose of your interview, and what you would like them to do. You could also explain what they will get from the interview, such as a tape recording and a transcription. If they agree to an interview, you can then follow these steps:

Make an Appointment After you have decided whom to interview and that person has agreed to be interviewed, arrange a place where you will both feel comfortable and a time when you will not feel rushed. You want to find a place with minimal distractions in which to hold the interview. The interviewee's home is often a good place; it may have mementos or other objects that will spark the individual's memory. One or two hours is generally enough time for an initial interview. Some people will tire easily, however, especially those who are elderly or ill, and several shorter interviews may be more effective.

Make a List of Questions to Ask The type of questions you ask at the beginning of the interview will establish a pattern for your entire interview, so you should plan carefully. The first question or two can be simple to set the interviewee at ease. But other early questions should get the interviewee talking. Once the person is talking, you should interrupt as little as possible. The flow of speech will often generate a series of memories that will build on each other. There are generally three kinds of questions you can ask.

- **Open-Ended Questions.** *Usually the most successful interview comes when the interviewee discusses whatever is most important to him or her. You can lead an interviewee to discuss interests by asking open-ended questions, such as "What are your fondest memories of your mother?" or "How did you meet your husband?" or "What was your greatest challenge as a child?" These*

questions require more than one or two words to answer and will encourage the interviewee to talk. See appendix B for a list of sample questions.

• **Direct Questions.** A direct question evokes a short response, usually one or two words. Direct questions are appropriate if you seek specific information. For example, you might ask, “What year was Albert Smith born?” or “Who was his father?” This type of question can help you get good information, but it won’t generate the kinds of thoughts and memories that can come from an interview. They might be good introductory or concluding questions and they might help provide important contextual information, but a successful interview is usually built on open-ended questions.

Even though the best interview arises from open-ended questions, you can make a list of direct questions you hope to have answered during the interview. Your interviewee may answer them without prompting during the course of the interview. If not, the last few minutes of an interview are a good time to ask a limited amount of direct questions.

• **Object-Based Questions.** Photos, objects, and heirlooms can serve as an interesting basis for interview questions. For example, during your interview you might show a photo and ask what your interviewee knows about the people in the photo.

Be sensitive about the questions you ask. If you know a certain subject will be upsetting to the interviewee, avoid that subject or approach it carefully. Broach the subject only after you have developed sufficient rapport.

Arrange for Recording Equipment Expensive equipment is not required for oral history interviews. An inexpensive video or tape recorder and microphone are usually all you need. Test the equipment in advance to ensure that it works properly and that you know how to use it. High quality tapes will preserve your interview longer. You should also bring extra batteries or a power cord you can plug in the wall.

Expert Tip: Some people are shy of microphones. Try to obtain a microphone that can be inconspicuously placed on a table in the interview room rather than one that must be held in the hand or spoken into directly.

Make a Checklist Make a checklist of things to take to the interview, which may include:

- *Extra batteries or a power cord for your recording equipment.*
- *A label for your tape.*
- *A pen or pencil and paper for note taking and for labeling your audio or video tape.*
- *Your list of questions.*
- *Photographs or artifacts that might be useful.*
- *A pedigree chart or family group record.*

- *A release form for the interviewee to sign.*
- *A release form giving your permission to share the content of the interview (see Appendix C.)*

At the Interview [\[edit source\]](#)

At the interview be relaxed and alert. It is best not to spend too much time taking notes. Jot down what you need to remember, but for the most part you should look at the interviewee and listen carefully to what is said. The following recommendations will help you in your interview.

Be on Time You will have a more successful interview if you minimize inconvenience to the person you interview.

Set up a Good Rapport Thank the person you interview for his or her time, and spend two or three minutes chatting before you set up your equipment.

Set up Your Recording Equipment Choose a room where your interviewee is comfortable. To minimize distractions and obtain the best recording possible, avoid rooms with loud ticking clocks or other noises. You also might want to turn off any telephone ringers during the interview. Sometimes wrapping a towel around the microphone will cut down on background noise. (If you use this technique, try it beforehand to ensure it works with your recording equipment.) Be sure to test the microphone before the interview to make sure it works properly.

Record the Details of Your Interview Start your recording with your own voice. Explain who you are, who you are interviewing, what the date is, and where the interview is being conducted. For example: "This is John Doe. I am interviewing my grandfather William Doe. It is October 1, 2008, and we are at grandfather's house on 8898 South Laredo Drive in Houston, Texas." You can then test your equipment by playing back what you have just recorded.

Start Asking Your Questions During the interview itself, your job is to help your subject feel comfortable and willing to talk. Once comfortable, most people do not have any problem talking about their life experiences. As you progress with your interview, keep in mind the following points:

- ***Make a note of anything that may need clarification.*** *Instead of interrupting while your interviewee is talking, make a quick note of things you do not understand and ask for clarification later in the interview.*
- ***Stay alert for signs of fatigue.*** *If the person you are interviewing shows signs of fatigue and is not refreshed by a bathroom break or a drink of water, you may need to finish your interview at a different time.*

• **Ask final questions.** About 10 or 20 minutes before your scheduled time is over, you can direct questions you might have. Also ask about anything you feel needs clarification and how to spell the names of people and places mentioned in the interview.

• **Finish up.** Immediately label your audio or video tape. Your label should include the same information you provided at the beginning of your interview—your name, the name of the person you interviewed, and the date and place of the interview. Punch out the tabs in your audio or video tape to prevent it from being recorded over. Clear out all your equipment, thank your interviewee, and offer him or her a copy of the interview itself or a transcription. If you would like to do an additional interview, try to schedule it before you leave.

Expert Tip: Don't be concerned about getting through your list of questions. It is more important that people you interview be allowed to talk about whatever is significant to them. They know more about their life experience than you do and often are better judges of the value of their personal knowledge. Most of all, you want the interview to be a satisfying experience for the person you interview.

After the Interview [\[edit source\]](#)

Don't wait too long after the interview to make use of the recording. As time passes, you will begin to forget important details that may help you as you transcribe the recording.

Transcribe the Interview Transcription is important in safeguarding and sharing your work. Audio and video tapes become obsolete much faster than typed documents. They are easily damaged, and the quality of the recording can degrade quickly. If keeping a copy of the original recording is important, be sure to convert the recording to new technologies as they become available.

A transcription machine is helpful when you are transcribing an interview. It allows you to start and stop the recording easily while you write or type. If you do not have a transcription machine available, however, you can still transcribe the recording using normal equipment.

Written language is generally quite different from spoken language. People often prefer to see the written record of their words in a grammatical or standard form, even when they did not speak grammatically. They can become quite embarrassed if the transcription shows all their verbal pauses and false starts and stops.

As you transcribe the recording, you do not need to write down every "um" or the other kinds of sounds people make as they talk. After you have transcribed the interview, you should go through the text and edit it to remove the false starts and verbal repetitions that occur in spoken language.

As you edit, however, try to keep those elements that are unique, that make the person's voice uniquely recognizable.

Make Copies of the Interview Make copies of your interview, and store them in different locations to help preserve them in case of fire or other type of disaster. You will also need to make copies to share with others. When you make copies, use material that is durable, such as acid-free paper, so the copies will last for a long time.

Share Your Interview If you offered any copies to your interviewee, make sure you share the copies promptly. If your interviewee agrees, and you have obtained a copy of that agreement in writing (see Appendix C), you can also share your interview in many other ways:

- *Offer your transcript to your local historical society or university.*
- *Send a copy to interested family members.*
- *Publish it on a Web page.*

Expert Tip: It is extremely important that you exclude any identifying information on living individuals if you share your interview with anyone other than close family and friends, especially when the interview is shared over the Internet.

Summary[\[edit source\]](#)

There are many ways to do interviews. In fact, your interview does not even have to be conducted orally. You could set up a Web site or blog where family members can record their memories of a beloved ancestor. Or you might set a goal to e-mail a family member just one question a week in order to get to know that person better. The best way to learn how to conduct family history interviews is to practice. With a little experience, you will be able to determine what techniques and technology work best for you. Regardless of how you do it, you are sure to find the process of preserving memories very rewarding.

Additional Resources[\[edit source\]](#)

Books

Willa K. Baum. *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1987.

Gary L. Shumway and William G. Hartley. *An Oral History Primer*. Salt Lake City: Shumway and Hartley, 1973.

Websites

Cyndi Howells. Cyndi's List: Oral History. URL: <http://www.cyndislist.com/oral.htm>

Judith Moyer. Step-by-Step Guide to Oral History.

URL: http://www.dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html

L. Dale Patterson. Doing Oral History. Online: Archival Leaflet Series, the General Commission on Archives and History, the United Methodist Church. URL: <http://www.gcah.org/resources/archival-leaflets-oral-history>

Connie L. Vance. Project: Oral History Guide. URL: <sites.google.com/site/utahnorthcompany/>

[How to ask questions](#)

Printable Lessons

[How to Conduct Family History Interviews](#)

Ideas for Teachers[\[edit source\]](#)

Teaching Goals

- Help students understand how to conduct a family history interview.
- Demonstrate the skills needed to conduct a family history interview.
- Help class members learn what resources are available.

Preparing to Teach

Before you teach, you will need to:

- Have supplies to show class members what they will need to carry out a real interview. These supplies could include a tape recorder with good batteries, a tape, a list of several questions, a video recorder, or a laptop.
- Prepare a list of good interview questions (see Appendix B). Make enough copies of this list to hand out to each member of the class.
- Visit some Websites about oral interviews to see what they contain, so you can discuss with the class what the best Websites have to offer.
- Give each student a piece of paper and pencil. Ask students to write down the name of someone they would like to interview and two open-ended questions they could ask that person.
- Divide the class into groups of two. Tell each group they are going to practice interviewing one another. Ask them to come up with two open-ended questions to ask and then to interview each other for five minutes each.
- Ask the class to respond to the question “What keeps me from interviewing my family members?” Make a list of the responses, and then as a class discuss ways to overcome the identified obstacles.

Appendix A—Advantages and Disadvantages of Various Recording Equipment [\[edit source\]](#)

Equipment	Advantages	Disadvantages
Paper and Pencil	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Inexpensive.</i> • <i>Less threatening to people who are nervous about being recorded.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Impossible to record the interview wordfor–word.</i> • <i>Greater possibility of errors.</i> • <i>Does not create an audio copy of the interviewee’s voice.</i> • <i>Does not create a photo of the interviewee.</i>
Audio Recorder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Relatively inexpensive.</i> • <i>Can record the interview accurately.</i> • <i>Enables immediate playback.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Does not create a photo of the interviewee.</i> • <i>Can make it difficult to determine who is talking during group interviews.</i> • <i>Recording equipment can be intimidating to some people.</i> • <i>Recording equipment can malfunction.</i>
Telephone Recorder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Relatively inexpensive.</i> • <i>Can record the interview accurately.</i> • <i>Works well for elderly people who live far away and who do not have the energy to talk very long.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Does not create a photo of the interviewee.</i> • <i>Difficult to create the same rapport as faceto–face interviews.</i> • <i>Recording equipment can malfunction.</i> • <i>Can be illegal if one of the persons being recorded does not know that a recording is being made.</i>
Camera	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Can create visual images of interviewee as well as heirlooms.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Does not create an audio copy of the interviewee’s voice.</i> • <i>Requires additional equipment to accurately record interview.</i>
Video Recorder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Can record the interview accurately.</i> • <i>Can create visual images of interviewee as well as heirlooms.</i> • <i>Enables immediate playback.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Expensive.</i> • <i>Can be intimidating to the interviewee.</i> • <i>More difficult to transcribe.</i> • <i>Recording equipment can malfunction.</i>
Digital Audio or Video Recorder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Records in digital format, which is directly transferable to computer.</i> • <i>Enables immediate playback.</i> • <i>Can be easily edited electronically.</i> • <i>More easily transcribed, since audio and video tracks can be separated.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>More expensive.</i> • <i>Can be intimidating to interviewee.</i> • <i>Recording equipment can malfunction.</i>

Appendix B—Open-Ended Questions [\[edit source\]](#)

This is only a preliminary list of questions you can ask in an interview. The kinds of questions will vary depending on your circumstances and the person you interview. Modify the questions or add to them according to your needs. A very comprehensive listing of questions (hundreds) can be found in the article [Creating a Personal History](#).

- What is your earliest memory?
- What were some of your family's traditions?
- What was the happiest day of your life?
- Tell a story your mother or father told you when you were young.
- What places have you visited?
- What family heirlooms do you have?
- What childhood games did you play?
- Tell about a childhood hiding place.
- What were Sundays like when you were growing up?
- Describe your feelings or testimony of Jesus Christ. How did you gain that knowledge?
- What prayers have you had answered?
- Describe the most serious illness or accident that you have had.
- Do you remember any of your grandparents? Any great-grandparents? What were their names? What were they like?
- What were your siblings like?
- What trips or vacations do you remember?
- What special events took place in your neighborhood while you were growing up?
- What was your hometown like?
- What were politics like there?
- How many people were in your family? Describe each family member.
- What kinds of household chores did you do as a child? Which did you enjoy? Not enjoy?
- What aunts, uncles, or cousins do you remember? What were they like?
- Tell about family traditions for holidays and birthdays.
- Did you belong to any clubs or social groups? What were they like?
- What were your favorite childhood activities?
- Did you serve in the military? If so, where and when? What was it like?
- What special school memories do you have? Who were your favorite teachers?
- What challenges did you face as a child?
- What challenges have you faced as an adult?
- How did you first meet your spouse?
- How did your father spend his time?
- How did your mother spend her time?
- Tell about ancestors you know about—names and dates and any stories about them.
- What are the names of your children? What are their birth dates, where were they born, and what were the circumstances of their births, and their lives?
- Tell about some of the most notable people in your hometown.

- Tell about some of your neighbors as a child, as a youth, and as an adult.
- What changes have you seen in your lifetime in technology, society, politics, and so on?
- Tell about the house in which you live. Where else have you lived?
- Tell about the house you lived in during your childhood. Do you remember addresses or phone numbers?

Appendix C [\[edit source\]](#)

When recording an interview, regardless of the format being used, it is important to respect the person's personal rights of privacy. Most people will not mind you sharing the content of their interview with you. However, it is always good to make sure that you have the interviewee's permission to share their comments with others.

Below is a sample of a contractual agreement you could use when interviewing a family member. The purpose of this contractual agreement is to inform the person being interviewed that the content of their interview may be shared with others. This could be in written form, such as a written history that has been published or photocopied. Or it could be posted in electronic format on a family website on the internet.

I _____ (name of the person being interviewed), hereby give my permission to _____ (name of the person conducting the interview) to use the transcript of the interview I took part in on _____ (date the interview took place) for any purpose, including sharing the text, audio, or video recording to interested family members, historical societies, universities, or published Web pages.

Signature of person
being interviewed

Signature of person
conducting the interview