

# **Conducting an Oral History Interview**

**Kentucky Oral History Commission  
Kentucky Historical Society**

Created by Brent Bjorkman and Doug Boyd, Ph.D.

## **Pre-Interview Preparations**

1. If the interview will be part of a larger oral history project, identify the scope of the project. Think about the organizing components of the interviews you will be conducting. Limit your focus and be able to articulate a clear description of your project.
2. Conduct Library/Archival research.
3. Compile a set of core questions relevant to the scope of your project.
4. Think about the unique questions that you will use for this particular interview. Which of the core questions will you use for this interview? Create an outline for the interview. Be careful if you use a list of questions...to often this becomes a script.
5. Begin writing field notes—(Including personal expectations and hopes for the project/interview—this will carry on throughout the fieldwork process).
6. Decide who will be interviewed for your project.
7. Make initial contact with interviewee/narrator.
8. Create a checklist. Do you have everything?
  - Recorder + Cables
  - Microphone + Cables
  - Release forms
  - Paper/pencil
  - Batteries (if needed)
  - Appropriate media for recorder (Tape, Compact Flash Card, CD etc...). Do you have enough for a 4 or 5 hour interview. You probably won't need it but you may.
  - Camera (if needed)
8. Check the recording equipment before leaving home. Is it working today? Have you practiced recording on this machine?

## **The Interview**

1. Review your purpose of the interview.
2. Arrange for an optimal recording situation. Setup: locate recorder and microphone(s) in appropriate place.
3. Explain the purpose of your project, explain interviewee's relevant to you project, explain the archival donation form (to be signed at the end).
4. At the beginning of the recording, create an audible header for the interview.
5. Begin with a simple, general question: "Tell me a little bit about yourself?"
6. Ask one question at a time, keep the questions fairly simple.
7. Phrase questions in an open-ended manner, steer clear of yes-no questions. Very Important!
8. Don't interrupt; don't challenge the information being provided.
9. Write down potential questions while the narrator is talking. Take notes, but not too many notes.
10. Be an active listener.
11. Remember, this is an interview not a dialogue.
12. Don't forget your recorder, is it recording? Are the levels appropriate? Now, don't obsess about the recorder.
13. Silence during the interview is important. Why?
14. Follow up on interesting digressions. Allow yourself to be led by the interviewee to some degree. Find appropriate segues back to your topic.
15. Take note of names mentioned who could be potential interviewees for your project..
16. Close with a contemplative question such as "What one thing has affected your life down through the years? Don't be afraid to stay and chat following the interview.
17. Only one interview per medium or data file.
18. Get the release form signed.

## Post-Interview Procedures

1. Label recording in accordance with the system setup by you or the repository you are working with. If you don't have a labeling system, create one. If you've recorded to a digital file, change the filename after you have transferred recording to the computer. It is especially important to have a naming convention if you are working with digital files.
2. Fill out your interview information sheet (See sample).
3. If you are using a field diary, bring it up to date while the memory of the interview is fresh. Were your expectations fulfilled? How did they change over the course of the interview? How might you "better" conduct future interviews with this person or on this subject? What have you learned about basic human interaction as an oral historian? How did you feel about the interview?
4. Send a thank you note expressing your appreciation for their willingness to participate in the interview. Reaffirm your intentions to fulfill all promises to the interviewee (i.e. to have copies put on CD or DVD and sent back to them promptly).
5. Promptly fulfill all promises made during the interview.