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## Interviewing: Conducting Oral History Interviews

In this section, activities cover interview types and components, strategies for preparing, conducting, and debriefing for oral history interviews. Information about how to locate subjects for oral history interviews is also included. Before conducting interviews, youth should understand the context of their general research theme (page 13) and develop their history research question (page 37). Youth should also be familiar with field journal writing (page 96).

# INTERVIEWING I

## Preparing for an Oral History Interview

**Estimated Time:** 90 minutes

### **Suggested Materials:**

- Film, *Twilight in L.A.*
- Taped interview by Barbara Walters or other well known interviewer

### **Vocabulary:**

*informational survey:* Usually a standardized list of questions presented either in writing or verbally to a large number of people. For example, business owners in a district being researched can be surveyed about when their businesses were established, what kind of businesses they run, who the prior owners of their buildings were, and what kinds of other businesses occupied their location.

*records survey:* A listing, usually completed early in a research project, that identifies available source materials on a subject.

*questionnaire:* A written list of questions, presented in a logical order, with space provided for respondents to write answers.

*rapport:* A trustful relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee or subject.

### **Procedure:**

1. Provide information about different types of research (survey, questionnaire, interview). Explain that the type of research this group will conduct is a social research and is an oral history interview, which includes elements of a questionnaire (rigid sets of questions) and a life story (a loosely structured conversation about how a person interprets his/her life).
2. Discuss the value of oral interviews and suggest how interviews are used. Youth view a segment *Twilight in L.A.*, a film by actress and playwright Anna Deveare Smith. Smith interviewed over three hundred individuals with different views of the riots that took place in the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict. The actress / playwright interprets these many interviews by juxtaposing direct quotes in her own arrangement to make a one-person play. Youth take notes in their journals, looking to identify different ways of interpreting and using an oral interview. Briefly discuss Smith's use of interviews and explore any new ideas it fostered.
3. Underline for youth the importance of establishing rapport with their interviewees by explaining that it can both affect the subject's willingness to open up and the interview's efficiency. Youth historians can build rapport with their subjects by providing a brief, well-rehearsed explanation of the interview's purpose and scope as well as giving interviewees the opportunity to ask questions. Interviewers should remember to express gratitude at the interview's conclusion.



A YOUTH HISTORIAN BRAINSTORMS OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS IN PREPARATION FOR AN INTERVIEW.

4. Explain that interview management involves ensuring the topics get covered in a reasonable amount of time. Most interviews will take an hour to an hour and a half. Ask youth to create a list of topics they wish to cover as well as follow-up questions for key topics. Youth historians will need to practice doing interviews, including mock interviews with subjects who digress or give one-word answers.

5. Describe and model “closed” and “open” questions.

A “closed” question will receive a finite answer.

Closed questions start with “Who,” “When,” “Where,” and “What.”

An “open” question will receive an answer in the form of multiple responses.

Open questions start with “Why,” “How was it,” and “What was it like.”

6. Show youth historians a taped interview. For example, an interview conducted by Oprah Winfrey or Barbara Walters would work. Play the interview tape, stopping occasionally to ask students to identify the type of question (open or closed) asked by the interviewer. Assess their responses, correcting them if necessary. Students can further discuss and ask questions regarding what constitutes certain types of interview questions.

*We felt that our students did not get adequate practice watching interviews and identifying open and closed questions when we did the project initially, so we decided to add the Oprah or Barbara Walters video component to this lesson. The more exposure youth can receive regarding interviewing techniques, the more comfortable they will feel interviewing someone themselves. We felt this addition will provide the necessary practice youth need.*

7. Youth examine copies of interview transcripts and identify open and closed questions throughout.

8. Finally, the youth ask the teacher open and closed questions based on the topic of his or her family. As the teacher answers each of their questions, he or she asks the group to identify whether it is open or closed.

Some sample questions are:

Closed: What year was your mother born?

Closed: What street was the store on?

Open: How was it growing up in your town?

Open: What was it like growing up in your family?

9. As a wrap-up, ask student historians to create open and closed questions they will ask a peer interviewee in a future session.

The image shows a handwritten table on lined paper titled "Interview Questions". The table has two columns: "closed" and "open".

closed	open
where did you hang out?	what was it like? what do you remember? what kind of place was it?
what kind of ethnic groups were there?	How did you get along? How did people talk about each other?
who do you know from other groups? Did they socialize?	How was your relationship with those other groups? what was it like to socialize with them?
what did people call you? why did they call you that? <i>open question</i>	How did that make you feel?
where were you born? How old were you when you came to california?	why did your family come to california? How did your family get to california? Tell me about your childhood

### ASSESSING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Like historical inquiry questions, open-ended questions invite multiple answers, critical thinking, and in-depth investigation. Closed questions required a single answer. Have student historians create ten open-ended and closed questions to ask a peer interviewee in a future session. Using the definitions for the two types of questions as scoring criteria, have peers score the ten questions based on the number of responses for each item, i.e., single responses for closed questions, multiple responses for open-ended questions.

# INTERVIEWING 2

## Conducting the Interview

**Estimated time:** Approximately one to two hours per interview

*It is recommended that interviews do not last longer than two hours.*

### Suggested materials:

- Field journals
- Tape recorder

### Interview Procedure:

1. Youth conduct background research that will pertain to the interview.



INTERVIEWING A COMMUNITY ELDER

*The interview process is most effective when youth have done background research that can be used to construct the questions for the interviews. The more information the youth historian has to work with, the better the focus of the interview, the greater the specificity of the questions, the more likely that the interviewee will appreciate the youth's knowledge of the substance of the interview questions. If the topic is women workers in the shipyards, for example, the more a youth historian reads about the shipyards, the kind of work done, the types of ships made, etc., then the more he or she can develop an interview structure that is best suited for the interviewee.*

2. Establish a goal for the interview. Based on your knowledge of the interview subject, decide with the group what the goal of the interview will be.

### Types of Interview Goals

There are different types of goals you might have for each oral history interview. These three different approaches generate different questions in an oral interview.

#### Life Story Interview

A life story type of interview suggests the “life cycle” approach, typically beginning with place of origin up to the present (birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, etc.). For example, “How old were you when World War II started? What was it like growing up during the war?”

#### Event / Era-focused Interview

This type of interview focuses on a particular event or historical moment (such as World War II). For example, a hypothetical question might be, “Do you remember what you felt when you heard about Pearl Harbor? How did you feel toward the Japanese as a result?”

## Topic-focused Interview

This type of interview focuses on a more specific topic, such as women working during wartime. A hypothetical question for a male might be “How did you feel about so many women doing what was usually done by men before the war?” The questions noted above for the two other types of interviews would not be especially appropriate for this third type of interview.

Although it is recommended that you set an interview goal, also have an open mind and ear. It’s often what you don’t expect to hear that will be the real treasures of oral history interviewing.

A *Life Story* oral history interview might be structured in this way:

- 1. Just the Facts** – Start with factual questions about the person
  - full name
  - date and place of birth
  - occupations
  - places of residency
  - parents’ and grandparents’ full names, their dates and places of birth, occupations
  - number of siblings in the person’s family, names, birth dates, birth order
- 2. Childhood** – Begin chronologically with childhood experiences
  - location of residency
  - location and extent of schooling
  - memorable experiences as a child
  - historical events of that time
  - pastimes, friends
- 3. Daily Life** – Move on to the interview subject’s life after school
  - marriage(s), name, occupation, location, date, circumstances for meeting the person
  - children, names, dates of birth
  - moves and reasons for migration
  - involvement in political or social organizations or events
  - deaths, illnesses
  - schooling
  - military service
  - world events that affected the person
- 4. Work Life** – Obtain specifics about this major part of an adult’s life
  - subject’s major occupations with the names, locations, purposes of employment
  - responsibilities of the work, skills and training required
  - approximate dates of each job, and/or how long the job lasted
  - rates of pay and hours
  - how the interview subject got the job
  - interesting encounters, experiences of discrimination, unusual circumstances

# Advice for Conducting an Oral History Interview

## Be patient

Don't move onto a new topic until you have fully exhausted the current topic.

## Show that you are listening

Carefully organize notes in your field journal (Refer to Writing 1: Field Journals).  
Keep notes in chronological order with similar information together.  
If the interview subject changes the topic, leave space to return to the previous topic.  
Use the margin to take note of details you have questions about.  
Use the margin to write down names and phone numbers of additional contacts.  
Put asterisks (\*) or other marks next to items you want to find easily later on.

## Probe for correct and complete descriptions

Ask the subject to spell names and places.  
Ask for approximate dates and locations for every event in the person's life.  
Ask the subject to define unrecognizable terms.  
Ask for more specific details (prices, hours, distances, names of other people involved).  
Ask "how" and "why" an event happened to seek motivations and conditions.

## Sample field-note extract

*Mother's parents - mother sewed dresses, born in Jalisco between 1900 and 1904, first name Rosa. Father - Francisco Mendez, born in Colombia, arrived in Mexico 1914 to fight in Revolution, carpenter. Ran off with Rosa and arrived in El Paso, 1916.*

## Incomplete sample

*Grandmother was a seamstress and grandfather was from Colombia, and came to fight in the Revolution, then they went to El Paso.*

## Note behavior

Take note of the interviewee's behavior and/or physical demeanor when different topics are discussed. The emotional impact of an event may be difficult to express.

## Note special words

Sometimes a person will say something very powerful that you will want to capture word for word. Ask the subject to pause while you write it down if necessary. Those quotes can be extremely effective ways of getting across the essence of an experience, person or time.

*We asked one interview subject why she and her family migrated to the United States. She described how her brother had once asked their father, "Why did we leave such a beautiful place as Puerto Rico to live in the 'concrete jungle' of Oakland?" Her father responded, "Eating is a hard habit to give up." This is a very powerful way of communicating how difficult life was in 1930s Puerto Rico.*

## Review your notes

If you've missed something, go back and ask for the information before the interview ends.

## Interviewing Situations

When you conduct an oral history interview with the interviewee you are building a relationship. It may last only two hours, or this person may become central to your ongoing project and become a permanent part of your connections to this community. Always keep this in mind. You need to balance the immediate research need to get certain information from the subject with the longer-term need to develop a relationship of mutual trust and respect.

*I had specific questions about X, but she kept on going.* I didn't know how to stop her. Politely tell the informant that while her stories are very interesting, this particular project is focusing on the history of X, and since the project has a limited timeframe, you would like to go back to talking about X, for example... (next X question). On the other hand, if she is telling you an eyewitness account of a historical event that has nothing to do with your research topic, but may be a priceless piece of living history, forget your agenda until she finishes, even if you have to come back for a second interview in order to complete your research.

*It was difficult to steer the conversation. He spoke of other topics that interested him.*

Everyone wants the chance to tell his or her story and sometimes interviewees are so happy to be listened to in depth that they want to talk about everything that's on their minds. It helps to show interest and wait for the subject to finish the sentence. Then let the person know "we really need more information on X. Can you tell us..." and repeat the question. Sometimes if you repeat information about the focus of the research project and let the subject know you have been searching for the precise information they may have, it will help them to understand that what they know really is important to other people, and may help them stay on topic.

Sometimes interviewees will want to describe their philosophies of life. It is their way of trying to pass on a legacy, but it isn't usually what we're looking for, although sometimes you can get a wonderful phrase that sums up something about this person's life. If it's short, listen attentively and then say, "Let's get back to X. When exactly did you begin working at X?" or some other very factual, detailed question. In rare cases, you will have to interrupt and force your way into a subject's monologue. As long as you do so in a way that conveys interest in the human being who is speaking and do it with a pertinent question about the subject's life, the interviewee will usually not take offense.

*The interview subject began crying when she spoke of her father. I didn't know what to say.*

It's important to understand that strong emotions are part of telling one's life story. Stay relaxed and express sympathy. It may be appropriate to pause the tape recorder, but it's also fine to leave it running if the subject's tears are brief or she/he seems comfortable. When the subject is calmer, you can express sympathy and ask if they want to say more about the subject or would rather move on. Sometimes tears open up a new topic and if you convey to subjects that it's fine for them to be emotional, they may tell you stories they would otherwise have withheld.

*She answered every question with a single sentence. I couldn't get her to talk.* It's important to find ways to put the subject at ease. She may be shy, unused to recording equipment, not accustomed to thinking of her story as important, or may feel she has to pass some kind of test. She may have agreed to the interview under pressure from someone else and just want

to get it over with. She may be anxious about relatives who are undocumented and concerned about how the information will be used. If a subject seems tense or overly formal, spend a little time warming the person up before the interview. Talk about the project and mention people she may know whom you have already interviewed or plan to speak to soon. This is usually the best icebreaker. The subject will feel more at ease when she realizes people she knows have trusted you. If you are in her home, comment on the house, photographs of children, or anything you may have in common. Ask if she's ready to begin and plan to spend some time on topics that may not be central to the research but will help her to relax. If she seems reluctant to have some details on tape, pause the tape while she tells the sensitive story, and ask her when it's okay to start it again. These are all ways of showing the subject that we respect her right to control her own story, and that we're not there just to grab information and run.

## Locating Individuals for Oral History Interviews

The best way to locate individuals who have had firsthand experience in your research content area is to use the social networks that are already in place in your local community. Collaboration with your local community is pivotal for a community history kind of project to succeed.

Consider inviting several members from a major community organization, knowledgeable staff people from the local senior center, museum, historical society, or library. Ask these community experts to refer you to specific people with whom they already have relationships. It's helpful if your community experts contact the potential interview subject (by phone or by letter) to make an introduction for you and your group. Instead of striking out into a vast world of histories, build relationships through your community members.

At the Oakland Museum of California, an entire "Latino History Project Advisory Committee" was established and its well-connected members were a pivotal source for identifying individuals with extraordinary stories to tell. The members of this group also played key roles in identifying potential research topics and invaluable local resources. Please refer to the LHP Case Study for more information about advisory groups.

When several individuals have been contacted, it is a good idea to ask their permission to audio and/or videotape the interview. The Oakland Museum of California asked all interview subjects to sign an "Interview Release Form" (see sample in the Index, page 141) so that youth historians could publish quotes and other information gathered during an interview in their culminating projects.

Some of your interviewees may not be able to drive to your site, so it's important to consider transportation options. Interviews may not always be conducted at your "home base." Often, Latino History Project youth visited the homes of interviewees in teams of three: a project historian and two youth historians.

# Practice Interview Activities

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**Estimated time:** 60 minutes for each activity

**Suggested materials:**

- Field journals
- Audio recorder and tape and/or video camera (optional)

**Procedure:**

## Pair Interviews

Give the group time to develop a list of questions they would like to ask their partner. Review tips for interviewing and note taking with the group. One youth historian will then act as an interviewer and the other as an interviewee. Observe the student historians and indicate when they should switch roles. After the interviews, as a group, debrief on findings and the interviewing process itself. (Refer to Interviewing 3: Debriefing)

## Group Practice Interview

For this group interview, consider interviewing an adult who may have lived through the research era and with whom the youth feel at ease. At this time, discuss what the goal of the interview will be.

*In Oakland, our first group interview was with one of the project educators. Our interview goal was event/era-focused; we wanted to find out what the World War II experience had been like for Yolanda as a child.*

Review tips for interviewing and note taking with the group. Roles may be assigned for this practice interview. For example, one individual may conduct the interview segment about the person's childhood, another on the person's work life. This will encourage all youth to participate. It is also acceptable not to assign roles, since most interviews are very fluid and it's impossible to determine what the interview subject will want to discuss. Youth historians will need to practice this fluid style of interviewing.

As the educator, you may wish to interject appropriate questions, aid youth historians in redirecting the interview, or "freeze" the interview entirely to ask youth to consider if the interview is heading in a direction that will meet their research goals. After the interview, as a group, debrief on findings and the interviewing process itself. (Refer to Interviewing 3: Debriefing)

# INTERVIEWING 3

## Debriefing an Interview

**Estimated Time:** Approximately 45 minutes

**Suggested Materials:**

- Field journals

**Vocabulary:**

*debriefing:* A conversation between researchers in which they share information, experiences, impressions and questions raised by a particular piece of field work. This can be between a group of researchers who all shared the work or as a report to others who did not take part in it.

**Procedure:**

When the interview is over, the group participates in this critical debriefing of the interview.

*The debriefing process is imperative, since in most instances the entire research team will not be present at the interview and key information will need to be divulged to the whole group. During the Oakland Latino History Project, debriefings occurred every day. They built a sense of collaborative teamwork and kept the group progressing in a positive direction.*

1. Before any discussion takes place, ask youth historians to spend time organizing their field notes. Ask youth to:

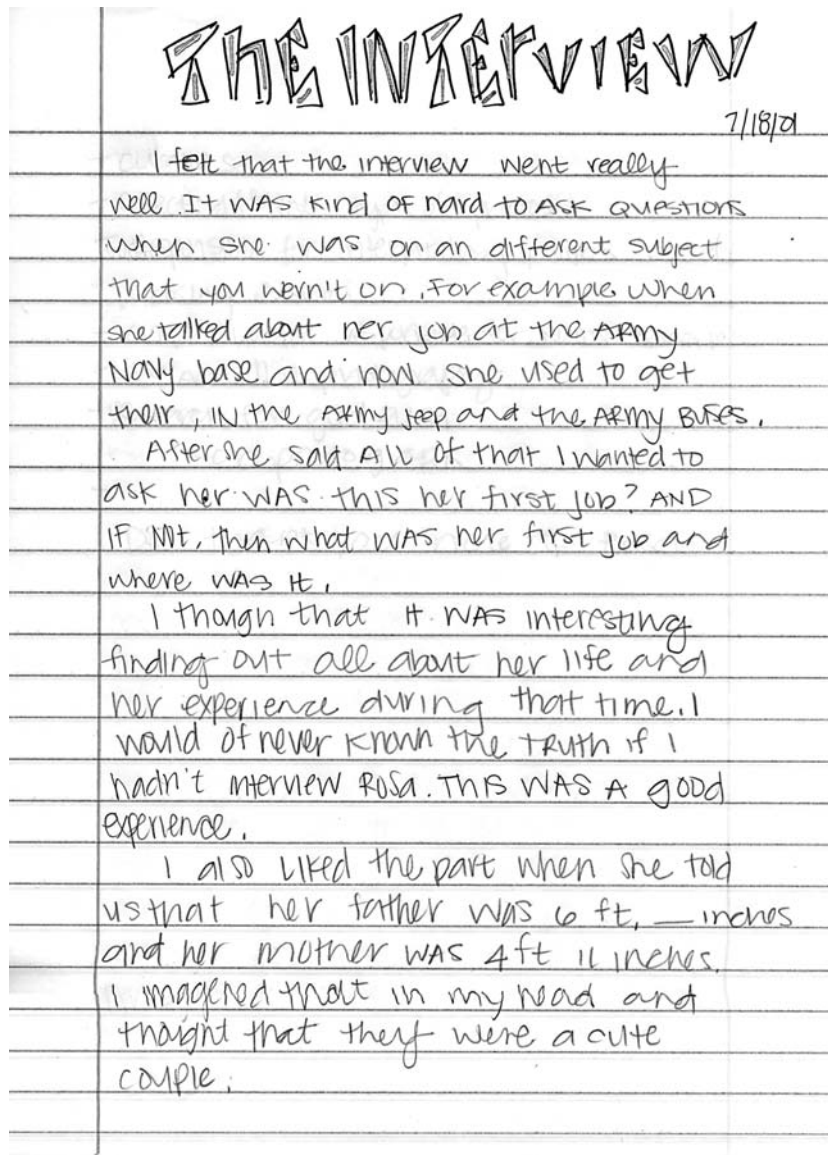
- write a short one-page narrative based on the notes they took in their journals
- highlight the new historical information that was gained in the interview
- highlight two or three parts of the interview that most intrigued them
- note questions they have — what information is still missing?
- note any new research leads

*Narrative extract:*

*Magda Calderón's (interview subject) father worked briefly in Galveston, Texas on his way from Puerto Rico to Oakland. It was more than a few weeks and less than two years, between 1934 and 1936. He worked at a hamburger stand on a segregated beach and got in trouble for serving food to people of color in spite of instructions to serve only whites. He said he would serve anyone who could pay. Health inspectors were sent to try to close the place in order to stop this.*

We don't know if the inspectors succeeded in closing the place, who exactly sent them, who owned the stand, how long he worked there, or what he got paid. But we do know the years, place, general setting, racist policies, and how he responded to them. This gives us insight into both the times and the man.

2. Begin the discussion by asking youth to share their short narratives and identifying the new information that was learned. This is a time for questions and answers between those who attended the interview and those that did not. Add new information to timelines and other on-going information records.
3. Review new questions that arose during the interview and devise group strategies for obtaining the information, including asking the questions in future interviews.
4. Critique the interview process. Discuss the effectiveness of the questions that were asked. Point out strengths and weaknesses in the interview, including characteristics of the interviewee that may have made the interview especially easy or challenging. Youth may take notes on ways to improve their interview techniques.



#### 5. Self-Assessment of Interview Debriefing: A Reflective Journal Entry

Ask youth to write a two-page reflective essay in three parts, labeling each part as a subheading.

**In Part 1**, describe your participation in the Interview Debriefing discussion. Be specific about what you did with your field notes, questions you asked and answers you provided to others' narratives, new questions you generated, or strategies you suggested for answering them.

**In Part 2**, discuss the challenges you faced in the interview process.

**In Part 3**, reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of your interview and identify ways to improve your interview techniques.