

TIPS FOR CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS

Begin your planning by being clear about what you want to learn from the interview subject and also what the interview subject has to offer. Sometimes this requires a conversation before the interview begins. Decide how you want to record the interview. One answer to one question doesn't take much to remember, but anything longer needs to be written down or recorded (tape/type/digital audio recorder/video). Ask permission to record, let the interview subject know what you are going to do with his/her words, and let them know when they are "on record" or being recorded.

The goal of an interview is to get the subject talking and telling stories about events of the past that you are interested in learning about, even if the stories are unexpected or unfamiliar to you. To make this happen, design a few solid questions to get things going. Pick a time and place that is comfortable for both you and interview subject.

Designing questions for a successful interview

Phrase your questions simply and without the use of specialized or technical language that might be unfamiliar to your subject.

Ask general questions first and then probe for richer information. Don't be upset if the interview subject takes the question in a different topic unless it is completely off topic and you have somewhere to be. Write out your questions in advance, even if it is just a list of topics. If the subject talks about things that answer other questions on your list, check them off.

Be flexible and let the interview subject tell you what he/she knows rather than trying to get every question answered the way you want. Listen and allow the subject time to get their thoughts out. Sometimes it is a good to have an ice-breaking or wrap-up question -- something fun like "what do you like most about being born when you were born?" or "what's the coolest thing you have ever owned?"

Examples of Interview Questions

You have already asked questions in response to prompts -- link: <http://www.thielmann.ca/uploads/2/4/2/6/24266342/heritage_and_story_prompts.pdf>. Any of those could be used as the basis for interview. Below are some more. Adapt these and other questions to the time period you're interested in and your inquiry questions. Probably four or five decent questions is all you will need to get a good interview going.

1. Where/when were you born? Describe your home, street, or town at the time.
2. When you were growing up, what were your favourite tv or radio programs?
3. As a young person which Canadian musician, artist, or writer did you admire most?
4. What were your favourite activities or pastimes as a youth?
5. What was your family like? (jobs, personalities, skills, challenges)
6. How did your family come to live in Canada (or at least the town you grew up in)?
7. What did you and other boys and girls wear? drive?
8. What were some events (local or global) that you remember from your childhood?
9. Did you or anyone in your family have a connection to any important local, national, or global events?
10. How did you meet your spouse?
11. How was the world different then or now?
12. Are there any special heirlooms, keepsakes, or objects that have been passed down in your family?
13. What is the story behind them? Does anyone else know about these stories?
14. Do you or anyone in the family have a connection to the military or war service?
15. Do you or anyone in the family have a connection to well-known people or events of significance?
16. What other stories or traditions have been passed down that I should know about?

Getting Started

Often the first question is just to get the interview subject talking. It is usually more important to get the subject to expand on their response than it is to keep asking fresh questions. Make it more conversational by asking follow-up questions such as:

- Can you tell me more about that? What was that like? What does that mean?
- Can you explain that? (“that” can be anything interesting that the subject brings up)
- So, what you’re saying is....? Can you explain that a bit for me?
- How did that affect....? Was that difficult for you?

Tips for the interview

Pick a quiet place and make it clear to the subject what you are doing and why, including how you are going to record the interview and what you’ll do with it. Sitting across a table often works well.

Set an end time or time limit for the interview so the subject knows what to expect, or ask them how much time they have. Don’t schedule an interview if you don’t have time to listen to full responses to your questions. Don’t just ask questions and wait for a response. Go back to questions you think should get a deeper response, and talk about what you are hearing. For example, if a subject says “we never used to worry about streams when we built logging roads back in the day” you might ask about the context (how long ago, what area of the province, what kind of streams) and why the subject thinks that happened.

Methods of recording an interview

Face-to-face: paper, type on a laptop, text memo for yourself, digital recorder or tape, phone or device with built-in recorder (audio or video), cellphone with audio or video capture, video camera, webcam. If you can, choose a method that lets you focus on the interview subject and not fool around with recording device. Regardless of your recording format, let the interview subject know what you are doing and what the information will get used for.

Remote interview: type notes from a phone call, keep records from a Skype or similar digital chat, email correspondence, ask for responses to questions in writing.

If you have an unexpected chance to talk to someone about work you are doing for the project, write or type up what you learned as soon as you can. It is probably respectful to ask “do you mind if I use this conversation as notes for my Social Studies project?”

Processing your interview

Decide what’s important from the information you gathered. If the whole conversation provides a context for something you’re trying to express, then you might want to reproduce the entire interview (e.g. a transcript or written record of the questions and answers) in your project. You may wish to edit for length, though, and focus on the unique responses that are relevant to your assignments (e.g. a quote, video clip, or summary). Either way, include some notes about how you know the interview subject, where and when it took place, and any relevant background details that establish the interviewee as a credible speaker on your topic.

Practice Safety

Occasionally, you may wish to interview someone you have never met. If you have any doubts, practice safety with strangers -- choose a public place for an interview if you have any concerns. Avoid situations and scenarios that seem inappropriate and excuse yourself promptly if you encounter danger. If your interview is by computer, practice internet safety.