

Interviewing techniques

(Adapted from *EAM Champaign County African History Committee Interviewing Techniques*
and *Oral History Outline for High School*)

Preparing for the Interview:

- *Make contact with the interviewee, but don't let them tell their stories yet!
- *If available, read biographical information about the interviewee to prepare
- *When you make contact with the interviewee, ask if they would be willing to fill out a family history questionnaire (if they have information on their ancestors)
- *Describe a little about what the purpose of the interview is and what you'll be discussing
- *If they want, send them a copy of the information you will be asking at the interview
- *Prepare the interview questions based on the person's career or vantage point
- *Become familiar with the questions – try to make sure the questions are open-ended
- *Check that you have all of your materials – tape recorder, interview questions, notebook, extra batteries (just in case), extension cord, consent form(s), extra tapes, camera (for any artifacts you want to take pictures of)
- *Practice with the tape recorder
- *Send a reminder or call about the agreed time, place of interview

During the Interview:

- *Remind the interviewee about the purpose of the interview and where the tapes will be stored
- *Explain the consent form
- *Find a good, quiet place for the interview
- *Test the tape recorder; make sure you both are heard
- *Begin the recording with the introduction on tape
- *Ask one question at a time, don't rush, and don't interrupt – try to minimize “Hmm” and “Uh-huh”
- *If the interviewee digresses, that's ok, but you can pull them back to the topic
- *Try to establish dates, locations, and names as specifically as possible – but don't check the spelling until after the interview (write these down)
- *Write down notes of other questions you have while the interviewee is talking
- *A good interview shouldn't last much more than an hour, unless you and the interviewee are both comfortable with going longer!

- *Don't correct the interviewee
- *Thank the person for their time and close while the audiotape is still recording

After the Interview:

- *Don't rush out the door!
- *Feel free to start the tape again if the conversation gets going
- *Send a thank you note
- *Label the tape and tape container

Other tips for interviewers...

1. The point of the interview is to get the narrator to tell his or her story. Limit your own remarks.
2. Open-ended questions often start with WHY, HOW, WHAT KIND OF....
3. Ask one question at a time rather than a series of questions all at once.
4. Silence is OK. Give them a chance to think of what to add.
5. You don't have to be perfect! If you fumble your words or have a problem with the tape recorder once in awhile, your interviewee might feel more comfortable.
6. If your narrator is having trouble describing people, an easy way to draw this out is to ask them to describe their appearance.
7. If your interviewee has a different account of some event than what you know of, rather than correcting them, tactfully start out with, "I have heard..." or "I have read..."
8. Try not to turn the tape recorder off and on. You want as much "on the record" information as possible.
9. Interviews usually work better if it is just you and the interviewee. Try to find a quiet location without the T.V., radio, traffic noises, etc.
10. If you find that the interview is running too long, go back a second time rather than tiring yourself or the interviewee.