



How to do your own interview

“How to Do Your Own Interview” offers basic instructions for beginners in recording audio or audiovisual life-histories. For those interested solely in audio interviewing, please disregard those points (*) in the procedures below pertaining strictly to video recording. Life histories may be recorded on analog magnetic audiotape (cassette or reel-to-reel tapes), digital audio (DAT and CD recorders), film (16 or 35 mm), videotape, or digital video.

Observe the 6 Rs:

Research | Rapport | Record | Restraint | Retreat | Review

Research

1. Talk to people who can tell you personal details about a narrator’s life prior to the actual interview.
2. Use libraries and the Internet to discover significant information about the narrator’s historical role.
3. Become thoroughly familiar with the topics you intend to pursue in the interview.
4. * Scout the location of the interview for conditions that may require special audio or video considerations. For example, a windy outdoor location may require a windscreen for microphones; a dark interior may require supplemental lighting.
5. * The interviewer and video crew should confer to decide upon a “style” or “look” of the video interview.



Masaki Miyagawa (l), sound recordist for the Frank H. Watase Media Arts Center of the Japanese American National Museum, and Interviewer Mitchell Maki (seated) look on as interview subject, Dr. Richard Kosaki, refers to a publication prior to the interview.

Rapport

1. Always be on time for the interview.
2. Keep the interview setting as comfortable as possible.
3. While the audio/video equipment is being set up, the interviewer should set the narrator at ease by engaging in conversation that explains the project, the recording process and the conventions of audio/video interviews.
4. Start with non-controversial questions.
5. Don’t interrupt a good story because you have thought of a question.
6. Do not challenge accounts you think may be inaccurate, but instead politely ask the narrator for greater elaboration and clarification.



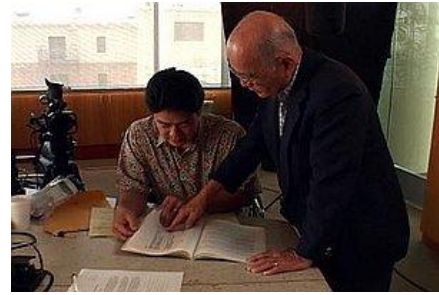
Photographs often help the subject to remember names and other details of events to be recalled during an interview.

Record

1. Always begin the interview with an introduction: name of narrator, name of interviewer, place of interview, date of interview, and name of the oral history project.
2. An interview is not a balanced dialog, a casual conversation, or a heated debate.
3. Ask open-ended questions that require more of an answer than “yes” or “no.”
4. Ask one question at a time.
5. Ask brief questions.
6. Ask follow-up questions to clarify information.
7. Ask neutral, not leading, questions.
8. Ask questions beginning with *how*, *what*, *when*, *why*, *where*, and *who*.
9. Ask about thoughts and feelings.
10. Ask for specifics of place names, names of people, and dates or context.
11. Listen carefully.
12. Use body language and eye contact to encourage the narrator’s responses.
13. Use the opportunity of tape and/or battery changes to provide breaks for the narrator. Label each completed tape, storage disk, or electronic file with details of location, date, recording conditions. “Lock” recorded tapes to prevent accidental erasure.
14. Ask the narrator to repeat a response if an answer is interrupted by a technical or environmental disturbance or if circumstances (e.g., the ringing of a telephone) indicate a more effective answer can be obtained.

Restraint

1. Don’t let periods of silence fluster you.
2. Don’t worry if your questions are not as beautifully phrased as you would like them to be for posterity.
3. * Don’t switch the camcorder off and on.
4. Don’t use the interview to show off our own knowledge, vocabulary, charm, or other abilities.
5. Avoid making your opinions and/or experiences the focus of the interview.
6. Refrain from asking questions beyond the narrator’s expertise or about things he or she will not know firsthand.
7. Politely discourage requests to turn off the recorder at any time during the interview.
8. Keep track of the time to make sure you don’t extend the interview past a reasonable limit.



While the production crew completes final adjustments of the camera and lighting elements, Dr. Maki, Acting Dean of the College of Health and Human Services at California State University, Los Angeles, (seated) briefs Dr. Kosaki on the topics to be covered in the interview.



Akira Boch (left in white shirt), videographer for the Watase Media Arts Center, has used a diffused light source to provide a flattering, soft light for the subject. To the far left of the frame can be seen a dark cloth that blocks window reflections from Dr. Kosaki’s glasses.



During the interview, Dr. Maki uses body language and eye contact to encourage the narrator’s responses.

Retreat

1. Try to avoid “off the record” information.
2. End the interview at a reasonable time.
3. Provide the narrator with a release form or copy of deed of gift to sign.
4. Restore the interview location to its pre-interview condition.
5. Take a photograph of the narrator in the interview setting.
6. Thank the narrator before departing and follow-up later with a thank you letter.



During the interview, sound recordist Miyagawa and videographer Boch continually monitor the technical quality of the recording by listening through high quality headphones and observing both the camera monitor and a larger video monitor to insure proper framing and lighting.

Review

1. Test the recording equipment by recording a few moments and then reviewing it prior to the first question to ensure that it is properly working. Recheck the recording periodically.
2. * The interviewer should occasionally look through camcorder viewfinder or at LCD monitor screen to confirm that video is consistent with framing agreed upon with the videographer.
3. After the interview is over, listen to it or watch it as soon as possible to determine its sound quality, its content, and your performance as an interviewer.

For more information on conducting interviews, consult one or more of the numerous oral history manuals in print. A very basic and especially helpful and easy-to-use one is Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan, *The Oral History Manual* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002). Also excellent but more advanced are: Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) and Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* [Second Edition, paperback] (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005).

** These instructions were developed by Arthur A. Hansen, Professor Emeritus of History and Asian American Studies at California State University, Fullerton. This page was originally published on the Discover Nikkei website in March 2005.*

Check out the new How-To Interviews page for video instructions and downloadable checklists, sample release form, and more:

<http://5dn.org/how-to-interviews>