

TIPS ON CONDUCTING ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

- Pick someone, if possible, that you'll have some point of contact with (family, shared interests, etc.)
- Do your homework (background research, basic info)
- Decide the most important things that you want to learn or record
- Prepare a list of about 20-25 potential questions, based on your background research
- Use mostly open-ended questions ("Tell me about..."; "Who, what, when were, why"; "Can you give me an example...")
- Schedule a mutually convenient time for your interview (1-2 hours), at a comfortable, quiet location
- Practice on the recording equipment you'll be using (microphone, 60-minute tapes)
- Start the interview tape with the interviewee's name, your name, the date, and the location of the interview (then play it back as a test)
- Be friendly and courteous, and be a good listener
- Let the interviewee do most of the talking
- Start with basic biographical questions
- Go from the general to the specific
- Don't hesitate to ask for clarification but don't get bogged down in details
- Look for colorful, personal experiences, the kind of information that isn't in history books
- Sometimes photographs will spark interesting stories
- Be flexible – follow up interesting stories, but don't get too dragged around
- Learn from your mistakes!
- Send a thank-you letter
- Consider transcribing or indexing the interview

STARTING POINTS FOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

When and where were you born?
Who were your parents and where did they come from?
How did they make their living?
What do you remember about your grandparents?
What are your very earliest memories?
How do you remember your early childhood?
Tell me about the house you grew up in.
What were your first school experiences?
Tell me about a typical day at school.
Tell me about your favorite teacher.
What did you do after school?
How did your family spend vacations or have fun?
What did you usually eat for breakfast, lunch, dinner?
What was your favorite food?
Who was your best friend and what did you do together?
How did world events (wars, depressions, etc.) affect you and your family?
Did you experience any natural disasters while you were growing up?
What did you and your friends do for fun? (sports, picnics, movies, fairs, etc.)
What did you usually wear for everyday clothes?
What would you usually get dressed up for and what did you wear then?
What was Austin like when you were growing up?
How did you make spending money as a young person?
What was your favorite, most precious possession as a child?
Did you have pets in your family and what were they?
What happened when you (or brothers/sister) got into trouble?
What did you (and your parents) do when you were sick?
How did you meet your spouse?
What did you do while you were courting?
What were your favorite radio programs?
How did you decide on your chosen career?
What was your first job?
Describe your first boss.
Have you had any interesting experiences with famous people?
What is your favorite holiday and what memories does it bring back?
How did you spend your first Christmas (or other holiday) away from home?
Describe your volunteer activities.
What cities/countries have you traveled to?
Of what are you the most proud in your life?
Tell me about your children, who they are, and what they're doing.
What hobbies have you had?
What is the biggest change you've seen in your lifetime?
Did your life turn out the way you thought it would?