

WHITEHEAD MEMORIAL MUSEUM



WHITEHEADMUSEUM.ORG

HOW TO CONDUCT YOUR INTERVIEW

1. Obtain consent – be sure the interviewee understands why this interview is important and what your plans are once the interview is completed. Make sure the Oral History Agreement Form.
2. Before the interview, test your recorder and sound level.
3. Whether you use an audio or videotape, you want to be sure to identify your project. Speaking clearly, say, “My name is _____ and, I am interviewing _____ on the topic of _____.
The time is _____ a.m./p.m. and the date is _____.
4. Begin with simple questions, such as those relating to the narrator’s background. Cover the material chronologically wherever possible, as this is the way most people best remember events. Go through your list of topics, without interrupting the narrator or disturbing the flow of the interview. As new questions or areas of interest emerge, jot them down for follow-up.
5. Consider whether the interview should be transcribed and who will do the work—yourself or a volunteer.

SAMPLE FAMILY HISTORY OUTLINE

Early Childhood and Family Background

- Parents and Family
 - Ask when and where they were born and then start off with a general question: “Tell me about your parents” or “Tell me about your family background”
 - Where was family originally from? What do they know about that place? Have they ever visited it?
 - What stories did they hear growing up about earlier ancestors whom they never knew?
 - What parents did for a living? As a child, did they contribute to the family income or help parents in their work in any way? What was parents’ religious background? How was religion observed in their home?
 - What were parents’ political beliefs? What political or other organizations were they involved in? What other relatives did they have contact with growing up?
 - What do they remember about their grandparents?
 - Describe their siblings and their interactions with when they were young. What did they do together? What conflicts did they have? Who were they closest to?
 - Describe the house they grew up in. Describe their room.
 - What were family’s economic circumstances? Do they remember any times when money was tight? Do they remember having to do without things they wanted or needed?
 - What were their duties around the house as a child? What were the other children’s duties? How did duties break down by gender?
 - What skills did they learn (e.g., cooking, carpentry, crafts) and who taught them? What activities did the family do together?
 - Any special food they remember from their childhood? Do they currently make any traditional family foods?
 - What did they do on Christmas? Thanksgiving? Birthdays? Other holidays?

- B. Community Grew Up In
 - Describe the community they grew up in and especially their own neighborhood.
 - Races and ethnicities in neighborhood, what people did for a living, class differences.
 - Where did they shop? What was the largest town or city they remember visiting when they were young and what were their impression of it.
- C. Early Schooling
 - Description of school they attended. What was school like for them? What did they like about it? What was hard about it?
 - Friends. Favorite teachers.
 - Favorite subjects.
 - Special activities.
 - Discipline.
 - Any teasing or bullying.
- D. Friends and Interests
 - What did they do in their spare time?
 - Who were their friends and what did they do when they got together?
 - Hobbies? Favorite stories? Favorite games or make-believe?
 - What did they want to be when they grew up?

Teenage Years

- Changes in Family
 - How did relationship with parents change when they became a teenager?
 - Additional responsibilities, chores?
 - If they had conflict with parents, what was it over?
- School
 - Favorite subjects? Particular interests?
 - Least favorite subjects?
 - Memorable teachers? Describe their teaching style. How did they influence them?
 - Different groups in school? Which did they belong to? How do they think they were perceived by others?
 - Extracurricular activities.
 - What were their plans when they finished school? Education? Work?

- What did their parents think of their plans? What did their friends plan to do?
- Did the boys and girls in the family have different plans/expectations?
- Work
 - Jobs during teenage years.
 - Contributing to family income? If not, how spent money?
- Social Life and Outside Interests
 - Who were their friends and what backgrounds did they come from? What did they do together?
 - Age began dating? Kind of activities? Describe first date. Parents' advice/rules related to dating/contact with opposite sex? Advice from church or school? Peer group's norms with regard to dating and relationships?
 - Hobbies/interests? Books read? Music listened to? Sports played? Crafts participated in?

Adulthood

- Further Education
- Marriage or Formation of Significant Relationships
 - How met. What drew them together?
 - Describe decision to marry/move in together.
 - What was most difficult being in a relationship originally? What was most satisfying?
 - Changes in relationship?
 - Break-ups, divorces, deaths?
- Employment
 - Who worked in the household and how did they support the family?
 - Specifics of their employment: positions they held, duties, part-time employment or self-employment.
 - Difficulties and stresses on the job/Rewards.
 - Balancing work and family
- Children
 - Describe the birth of children.
 - What they were each like when they were young. How they have changed or not changed.
 - Relationships with when young and now
 - What activities did the family do together?
 - Family traditions.

- What was most satisfying to them about raising children? What was most difficult?
- What values did they try to raise their children with? How did they go about doing that?
- What forms of discipline did they use and why?
- Church, political and other involvement: specifics of, reasons for and passions behind.
- Ongoing interests and hobbies

Overview and Evaluation

- What has provided them the greatest satisfaction in their life?
- How would they say the world has changed since they were young?

In addition, don't forget to ask people about historically significant events they lived through:

How was their family affected by the Depression?

Did they or anyone close to them serve in World War II and what do they remember of that experience?

Did they support or were they opposed to the war in Vietnam or the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and how did they express their political opinions?

Did they participate in or do they have any memories of any of the movements that came out of the fifties, sixties, and seventies—the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, the gay liberation movement, and so forth?

If the interviewee belongs to a group that has traditionally been discriminated against, ask them what they were told, both positive and negative, about their group inside their family and outside of it. Ask them about discrimination they experienced and also who their role models were.

If the interviewee is an immigrant or their parents or grandparents were immigrants, ask them to describe what they know of the country they came from, why they immigrated, how they immigrated, and the specifics and difficulties of beginning a life in a new country. Do they remember their first contact with such significant inventions as radio, television, personal computers, etc.? When did their family first buy them and how did the family use them?