

Family History Center - Story Room

How to Conduct a Successful Interview.

Preparation

Family history interviews are a good way to capture memories before they are lost. They help you verify and preserve names and dates — the sort of information you would typically record on a family group sheet or pedigree chart. These interviews are also one of the best ways to preserve a wealth of stories, testimonies, thoughts, and feelings.

A. Before the Interview

Make a List of Questions to Ask. The type of questions you ask at the beginning of the interview will establish a pattern for your entire interview, so you should plan carefully. The first question or two can be simple to set the interviewee at ease. But other early questions should get the interviewee talking. Once the person is talking, you should interrupt as little as possible. The flow of speech will often generate a series of memories that will build on each other. There are generally three kinds of questions you can ask.

1. **Open-Ended Questions.** The most successful interview typical comes when the interviewee discusses whatever is most important to him or her. You can lead an interviewee to discuss interests by asking open-ended questions, such as “What are your fondest memories of your mother?” or “How did you meet your husband?” or “What was your greatest challenge as a child?” These questions require more than one or two words to answer and will encourage the interviewee to talk. See *Below* for a list of sample open-ended questions.
1. **Direct Questions.** A direct question evokes a short response, usually one or two words. Direct questions are appropriate if you seek specific information. For example, you might ask, “What year was Albert Smith born?” or “Who was his father?” This type of question can help you get good information, but it won’t generate the kinds of thoughts and memories that can come from an interview. They might be good introductory or concluding questions and they might help provide important contextual information, but a successful interview is usually built on open ended questions.
1. **Object-Based Questions.** Photos, objects, and heirlooms can serve as an interesting basis for interview questions. For example, during your interview you might show a photo and ask what your interviewee knows about the people in the photo.

Even though the best interview arises from open-ended questions, you can make a list of direct questions you hope to have answered during the interview. Your interviewee may answer them without prompting during the course of the interview. If not, the last few minutes of an interview are a good time to ask a limited amount of direct questions.

Be sensitive about the questions you ask. If you know a certain subject will be upsetting to the interviewee, avoid that subject or approach it carefully. Broach the subject only after you have developed sufficient rapport.

Make a Checklist. Make a checklist of things to take to the interview, which may include:

1. Your list of questions.
2. Photographs or artifacts that might be useful.
3. A pedigree chart or family group record.

B. During the Interview

During the interview be relaxed and alert. It is best not to spend too much time taking notes. Jot down what you need to remember, but for the most part you should look at the interviewee and listen carefully to what is said. The following recommendations will help you in your interview.

1. **Be on Time.** You will have a more successful interview if you minimize inconvenience to the person you interview
2. **Record the Details of Your Interview.** Start your recording with your own voice. Explain who you are, who you are interviewing, what the date is, and where the interview is being conducted.
3. **Start Asking Your Questions.** During the interview itself, your job is to help your subject feel comfortable and willing to talk. Once comfortable, most people do not have any problem talking about their life experiences. As you progress with your interview, keep in mind the following points:
4. **Make a note of anything that may need clarification.** Instead of interrupting while your interviewee is talking, make a quick note of things you do not understand and ask for clarification later in the interview.
5. **Stay alert for signs of fatigue.** If the person you are interviewing shows signs of fatigue and is not refreshed by a bathroom break or a drink of water, you may need to finish your interview at a different time.
6. **Don't be concerned about getting through your list of questions.** It is more important that people you interview be allowed to talk about whatever is significant to them. They know more about their life experience than you do and often are better judges of the value of their personal knowledge. Most of all, you want the interview to be a satisfying experience for the person you interview.
7. **Ask final questions.** About 10 or 20 minutes before your scheduled time is over, you can direct questions you might have. Also ask about anything you feel needs clarification and how to spell the names of people and places mentioned in the interview.
8. **Finish up.** Immediately label your audio or video tape. Your label should include the same information you provided at the beginning of your interview — your name, the name of the person you interviewed, and the date and place of the interview.

C. After the Interview

1. **Make Copies of the Interview.** Make copies of your interview, and store them in different locations to help preserve them in case of fire or other type of disaster. You will also need to make copies to share with others. Be sure to pick up the instruction handout of how to make copies to a DVD from your flash drive, which is available at the library.
2. **Share Your Interview.** If you offered any copies to your interviewee, make sure you share the copies promptly. When recording an interview, regardless of the format being used, it is important to respect the person's personal rights of privacy. Most people will not mind you sharing the content of their interview. However, it is always good to make sure that you have the interviewee's permission to share their comments with others.

A Great Place to Begin - Open-Ended Questions

This is only a preliminary list of questions you can ask in an interview. The kinds of questions will vary depending on your circumstances and the person you interview. Modify the questions or add to them according to your needs.

- Tell me about When and Where you were Born.
- What are the Names and Birthdates of your Mother and Father?
- Tell me about your 1st memory with your mother, what was she like?
- What is your earliest memory with your father, what was he like?
- What were some of your family's traditions?
- What was the happiest day of your life?
- Tell a story your mother or father told you when you were young.
- What places have you visited?
- What family heirlooms do you have?
- What childhood games did you play?
- Tell about a childhood hiding place.
- What were Sundays like when you were growing up?
- Describe your feelings or testimony of Jesus Christ. How did you gain that knowledge?
- What prayers have you had answered?
- Describe the most serious illness or accident that you have had.
- Do you remember any of your grandparents? Any great-grandparents? What were their names? What were they like, Where were they born and lived?
- What were your siblings like?
- What trips or vacations do you remember?
- What special events took place in your neighborhood while you were growing up?
- What was your hometown like?
- What were politics like there?
- How many people were in your family? Describe each family member.
- What kinds of household chores did you do as a child? Which did you enjoy? Not enjoy?
- What aunts, uncles, or cousins do you remember? What were they like?
- Tell about family traditions for holidays and birthdays.
- Did you belong to any clubs or social groups? What were they like?
- What were your favorite childhood activities?
- Did you serve in the military? If so, where and when? What was it like?
- What special school memories do you have? Who were your favorite teachers?
- What challenges did you face as a child?
- What challenges have you faced as an adult?
- How did you first meet your spouse?
- How did your father spend his time?
- How did your mother spend her time?
- Tell about ancestors you know about — names and dates and any stories about them.
- What are the names of your children? What are their birth dates, where were they born, and what were the circumstances of their births, and their lives?
- Tell about some of the most notable people in your hometown.
- Tell about some of your neighbors as a child, as a youth, and as an adult.
- What changes have you seen in your lifetime in transportation, technology, society, telephone, television, price of gasoline, soda pop and so on?

- Tell about the house in which you live. Where else have you lived?
- Tell about the house you lived in during your childhood. Do you remember addresses or phone #s?
- Share with us the story about a special pet that you once had that you don't have any more?
- Tell us about a time when you got into trouble for something you had already been told not to do?
- Share with us a story about a party or date that you didn't want to go on to begin with?
- Can you remember a night your parents never found out about?
- Can you remember a time when you got lost or separated from your companion?
- Do you recall a time when you're first impression of someone turned out to be completely wrong?
- Tell us about the first place you remember living.
- Tell us about a trip to a favorite relative's home
- Take us with you when you had to move from home to another.
- Tell us about a time you are embarrassed at school (or any other place).
- Share with us a story of a very special childhood holiday?
- Can you take us to a special place where you like to go for walks or for picnics
- Tell us something about a neighbor you had when growing up.
- Introduce us to the oldest person you can remember knowing when you were a child.
- Can you tell us about an early friend whom you have continued to know all your life?
- Can you tell us about a teacher that had an impact on your life
- Can you introduce us to a girlfriend or boyfriend whom you did not marry?
- Can you remember the first person you ever had a crush on?
- Can you tell us about a person at whose home you sometimes spent the night?
- Can you tell us about one of your grandparents?
- Can you introduce us to someone at your class reunion?
- What did your grandfather's do for a living? Did your grandmother's work?
- Tell about your parents philosophy of raising kids.
- Do you remember your great – grandparents? Tell us about them.
- Tell us about an experience that taught you a valuable lesson.
- Tell us about when you first met your in laws.
- Describe your yard as a child. What special memories happened there?
- Tell us about a day in junior high school?
- Did you have a television when you were a child? Did you have a favorite show?
- Can you take us to your hometown at Christmas time?
- Did you participate in sports, music or drama in high school? Tell us about it
- Describe the most serious illness you have had, and what happened.
- What was your favorite place to go with your spouse and kids?
- Tell us about how and when you learned how to drive? Any funny experiences?
- Tell us about your first paying job
- Tell us about your favorite aunt or uncle.
- Tell us about a special memory of one of your best friends.
- On Halloween, did you do more tricking or treating?
- Are there any special experiences that you had that you would like to share?
- Share with us any extreme challenges you faced in life.
- Tell us about when and where you gained your testimony.
- Share your Testimony with us and any counsel you would like to offer.
- Is there anything else you would like to share before we close our interview...
- Please share with us a Closing Statement to your family.