The ERA Debate: Creating Oral Histories

Creating Oral Histories

The following guidelines were adapted from guidelines prepared for use by staff in Special Collections at Georgia State University.

PRE-INTERVIEW PREPARATIONS

Pre-interview telephone call / meeting with interviewee

- Provide a background of the project and briefly describe what an interview might entail, as well as the interviewee’s rights. If the interviewee agrees to do the oral history, have them sign the consent form so that our class can listen to the Oral Histories.

- You should review the topics you want to cover and explain what an Oral History is.

- A general explanation of the Oral History could be:

  - Oral history is a one-on-one interview that is meant to document the history of a person, organization, movement, or event. It is different from an interview conducted by a journalist. The oral history interview is meant to fill gaps in the written record. It is more of a life history.

  - We will listen to your interview in our class; it will not be shared with the general public.

  - Oral histories are important because they contribute to our knowledge of history.

Discussing where the interview is going to take place

- Let the interviewee know that you have to avoid kitchens (clicking appliances), and avoid rooms that are close to the street. If windows are normally open, you will ask if they can be closed during the interview. Dens or living rooms that are carpeted work best. Ask the interviewee to turn off or silence phones, ensure pets are removed from the vicinity, and avoid having guests or visitors. If you’re interviewing a neighbor or someone outside of your family, you should ask your parent or guardian to sit with you during the interview.
PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Background research

- You should do some research on your chosen historical topic.
- Use this information and what you know about the interviewee to guide the questions you will ask the interviewee.
- Plan the time and place of the interview.
- Gather together bottles of water and tissues for the interviewee to use during the interview.
- Prepare your equipment.

EQUIPMENT

- You can use a laptop, a hand held recorder, a cell phone or anything else that will create a file you can send to your teacher. If you do not have access to this equipment, speak to your teacher about making accommodations.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

- Make sure that the interviewee is comfortable.
  - Give them water and place tissues within reach.
- Listen and maintain eye contact
  - Oral history is a very special experience. Very few times in our culture are we listening so intently to someone else. Listening is important.
  - Try to remain focused on the person, instead of taking notes or checking the equipment.
  - Before the interview begins, tell the interviewee that you may look down at your notes from time to time, but that you are still listening.
  - Also, explain that you want them to enjoy being interviewed and that if, at any time during the interview, they do not want to answer a question, they just have to tell you that they would rather not
  - Try to avoid interrupting or verbally responding too much:
    - Nod instead of saying, “right, right” or “yes, interesting” so that there isn’t a crossover of voices on the recorder.
- If you need to ask a clarifying question, wait until the interviewee has finished their thought.

- Ask open-ended questions

- “Do you remember” versus “when did x take place,” or, so that the interviewee distinguishes between stories the interviewee has been told or what she/he has read, and what she/he actually experienced.

- “What was the experience like” versus “Were you ever discriminated against?”

There are different ways to ask the same question

- Stay on track…

- Keeping in mind the purpose of the interview, let the interviewee “roam” a little. You don’t want to lose an interesting aside, so let the interviewee finish their aside and then get them back on track.

- Silence is okay and can be important.

- It’s okay to have a long pause, if someone is thinking. This is sometimes hard to maintain, but don’t rush to move on to another topic right away if you think that someone has more to say.

- It’s okay to take breaks.

- Breaks can be edited from the transcript and/or recording – this is not a live interview. Explain this to the interviewee ahead of time.

- If you need to use the restroom, get a drink of water, or have to cough, etc., stop the recorder and resume when you can.

- Periodically, ask the interviewee if she needs to take a break – usually after an hour of talking.

- Personal questions help people get back memories,

- so it is ok to start with basic background questions if the interview is meant to be about a particular event or movement, instead of personal lives.

- Personal stories can be good ice breakers.

- Thank your interviewee after the interview!!!