

Selecting interviewees

Oral history interviewees have had first-hand experience related to the project topic. They were the doers of the experience or the eyewitnesses to the event.

- ◆ Locate interviewees
 - through your research on the topic;
 - by word-of-mouth, from advisors familiar with your project;
 - through notices in local news media publicizing the project;
 - during public events related to the topic (i.e., museum exhibits, town meetings, lectures);
 - through organizations related to your topic (i.e., veterans groups, political parties, neighborhood associations, professional organizations); or
 - through the “snowball effect” as one interviewee recommends another.
- ◆ Aim for a representative sample of people who can share insights from various perspectives. For example, for a project focusing on the World War II home front in your town, seek men and women who lived there during the period of 1942 to 1945. Choose representatives of various viewpoints, including people from the diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and socio-economic groups who made up your town during the war years. Include people who lived through those times at different life stages; in other words, in addition to people who were adults during the war years, also locate informants who were children or teenagers then and who can provide the perspective of a younger generation.

Maximize the interview experience

- ◆ *By getting to know your interviewee.* Whenever possible, visit with interviewees before the actual recording session to assess the extent of their experience with the topic, their recall ability, and their physical stamina. You may need to adjust your outline because they have limited or very specific experience with the topic or remember some things better than others. You may decide to stimulate their memory recall with some visual clues, such as maps or photographs. You may conclude that several brief interviews will accomplish more than a single long one because they tire easily.
- ◆ *By encouraging your interviewee.* For reluctant interviewees, explain why you think their personal accounts are important to the overall project. Assure them that oral history allows them to speak for themselves. Begin with simple, direct, open-ended questions and give them plenty of time to respond.
- ◆ *By interviewing one person at a time.* Set a project policy that interviewees will be interviewed one on one and inform interviewees of the policy when scheduling the interview. The policy provides justification to ask interviewees for individual attention and to request that others leave the room when the interview begins. The presence of an additional person may discourage probing questions and inhibit candid responses. One person may answer for, disagree with, or disparage the other, causing the preferred interviewee to retreat into silence. The unexpected participant may usurp the interviewer’s role by asking questions and guiding the discussion. Group interviews raise additional difficulties for transcribing the session and limit potential uses of the recordings in productions.

When necessary, partner or group interviews can be made successful with a few ground rules: the interviewee must agree to the guest’s presence; the guest must sign the legal-release form; the interviewer will address each question to one person, who alone responds; and no one will speak for or speak over another. Interviewers may want to request a follow-up one-on-one interview with the central narrator.

In the event two interviewers come together to question one interviewee, they should ask the interviewee’s permission to do so and agree at the outset who will operate the recording equipment and who will pursue which topics. The dual interviewers must listen carefully so as to not repeat a question and, of course, must never interrupt each other.