Composing questions

Compose questions on the spot from your topic list, adapting the questions to the narrator’s individual experience with the topic.

- **Ask open-ended questions.**
  - Tell me about . . .
  - Why . . . ? Why not . . . ? How . . . ?

- **Probe for details.**
  - Describe . . .
  - Explain . . .
  - How often . . .
  - Tell me more about . . .

- **Avoid loaded and leading questions** that reveal your biases and suggest you have already formed an opinion of what the answer might be.

  Not: Wasn’t Sandtown a poor, hard place to grow up in?
  *But:* Tell me how you felt about the place where you grew up.

  Not: You all moved to Sandtown because it was the only place you could afford, right?
  *But:* Why did your family come to live in Sandtown?

  Not: I assume your family, being Mexican, was always Catholic, wasn’t it?
  *But:* Tell me about the role of religion in your family life.

- **Restate or summarize.**
  - You said . . . Tell me more about that.
  - Let me say that back to you and see if I understand. You said . . .

- **Ask for definitions and clarifications.**
  - Tell me what . . . means.
  - What is . . . ?
  - I know what . . . is, but future generations may not. Please tell me what a . . . was and how it was used.

- **Follow up.**
  - What else . . . ? Who else . . . ? What other reasons . . . ?

- **Turn things around.**
  - Some people say . . . What do you think about that?

Also,

  - **Ask one question at a time.**
  - Be prepared to get off the topic, then gently bring the narrator back to the subject.
  - Use the silent question. Keep quiet and wait.
  - Close with a thought question.
  - End with an expression of appreciation.