

## Focusing & researching a topic

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### *Select a topic that*

- ◆ fits the mission of the organization or individual researcher;
- ◆ interests the organization or individual researcher;
- ◆ can be readily researched;
- ◆ matches with available narrators;
- ◆ can be completed in the allotted time;
- ◆ has potential for providing otherwise undocumented information; or
- ◆ has potential for confirming existing information.

### *Focus the topic.*

- ◆ A topical focus highlights a single subject of historical interest, such as an event, a time era, an issue or idea, an organization, a place, a skill or occupation. Several narrators may share their memories and distinct viewpoints on the subject.
- ◆ A biographical focus concentrates on the life experiences of an individual. Such life history projects may gather the subject's reflections on his or her life over several recording sessions, and they may include interviews with multiple generations of one family or selected representatives of a particular group who knew the individual.
- ◆ Some researchers collect oral traditions, including legends, folklore, and family stories passed down through the generations. When gathering oral tradition, document also the storytellers' accounts of how they received the tradition, from whom, when, where, and why.

### *Research the topic.*

#### *Why?*

- ◆ To locate the story within its historical context
- ◆ To learn what is already known and where there are information gaps
- ◆ To learn more about the person to be interviewed
- ◆ To uncover details previously undocumented, contradictory, or forgotten
- ◆ To establish rapport with the narrator
- ◆ To create informed questions that prompt storytelling
- ◆ To create follow-up questions that encourage detailed responses
- ◆ To clarify names of people and places mentioned in an interview
- ◆ To keep the story on track

#### *Where?*

- ◆ Libraries, archives, and local historical groups
- ◆ Public records: deeds, probate records, map collections, military records
- ◆ Organizations affiliated with the narrator (for example: schools and colleges; religious organizations; professional associations; military, social, service, and community organizations)
- ◆ Private collections, including photographs and mementos
- ◆ Newspapers; chronologies of the time
- ◆ A pre-interview visit with the narrator may yield useful research materials.

#### *When?*

- ◆ Before an interview (to prepare)
- ◆ Between interviews (to clarify and verify)
- ◆ After an interview (for validity and accuracy)