

Interviewing Pointers and Strategies

Interviewing is both a craft and an art. There are strategies you can learn to become a good interviewer. However, the best interviewers also draw upon their own abilities to be able to talk to people, make them feel comfortable and open up about their experiences, thoughts and experiences. If you are shy or nervous, don't worry. This is probably the first time your subject has been interviewed and they're nervous as well. You'll find that once you get started, things tend to open up, as the person gets comfortable in the conversation. And last of all, remember, like all arts and crafts, these skills develop through experience.

In Preparation for the Interview:

1. Make a contact with the person. Explain your project, why you are doing it, what's behind it. Select a place to interview them where they will be comfortable but it will be quiet enough to get a good recording. A busy Starbucks might not be the best place; a quiet space in a local library might. Or perhaps they would feel most comfortable in their own home.

2. Find out as much as you can about the person you are interviewing in advance. If you are interviewing a Haitian immigrant, for example, research what's been happening in Haiti in the last few years. What was it like there? What might they have dealt with in Haiti that might have influenced their decision to come here? If you are interviewing a person who works with a community-based organization, find out what the organization does. The more background you have about the person/things they have been involved with/what they have experienced, the better. This will help you come up with substantive questions as well as perhaps help you to get to know the person a bit before you interview them. We are all influenced by factors larger than our own family, our own block...think about Hurricane Sandy or the war in Iraq or Afghanistan if someone in the family was a soldier. Are they dealing with rising rents and development in their neighborhood? Are they worried about the results of the presidential election? We all have our own personal stories but they are also affected by larger events. How do they affect this person's life? What are their thoughts/insights/fears about them?

3. Come up with a strong list of questions. They should include specific factual questions but also open-ended questions that require thought and allow the interviewee to share their insights. Try to avoid yes/no questions. ("Do you like living in your neighborhood?") because they stop the flow of conversation. Rephrase them ("What do you think about living in your neighborhood?") Open-ended questions leave room for nuance instead of forcing people into yes/no dichotomies.

4. Put the list of questions in a logical order—for example chronological: starting with their own growing up, their family, the neighborhood they grew up in,

immigration (if they immigrated) and why they came here, etc. You want the interview to feel like a regular conversation, the way we all get to know people. This helps the interviewee feel more comfortable and to open up, rather than having the conversation jump from subject to subject. If you are going to get to larger questions about their fears about losing their health care, for example, you need to establish who they are and what their life is like first...and then lead up to more challenging questions.

At the Interview:

5. When you get to the place where the interview is going to be conducted, test your recorder. You want technology to be your friend not your enemy.

6. Chat a little and then introduce yourself and how you got involved in the Brooklyn College Listening Project and perhaps the project that your class is involved with. Explain the ideas behind the BCLP and why it is important. Go over and have her/him fill out the Consent Form and each of you fill out your own Deed of Gift Forms. If your interviewee agrees to a photograph, have her/him fill out a Photo Release Form.

7. Then jump in to the interview. You may want to have your interviewee introduce him/herself. It's a nice way to start the recording.

8. Use your list or questions as a guide but don't follow them in lock step. Let the conversation flow where it goes. You can always go back to the questions you missed. Even if you know the answer to a question, ask it anyway. (This may be true if you are interviewing a family member or someone you know well.) An oral history is your interviewee talking about their life in their own voice, their own way of speaking. You know they have two sisters and two brothers. What was it like growing up in the family right in the middle, for example? You know they grew up in Sunset Park. What was the neighborhood like when they moved there? What were their first impressions? What was it like growing up there?

9. Ask follow-up questions. People who have never been interviewed before tend to respond with short answers. They're shy or uncomfortable or they don't think their life is that interesting. But as a good oral historian, you shouldn't be satisfied with generalities—you want specifics:

"I didn't think I would make it through...."

"Why? What happened?"

"My sister was the one who was the center of attraction."

"What were you like? How did you feel about her being the center of attraction?"

“I never expected that I would be going to college.”

“Why? What direction did you see yourself going when you were growing up? To what extent has it changed? Why?”

10. But at the same time, don't be afraid of silence. Sometimes people take a while to think of answers to important questions. You want to give them that space rather than you quickly filling in the silence with another question. Silence also puts pressure on them to respond.

11. You want stories and anecdotes, not just facts.

“When I first got my job, I thought I was going to be fired.”

“Why? What happened? What made you feel that way?”

“My aunt was the mainstay of the family.”

“How? Can you think of a story that shows that?”

Stories/anecdotes often have to be nudged out of the person you are interviewing until they become comfortable...and they come to realize that you want to hear them. Stories and anecdotes are often are the things we most remember from interviews.

12. Since an interview is a conversation, you never know where it might end up. They might share with you information that you weren't prepared for, that has nothing to do with your list of questions but will give more insights into the person. Go for it! Ask follow-up questions to get more details. You can always go back to your list of questions if you haven't covered things you wanted to ask them. In the process you may discover more important things about the person than you knew at first. You are letting them control the conversation a bit and reveal things that are important to them.

13. Good interviewing skills develop over time. The challenge is to be both within and without the interview—to engage the interviewee, look at them, respond to them but also to think about where this might be going and get them to go into more detail.

After the Interview:

14. Send them a note thanking them for the interview. They are sharing their life and perspectives with you...and helping you with your project for class and the Brooklyn College Listening Project.