



INTERVIEWING FUNDAMENTALS

A. It's a conversation!

Skills you need to do a great interview are the same skills you employ every day when talking (and especially listening) to people. There are rules you follow and these rules are culturally defined; those rules are different here from what they are elsewhere. The skills involved include:

- Listening
- Reflecting on what you hear
- Asking follow up questions
- Eye contact
- Body language

Positionality is part of the interaction—who you are and who the person you're listening to is:
Race/Ethnicity/gender/class/sexuality/age/regional identity/accent

B. It's a lot of work! A lot of things are going on in a conversation or an interview—turn taking, cues, emotional reactions. When interacting with people from the same cultural background we do a lot of this stuff automatically. However, in an interview we need to be much more mindful of these things than we would be in a normal conversation.

1. The turn-taking function is suppressed in an interview, as the focus is on the interviewee. (i.e. the interview is fundamentally about the interviewee, not the interviewer. The interviewer's perspective is valued, but is not the primary reason for doing the interview)

2. Engagement is crucial in an interview. Active (passionate/engaged/empathic) listening, body language cues, eye contact—all the things that show that you are paying attention. Demonstrating these things is a sign of respect.

3. Power and positionality: As the documentarian you, more often than not, the one are wielding power in the exchange. Being mindful of these dynamics is important to facilitating the interview.

4. Careful attention to the flow of the exchange is one of the key factors that allows an interview to go well.

5. Questions: How a question is phrased has huge impact on kinds of answers you will receive. Open-ended questions tend to yield more expansive, thoughtful, and personal answers than yes/no, single-word-answer, or leading questions (questions that presume an answer). However, closed questions can be useful when they're appropriate, and can be followed effectively by "Can you tell me more about..." types of questions.

6. The importance of silence. Silence can feel awkward, but can be powerful. It's never as long as you feel it is.

C. They are the expert! The bottom line of an interview is that one person is valuing someone else's experience. You, the interviewer, are genuinely interested. You are asking them to talk about what they know and what they care about. They are the expert. They should know that you are there to do a lot of listening and that will put them at ease.

INTERVIEWING—PRACTICAL TIPS

A. Before Departing for interview

- Get a sense of who the interviewee is via any background research or initial phone contact
- Make initial contact (So they can get to know you and intentions; so they can get to know you; calm their nerves; so you can get a sense of them; fill them in on details of process: how long will it take e.g allow two hours, explain the kind of things you might ask, etc.)
- Ready equipment (check it, practice setting up, extra batteries, SDs cards, charge phone)
- Prepare consent forms
- What about questions? (listening and reflecting opens opportunities to ask questions)

B. Immediately prior to beginning interview

- Set up and test equipment/listen to the space
- Request reasonable accommodations for audio recording (try a different room, turn off fan, etc.)
- Make sure interviewee is physically comfortable (glass of water, comfy chair, etc.)
- Explain release form—let them know you will ask the to sign at end of interview.
- Explain procedure and consent: Notify interviewee that 1. They can request recorder be turned off at any time. 2. They can request that anything they say be deleted. 3. They can choose not to answer any question you ask. 4. They can request a break or to end the interview at any time.
- Position yourself so that you can maintain eye contact.
- Notify interviewee before you turn on recorder.
- Check and set recording levels (what did you eat for breakfast?), position microphone, etc.
- “Slate” interview (state your name, date, interviewee name and location). Ask interviewee to state name.

C. During the Interview

- Periodically check recording levels (when recording in person)
- At least occasionally monitor recording through headphones (when recording in person)
- Maintain eye contact
- Listen Actively/respect silence
- Use body language (eyes, body, “silent laugh”, etc. to demonstrate engagement)
- Last question: “Is there anything else you’d like to say?” “Is there anything I didn’t ask you about that you want to talk about?”
- If goals include editing interview content, you may want to ask interviewee to repeat a story, gather room tone

D. Immediately after Interview

- Share release form once again, read through/overview
- Ask what format they would like for their copy of the interview recording
- Make sure you have contact information
- Say thank you

E. Once you’re home

- Send thank you note/follow up phone call
- Make copy of interview and send to interviewee
- “Process” the interview (whatever your procedure is—name files, log, transcribe, etc.)

INTERVIEWING: TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATION

A. Recording the interview is central to oral history

Although history passed down orally in many cultures and in Western culture, “Oral History” as we know it exists because of tape recorder.

B. Technology is fundamental to recording

Documentation of human voice necessarily requires technology. Technologies for audio and video recording have changed over time—analogue/digital. From grooved cylinders to grooved disks to magnetic tape to flash memory—they all still do fundamentally the same thing.

C. Recording technology offers amazing opportunities

Capture what someone says as they are saying with high degree of accuracy. Editing and reuse of recording in documentaries, exhibits, books, web, etc.

D. Recording technology brings logistical challenges

Recording well requires specialized knowledge and skills as well as practice. paying attention to recording equipment detracts from ability to interact with interviewee

E. Recording technology can create barriers

Presence of recording equipment changes the dynamic of an interaction. Microphones, cables, headphones can be seen as obtrusive.

F. Recording technology carries great responsibility

Particularly in the digital domain, it is very easy to alter what someone has said. Recordings can be taken out of context. Recordings are “fixed.” The interviewer has an ethical responsibility to respect the interviewee’s ownership of their own words.

TECHNOLOGY: AUDIO OR VIDEO

Question we often get: what about video?

A. At Vermont Folklife Center we tend to emphasize audio

Historical reasons: video/film is expensive
Preference for recorded sound—love to listen
Archival considerations

B. Audio and Video offer different challenges and opportunities

With video...people tend to worry about HOW they look
It can be challenging to operate a camera and conduct interview at the same time
Sound quality is frequently overlooked in video production
Archival challenges of digital video storage
Value of audio and still images

C. Use whichever better suits the desired outcome of project

What you use should be tied to the project’s goals