

# Oral History How-Tos

## Preparation For Interviewing

1. Be especially aware of your recording device. Check it after just a minute or two to make sure that sound levels are correct and there is no background noise interfering with the session. Noises that do not seem distracting to you may be amplified on tape. Passing vehicles, television or radio, children playing or fans/air conditioners may cause special problems.
2. Make sure that your recording device is charged. Even if you plan on using an outlet, if applicable be prepared with batteries.
3. If you are recording in an analog manner, i.e., using tapes, point 4 applies. If your interview will be recorded digitally skip to point 5.
4. Label your tape immediately after completing the interview with the interviewee's name and the date. Clearly delineate sides A and B.
5. Label your file immediately after completing the interview in the following format: interviewer\_interviewee\_[status]\_[part#]\_[date].format.<sup>1</sup>
6. Take notes during the interview. Designate a notebook for interviews and interviews only. Record the place, time of day, day of the week, and observations about the environment such as temperature, aroma, décor and the interviewee's demeanor. Also jot down especially revealing statements. Do this consistently as it will give you a log of sorts of the interview. If your recorder has a counter, set it at zero to begin and note at what point certain statements are made. This can save much time later. Keeping the notebook may also serve to "save" the interview if the recorder malfunctions.
7. Prepare an outline of how you would like the interview to go with a set of questions to be asked. This outline should not be, however, etched in stone. Be flexible (See "10 Tips for Interviewers").
8. Make sure that the interviewee understands that the interview can be anonymous if they desire.
9. Provide a "Consent Form." See Attached.
10. Ordinarily an interview should last no longer than 90 minutes. Be alert to signs of fatigue, distraction, or boredom. Conduct a long interview in several sessions.

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<sup>1</sup> Dean Rehberger and Brendan Coates, "File naming in the digital age," In D. Boyd, S. Cohen, B. Rakerd, & D. Rehberger (Eds.), *Oral history in the digital age*. Institute of Library and Museum Services. Retrieved from <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/08/file-naming-in-the-digital-age/> [Accessed 17 February, 2014].

## After the Interview

1. Immediately after the interview, write up your field notes. Look back over the notes you have jotted down during the interview and expand upon them. Reflect honestly on the interview/visit.
2. Send a written thank you to the interviewee.

## 10 TIPS FOR INTERVIEWERS<sup>2</sup>

1. Choose a quiet locale and properly position your microphone.
2. Ask one question at a time. State your questions as directly as possible.
3. Ask open-ended questions--questions that begin with "why, how, where, what kind of," etc. Avoid "yes or no" questions.
4. Start with non-controversial questions. One good place to begin, for instance, is with the interviewee's childhood memories.
5. Understand that periods of silence will occur. These are useful periods of reflection and recollection for your interviewee.
6. Avoid interrupting the interviewee.
7. If the interviewee strays away from the topic in which you are interested, don't panic. Sometimes the best parts of the interview come about this way. If you feel the digression has gone too far afield, gently steer the interviewee back to the topic with your next question.
8. Be respectful of the interviewee. Use body language to show you are interested in what he or she has to say. Remember, the interviewee is giving you the gift of his or her memories, experiences, and time.
9. After the interview, thank the interviewee for sharing his or her experiences. Also send a written thank-you note.
10. Don't use the interview to show off your knowledge, charm, or other attributes. Remember, "good interviewers never shine--only their interviews do."

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<sup>2</sup> "Ten Tips for Interviewers," University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Southern Oral History Program, <http://sohp.org/files/2012/04/10-Interview-tips.pdf> [ Accessed 17 February, 2014].

## Consent Agreement

Informed consent and copyright permission for oral history interviews, images, and personal documents

Participant's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone and/or email: \_\_\_\_\_

I voluntarily agree to be interviewed for this historical study of the experiences of civil rights activists in the Greater Hartford area. I understand that the following items may be created from my interview:

- oan audio and/or video recording
- oan edited transcript and summary
- oa photograph of me
- ocopies of any personal documents or additional photos that I wish to share

I understand that my interview (and other items above) may be distributed to the public for educational purposes, including formats such as print, public programming, and the Internet.

Also, I agree to freely share my interview (and other items above) under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution

-Non-Commercial

-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. This means that I retain the copyright, but that the public may freely copy, modify, and share these items for non-commercial purposes under the same terms, if they include the original source information.

In return, the interviewer promises to send one free copy of the interview recording, transcript, and related items to my address above.

Any exceptions to this agreement [such as a request for anonymity] must be listed here: \_\_\_\_\_

Permission granted:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewer's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Reminder: Sign TWO copies: one stays with the participant.