

NOTES ON ORAL HISTORY

Oral history is a terrific primary source for the history of childhood. It provides a first-hand perspective on childhood in the past, enables people who are not famous to tell their stories, and preserves their memories for the future. Oral history is also exciting because it is interactive -- a collaboration between interviewer and interviewee. For this reason, it is important to be flexible, empathetic, and respectful of your interviewee.

If you choose to do an oral history interview for History 1080, you *must* familiarize yourself with York University's Ethics Policy for Research Involving Human Participants and comply with the ethics policy of the Faculty of Arts. It is *your* responsibility to: (1) provide the course director with an overview of your research plan, including how and why you recruited your interviewee; (2) ensure that your interviewee is fully informed and consents in writing to participate in the oral history *prior* to the actual interview; (3) retain *for two years* all relevant documentation, including your research plan and the signed consent form, and maintain your obligation regarding confidentiality; and (4) sign the *Faculty of Arts Ethics Form 3* at the end of term. This form reports on the ethics procedures followed in History 1080. In addition to your student number, signature, and project title, this form asks you to confirm that you were educated about -- and complied with -- your ethical responsibilities regarding research involving human participants, and that you obtained informed consent. York's ethics policy can be found at:

<http://www.yorku.ca/secretariat/legislation/senate/ethicsreview.htm>.

For more information about the benefits and limitations of oral history, see the excellent discussion in Neil Sutherland, "When You Listen to the Winds of Childhood, How Much Can You Believe?" in *Histories of Canadian Children and Youth*, eds. Nancy Janovicek and Joy Parr (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2003), 19-34. Another useful resource, *The Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide*, by Marjorie Hunt (2003), can be found at on the internet at <http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/pdf/InterviewingGuide.pdf>. We hope the following suggestions, taken mainly from an online guidebook produced by the Southern Oral History Program of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, will also be helpful. The full guide can be found at <http://www.sohp.org/howto/guide/index.html>.

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

1. Begin by defining the historical issue you wish to investigate. Only then can you decide who to interview and what to ask.
2. Do as much background research as possible *before* you do the interview. This will help you determine what questions to ask and better understand the answers. Since your oral history is one person's memories, it complements -- but cannot substitute for -- research into other sources.
3. Think carefully about your own assumptions, values, and attitudes regarding your interviewee and your interview topic. While no interviewer can be fully 'objective,' it is important to be self-aware and in control of your emotions.

4. Draw up a list of specific questions to be explored. You can refer to these questions during the interview, but should not feel constrained by them.
5. Choose a setting for the interview that is private and where the interviewee feels comfortable. Avoid places where there will be distracting background noise.
6. Familiarize yourself with your recording equipment prior to the interview. Make sure it works and is set at the right volume.
7. Familiarize yourself with York University's ethics policy on research involving human participants. Your interviewee must be provided with a description of your project and a consent form signed *before* you do the interview. It is very important to make sure that your interviewee understands the nature and purpose of the assignment -- and the fact that, in addition to your final paper, a transcript of the interview will be turned in to your instructor. Explain the value of preserving your informant's story, and be reassuring about the fact that an oral history is a spoken reminiscence and isn't expected to be polished or grammatical. Be sensitive to any hesitation on the interviewee's part.

THE INTERVIEW ITSELF

1. Set up your recorder and make your opening announcement on tape. Include the interviewee's name, your name, the date, the location, and the topic you will be discussing in your interview.
2. Be sure to play back the recording early in the interview. If there are background noises (fans, air conditioning, etc.), or other problems with the recording, this will be the moment to address such issues.
3. Start with non-controversial questions. You might begin with basic information regarding the interviewee's birthplace, family background, and where he or she grew up.
4. Seek a balance between allowing respondents to express their own understanding of their childhood experiences and shaping the overall direction of the conversation toward your area of interest. Listen carefully. Allow the respondent time to think. Take notes that will remind you to ask follow-up questions at an opportune moment, rather than interrupting the respondent's train of thought.
5. Ask questions that are open-ended, but direct. Avoid leading questions, and don't ask several questions at once. You may want to stimulate your interviewee's memory by supplying facts learned from background research.
6. Ask about facts and events first; then explore feelings. Consider beginning with a broad question, and then asking successively narrower and more detailed questions as they prove necessary.
7. It may be helpful to arrange the sequence of topics so that any questions your interviewee may find challenging come at the end. If appropriate, explain that the interviewee does not have to answer a question and that the interview can be stopped at any time.

8. Stay alert to signs of fatigue, distraction, or boredom. Don't keep the interview going too long.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Once the interview is done, your "history making" begins. The interview is raw data that must be transcribed and then analyzed in conjunction with evidence from other primary and secondary sources. It is often helpful to have a short follow-up session after you have analyzed the content of the interview and as your understanding of the research problem evolves. Remember that oral history is a collaborative effort, and think about the ways you can engage your interviewee in the interpretive process. Send a written-thank you and provide the interviewee with a copy of your paper.

Ten Tips for Interviewers from the Southern Oral History Program - University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

1. Ask one question at a time.
2. 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. Don't let periods of silence fluster you.
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 drifted 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 and experiences.
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."



**INFORMED CONSENT FORM
HISTORY / ARTS 1080: GROWING UP IN NORTH AMERICA**

Dear _____:

I am an undergraduate student at York University. I am currently taking History/Arts 1080.06, "Growing Up in North America."

For my final research paper in this course, I have the option of doing an oral history. If you agree to participate in my research, I would like to interview you about some of your childhood experiences. The interview will take approximately one (1) hour. It will be the basis of a 10-page research paper that is due on March 24, 2006. I will record and transcribe our interview, and submit a copy of the transcript to my instructor along with my paper. My professor will return both the transcript and the paper at the end of the term; she / he will not keep a copy.

There are minimal risks to this study. You may, however, be uncomfortable with some of the questions or with the interview process. You do not have to participate at all, and even if you agree to be interviewed, you may refuse to answer certain questions. You also have the right to stop the interview at any time. Your name and your relationship to me will not be disclosed unless you explicitly give permission.

A possible benefit of participating in this oral history is that you can tell the story of your childhood. By sharing your memories, you can deepen my generation's understanding of your life and history. I will give you a copy of my paper when it is completed.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact my professor Molly Ladd-Taylor at mltaylor@yorku.ca or 416-736-2100 ext. 30419. Thank you!

Participant Name

Signature

Date

Student Researcher Name

Signature

Date

I give permission for my ____ name and/or ____ my relationship to the student researcher to be disclosed on the transcript and in the paper. (Check one or both as applicable).

Signature