

# Oral History

## Help Sheet 4: Carrying out a successful interview

### Arriving at the venue

Make sure that you allow enough time for the journey, so you don't arrive late.

When you arrive:

- Introduce yourself and the person helping you
- Spend a few minutes putting the interviewee(s) at ease by chatting generally about your project or making small talk. Don't talk in detail about the content of the interview at that stage, as you might encourage the interviewee to give you their best material before the recording starts.
- Confirm how the interview will be conducted, and explain the role of the person monitoring equipment and making notes. Explain that you will be asking the interviewee to sign a permissions form at the end (but leave the signing until then in case the interview content makes it necessary to discuss restricting access to the interview for an agreed period).
- Confirm with the interviewee(s) where they will feel most comfortable telling their story.
- Check out the surroundings. Are there ticking clocks, or a phone that might ring? Are noisy pets close by? Does your interviewee have a hearing aid that is audibly buzzing and could be picked up by your microphone? Be prepared to ask for them to be turned off or moved to another room as appropriate. Check too that no one is expected to visit during the anticipated length of the interview.
- (With permission) arrange the furniture around the person's favourite chair. You should sit facing them. Your colleague monitoring the equipment and taking notes should sit to the side, so that they are visible to you if they need to signal you during the recording. If possible they should have a small table or flat surface in front of them. This makes taking notes easier.
- You may also need a flat surface such as a chair arm on which to rest your elbow if the microphone becomes heavy during the course of the interview.
- Test sound levels on your voice recorder to ensure that both you and the interviewee(s) are speaking loud enough to be heard, but not so loudly that it causes distortion.

## **Starting the Interview**

- Begin by confirming the date and introducing yourself and your interviewee/s.
- Invite the interviewee to introduce themselves.
- Begin your pre-planned sequence of questions.

## **As the Interview develops**

- Don't try to follow your list of pre-planned questions slavishly. Be prepared to ask supplementary questions about topics that seem interesting.
- Ask open questions (how, what, where, when, who, why) rather than closed questions that only require a yes or no answer.
- If the interviewee wanders off topic, but what they are saying is interesting, let them carry on, with additional probing questions as necessary, until this new theme is explored. Note where you were in the conversation before this happened, and draw the conversation back to that point when convenient.
- As far as possible let the interviewee speak without interruption until they reach a natural break in what they are saying.
- Show that you are listening using non-verbal communications skills, such as nodding and smiling, rather than verbal ones, such as "yes" or "um".
- Your helper should keep an eye on sound levels on the voice recorder. They can alert you if they wish to pause the interview to adjust the levels.
- Your helper should note briefly the main subjects of the interview, including the counter readings on the recorder when a new topic begins (see "sheet 4 appendix" as an example"). If you intend to edit the interviews later, the summary transcript and counter readings will make this easier.
- Keep an eye on the interviewee, If it looks like they are getting tired, suggest that you pause the interview to have a drink. Alternatively, suggest that you could finish the interview at that point and continue on another mutually convenient day and time.

## **At the end of the interview**

- Make sure there is nothing else that the interviewee(s) would like to discuss.
- Thank them for their time, and check that they are happy with the interview.
- Photograph the interviewee/s if appropriate and scan any images or documents that they may have referred to during the interview.
- Explain again about signing the permissions form, and ask them to do this, and explain what will happen with the content of the interview.
- Arrange to give them a copy of the interview on CD if previously agreed, and thank them again.