

The 2 Sides of Interviewing: Using Tech Tools to be an Effective Interviewer



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BASICS

Virtually everything that is documented began as oral communication

Oral history (including interviewing) is subject to
interpretation
perceptual differences
alteration over time and retelling

Even interviews of eye-witnesses should be considered suspect and subject to
verification!

However

Interviews also provide
clues for places to find documented evidence
a sense of our ancestors' humanness
a connection to the person with whom we are conversing

The interview format is one of status:

the one asking the questions is the one with perceived power until
the one giving the answers stops providing the information, causing the
locus of control to shift

INTERVIEWING TECH TOOLS

Audio recorders
Laptop/netbook/tablet (and memory devices)
Portable scanner (with connecting cables)
Portable printer (with extra ink & paper)
Smart-phone, iPad®, or comparable
Digital and/or conventional (still) camera
(And chargers for all the above!)

Notes:

--Do not expect to be able to
"plug in" – have charged/new
batteries.

--Be prepared for technology to
fail or the interview subject not
to want to be recorded –
bring plenty of notepaper
and pens/pencils as backup!

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Make an appointment

- Explain who you are (including your relationship to the interviewee)
- Tell what information you are seeking and why
- Advise how long the interview is expected to last
- Suggest a variety of dates and times for the interview, if possible

Research the family in advance

- Fill in the blanks on the pedigree chart and family group sheets

Plan interview questions ahead of time

- Use open-ended, not closed-ended (“yes”/ “no”) questions

Gather materials

- Recorder (video or audio) – be certain it works properly and you know how to work (with) it
- Extra tapes, memory cards, batteries (do not expect to plug in)
- Notebooks/paper and writing implements
- Charts, (copies of) documents, photos to share, etc.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

Be sure to clearly identify the specifics *on the recording*; state into the recorder:

- Your name (e.g., “Jean Hibben”)
- Who is being interviewed (e.g., “Mary Hollander,” not “Aunt Mamie”)
- When the interview is taking place (e.g., “June 8, 2012”)
- Where the interview is taking place (e.g., “Hollander cottage, Beaver Lake, near Hartland, Wisconsin”)

Minimize the background noises, if at all possible

Be respectful

- Let the person tell stories
- Look at photo albums and scrapbooks
- Do not interrupt; listen carefully
- Make notes

Suggestion: After recording identifying info, play it back to check volume levels and make certain that the recording is audible (this helps identify “white” background noises)

- of photos/documents you want to copy
- of follow-up questions
- of correct spelling of names of people and places

Ask only appropriate, non-intrusive questions

- save sensitive topics for when you are better acquainted

Avoid arguments or contentions

- Observe non-verbal cues that the person is getting tired and stop, even if you are not finished

Before you leave

- Make arrangements for a follow-up meeting (or continuing interview)
- Verify how to get in touch and where to send copies of compiled information
- Thank the person for his/her time and (if applicable) hospitality

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Process recordings

Clearly label and date the tapes, discs, flash drives, files

Secure medium so it cannot be accidentally erased (make a backup copy;
put a copy “in” the cloud)

Transcribe the material verbatim (that may survive even if the recording is
destroyed or lost)

Double check information that may be ambiguous, unclear, or incomplete

Properly document that your information came from this particular interview,
recording the person’s name, the date, and interview location in your
genealogy program and, if applicable, on publications (web and/or hard copy)

Send a thank you note and include your updated family group sheets

Follow-up a short time later with any new findings, allowing the interviewee an
opportunity to stay in touch and, perhaps, provide you with more data

OTHER OPTIONS

- 1) Go through photos or photo albums and record your conversation with the
interviewee, identifying the people and places and, hopefully, telling stories (be
sure to clearly identify what pictures you are speaking about)
- 2) Send a questionnaire, with large spaces between the questions, to the interviewee
Include a self-addressed, return envelope (with plenty of postage)
Keep a copy of the questionnaire in your files (real or virtual)
- 3) Communicate with associates of the family
former neighbors and friends
fellow parishioners
former co-workers
nursing home associates
people who married into the family
2nd, 3rd, 4th (etc.) cousins
- 4) Talk with your siblings to see if they remember things
differently

AS THE INTERVIEWEE

Ask the important questions

Who is the interviewer (relationship to you)?

Why is he/she interviewing you?

What information is requested?

When will this information be made public?

Where can you get in touch with this person in the future?

How will the information be used (and will you get credit as the source)?

Don’t get sidetracked with your own, irrelevant experiences

Help the interviewer stay focused

Remember the power/control component

Share information that will be helpful (don’t be difficult)

THE INTERVIEW GOLDEN RULE

Give
information/photos/doc-
uments unto others the
information/photos/do-
cuments you would have
others give unto you

Avoid making derogatory or evaluative remarks about any person or group
Do not share confidential information about living individuals (or anything that might bring shame or embarrassment to those still alive)
Recognize when the interview is over
Request a transcript of the interview to verify that information is accurate
Follow-up with a courtesy call, note, or email, as appropriate

Note: Cousin relationship handout on www.CoronaGenSoc.org on “Hints/Helps” page

REVIEW

- Interviews are 2-way streets (be prepared, no matter which side of the street you are on)
- Remember, and respect, the power component of the relationship
- Exercise courtesy – Apply the Golden Rule
- Stay in touch

Very Limited Reference List (*sources used in the preparation of this presentation)

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