

Asking All the Right Questions

How to conduct an oral interview

Step 1

Pick a topic you want to learn more about and think of a question you would like to answer. Do you want to know what it was like to live in the Okanagan in the 1960s or why your grandmother migrated from Montreal? Maybe your father fought in a war or your neighbour witnessed a major event. Regardless of the topic, make sure to do some preliminary research. The more you know about the topic before the interview, the better you will be at identifying relevant information and forming the right questions.

Step 2

Schedule a **preliminary meeting with your interviewee**—unless you already know this person in which case you can skip this step. If you don't, a quick meeting before the interview is a good way to establish a relationship with the interviewee, especially if the subject matter might be considered private or emotional. You want to form a relationship of trust with the interviewee; the more comfortable they feel with you, the more likely they will share the stories you want to hear. This is also a good time to explain your topic of interest, how you plan to record the interview, and what you plan to do with the recording afterward.

Step 3

Asking the right questions requires preparation. Be sure to prepare a list of set questions, but remember to *go with the flow*. An interview is a two-way street, so don't worry about following the list too rigidly. Familiarize yourself with **open-ended questions** and use phrases like “describe”, “tell me the story behind”, “explain” and “compare.”

Step 4

Time to record! Whether you chose to record video or just audio, the best place to conduct an oral interview is in the home of the interviewee, anywhere that is quiet and comfortable with little traffic. Make sure to test whatever equipment you plan to use ahead of time.



Students interviewing Merchant Navy veteran Bill Emberly at the Royal BC Museum

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Things to remember during the interview:

- Listen to your interviewee and really try to engage in a conversation with them, but give them space to tell their story.
- Be yourself. The more relaxed you are, the more comfortable your interviewee will feel.
- Oral communication is not always perfect. Expect “ums”, false starts, memory lapses and forgetfulness. This is an evolving conversation between two people, not a polished performance.
- Consider what questions might elicit the best response.
 - If the interviewee can answer yes or no to the question, it’s probably a closed-ended question.
- Go with the flow! A set of questions does not need to be followed too rigidly—let the interviewee move the conversation where they like.
 - Be prepared to ask for clarification. i.e., “What does that word mean?” “How do you think that affected your thoughts about...”

Closed-ended Questions	Open-ended or Evocative Questions
Where were you born?	What do you remember about the place where you were born?
Where were your parents born?	What did your parents tell you about their lives in?...
How did you travel to Canada?	What were the conditions like on your journey to Canada?
Were you a soldier in the First World War?	Tell me about your experiences during the war.
Leading Questions	Neutral
You must certainly have been happy on election night.	How did you feel on election night?
You didn’t like Mr. Doe, did you?	Tell me about Mr. Doe.
What did you think of your Captain’s rude behavior?	What was your relationship with your Captain? ¹

¹ Adapted from *Voices: A Guide to Oral History*, Derek Reimer (ed.) Victoria: Provincial Archives of BC, 1984.