

HOW TO INTERVIEW FOR A
LOCAL HISTORY

JOB DESCRIPTION: INTERVIEWER FOR LOCAL HISTORY

Ideally, the interviewer will have a degree and training in journalism, English, or communications, and some experience in conducting three basic types of interviews, fact, opinion, and personality sketch. Individuals will also qualify with training and experience in personnel, sales or some area where asking personal questions is primary. The actual interview requires the ability to research and then ask questions based upon answers of previous questions without a definite format. Ability to accurately record the answers and other specific detail learned in the interview is essential. The interviewer should have common sense, tact, be able to establish rapport, feel empathy toward the subject, have an understanding of the subject's point of view, and find the interviewee and the material interesting. This requires the ability to be a good listener. Must be a self starter and willing to work.

-June Stewart -

Note: If you do not meet the above training specifications and feel you would like to interview individuals for the Wheeling Museum book project, don't be discouraged. We will train you, but we ask you agree to complete at least three interviews. Contact Geraldine Swan, at 537-3119.

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Interviewing is one of the most productive ways of obtaining information. There are three basic types of interviews:

1. The interview for facts.

2. The interview for opinion.

3. The personality sketch interview.

Every interview falls into one of these categories, and more often than not, is a combination of all three. The facts are recorded in village records, previous histories, or church records and can serve as background information for the person conducting an interview.

The interviewer should be certain of the part the interviewee played in the event or history. Questions based upon the previously gathered information can serve as a starting point for the interview. Brothers and sisters will have differing versions of a childhood incident that could be an important event in the town's history. However, if adequate research was done on the event, the differing opinions will add flavor and color to the story and perhaps create a humorous situation for what otherwise could be dry and dull detail. Research, research, and more research is the starting point of the successful interview.. What is the individual's claim to fame? Mayors, village board trustees, park commissioners, school board members all played a part in shaping the community, and that part is a matter of public record.

Occasionally, there are non-verifiable interviews. These are not to be discounted; however, they should be noted as non-verifiable. An example might be an interview with the owner of a haunted house. Verifying that a ghost actually haunts the house can be difficult to say the least.

Or, perhaps the unverified information is something not on any police or village records, or in any newspaper, but was divulged by a person older than anyone else in the area. Here an attempt should be made to find out whether or not the incident is truth or speculation. Other unverified information may cause embarrassment to the individual being interviewed, and that person could request the information be withheld from public domain until after the person's death. In this case, it is imperative the respondent's wishes be honored. If the interview is on tape, arrangements should be made to keep the information from the public until such time as it is no longer an embarrassment.

In some cases, senior citizens being interviewed have a tendency to ramble, perhaps far off the beaten path of the hoped for interview. How do you get him or her back on the right stream of thought? The cause may be anything but intentional or the interviewee may be rambling intentionally to avoid an embarrassing situation. If the subject has been talking about a sensitive period in his or her life, an event that could put the family or subject in an unfavorable light, the rambling could be subconscious--an attempt on the part of the subject to avoid the unpleasant memory or dilute it by expounding upon a variety of less painful phrases. At this point, it is important to listen carefully to the seemingly unwarranted ramblings. The right question at this point can bring the entire story to the surface, as well as make the subject talkative. The wrong question can cause the interview to be over. In a situation such as this, it is important to reestablish rapport and gain the subject's trust. Otherwise, you may never find out about Aunt Mable's illegitimate baby, or how Uncle Mike tipped over the outhouse.

Often times, rambling from the interviewee is another way of sounding out the interviewer. If the subject is doing this, the interviewer must retain rapport empathy, understanding and interest in what the subject is saying without becoming judgemental. Remember, when interviewing for an historical book, you are writing history, not judging it.

What qualities should an interviewer have? Being a careful listener is the most important quality of the interviewer. If the subject says, "Grandpa Mortimer robbed three banks," and you reply, "How nice." Forget it! If you don't know what to say, feedback the information. "Grandpa Mortimer robbed three banks? "Why? How? Unless Grandpa Mortimer spent a few years in jail, chances are it was a family joke of sorts. It is up to the interviewer to find out how the family story evolved. It may be positive or negative action by today's standards, or even yesteryear standards. Again, the interviewer never makes a judgement.

An interviewer is similiar to a salesman; the sequence for obtaining information is very similiar to obtaining a signature on a contract. The same qualities are necessary for either job, rapport, empathy, understanding and interest. Establish rapport by introducing yourself, making a non-committal comment and stating your purpose. You must "feel out" the situation. An elderly, paranoid personality could require several minutes of conversation about the weather, children, a garden, or other subject before rapport is established. If the subject believes that you, as an interviewer, are "out to get him," rapport can only be established by presenting a non-threatening appearance. The interviewer does this by asking non-threatening questions. A question such as "How do you spell your name?" is non-threatening. Stated the wrong way it can be disasterous, and make the subject lose confidence in you. However, stating it "So that we have your name recorded properly, would you mind spelling your entire name for me," gives the impression the interviewer is accurate and concerned about the interviewee.

"Have you always lived here?" is non-threatening. If the individual moved to town, you might ask, "How did you feel about moving here?" Expound the original question and give the subject the chance to say more than "yes" or "no".

The technique of piggy backing, or asking the next question based upon the subject's last answer is usually a successful way to interview. Laugh with the subject and not at the subject. No matter how funny something the subject is saying seems to you, it could be a very serious matter to the person being interviewed. Self control is important. Try to be empathetic and see the pathos or humor of a situation from the individual's point of view. If the subject denies a certain incident you have asked a question about, obtained from another source, be understanding about the individual's reluctance to answer. If it is an obvious recorded incident and comments from others have thrown a bad connotation on one of the subject's relatives or on the individual being interviewed, explain, "Others have commented on the incident, would you like to tell your side of the story?" Or, "Don't you feel your side of the story should be recorded?" At the time of the incident, there probably were circumstances differing from those of today. What were those circumstances? Who was involved? When did it occur? Where? Why?

So Grandpa Mortimer did rob three banks. We have a skeleton, don't we. In a story like this, there could be a great deal of reader interest, for no doubt Grandpa Mortimer's conscience bothered him when he was established in another community, your community, and he tried to make up for his past deeds. Don't overlook this type of story. If you as an interviewer find the material boring, so will your readers. Most subjects will volunteer their accomplishments with the slightest encouragement. Seek the details about how the people lived, their work, and certainly the stories handed down from generation to generation.

A tape recorder is an excellent tool for obtaining oral interviews. However, some individuals may have "mike fright" when they catch sight of the microphone. Explain that for historical fact, it is important to tape the interviews.

A taped interview leaves no doubt where accuracy is a prime objective. Make the tape recorder and microphone part of the interview by explaining its importance and do not turn it off except to change tapes. Do not ever try to hide the recorder and microphone. You are not undercover agents. But again, don't draw unnecessary attention to it either. In addition to the recorder, it is a good idea to take notes as you record the interview. This helps you record nuances and expressions that will not show on the tape recorder, unless it is a video camera recorder. Remember to record details in your notebook or following the interview if tape is the only method you are using. Word for word quotes should be just that.

Notetaking can be a life saver if the conversation drifts. If you have taken notes, you will know what question to ask next without replaying the tape to find out where you and your subject drifted away from the topic. The subject may ask you not to make notes about a certain incident, and all the time, the recorder is taping away. Tapes of such interviews and their transcriptions should not be released without the interviewee's approval. Inform the interviewee of the information on the tapes by submitting a copy of the transcription and a request for a release date when they may be placed in the public domain. Another point - in any interview, a release must be signed by the subject granting the author permission to use the material in a book, and to retain the information either in open or closed archives of local museum. Finally, an interview should rarely last over an hour. Two hours is too long. Quality material can be obtained in an hour, or an hour and a half at the longest. If the interview is not complete, make another appointment to complete it.

If you, as interviewer, are using video equipment to tape the interview, a preliminary interview should be conducted and a script drafted from this. Have the subject identify persons in photographs and date the photos.

--June Stewart--