

GenGuides | THE INTERVIEW

by Genwriters | Tips and Techniques

The Interview can be a perfect starting point in your genealogical research adventure. Take the time now to sit down and talk with your older relatives. Many of these people are able to remember vividly events that occurred fifty or sixty years ago. They will be able to tell you first hand what life was like while they were growing up. Names and dates may not be accurate, but they will be able to convey the essence of their lives.

TIPS AND POINTERS TO REMEMBER WHILE PREPARING THE INTERVIEW:

- ✓ Set an appointment with the person you want to interview. Let him know that you are beginning to research the family history and that you would like to ask him some questions about his life. Set a specific day and time to meet as well as the anticipated duration of the interview. Arrive promptly and adhere to your predetermined time period.
- ✓ Prepare a list of questions ahead of time. You will want to direct the questions toward the time period you are researching. Think about events in your relative's life that she can provide more detailed information about. Remember: She is the best one to talk about her feelings during life events, such as her wedding day or the birth of her children.
- ✓ When you arrive for the interview, take a few moments to help the interviewee feel relaxed and comfortable. Allow them to sit in a favorite chair. Is the room comfortable and well-lit, and is the temperature suitable for both of you. An uncomfortable interviewee may result in a shorter-than-planned interview.
- ✓ Careful and thorough planning before the interview will help to ensure its success. The interviewee most likely has limited time, and perhaps limited energy, to devote to the interview. You will want to direct the questions to match your research goals. Be sure your questions are written open-ended and require more than a simple "yes" or "no" answer.
- ✓ Listen carefully to the answers to the questions you are asking. Encourage him to expand on his answers when you feel there is more to the story. Allow him to follow a tangent while he reminisces freely. These tangents will often open new doors to memories that were once almost forgotten.
- ✓ Get your relative to share full names of people she is talking about. Have her describe the physical attributes of the

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TIPS AND POINTERS

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- locations. Have her describe things using her five senses: touch, sight, sound, taste, and smell.
- ✓ Don't push for answers. There may be specific events or people he might not want to talk about. Be sensitive with your questioning and pull back from a line of questions that might bring back painful memories. Be sensitive. The interview process can uncover memories long forgotten.
 - ✓ Do a little at a time. Respect the time your relative is giving to you. She may tire easily after a short period of time. Your goal should not be to get the details of her entire life in one sitting. Typically, an hour or two at a time is sufficient. At the end of your interview time, you can set a day and time to return for another chat.
 - ✓ Video tape or tape record your interview. First, ask your relative's permission to record the interview. This recording will provide the most accurate transcript of your interview. When you return home, you can prepare a transcript to share with your relative as a way of saying thank you. He will be able to review its contents and make additions or corrections if needed. Listening to or reading the transcript may spark new memories.
 - ✓ Do it now. Don't wait to interview your aging relatives. It may be too late if you wait.

ALTERNATIVES TO THE PERSONAL INTERVIEW

Perhaps an in-person face-to-face interview is not possible. There are two alternatives to reach out to your relative:

TELEPHONE INTERVIEW: While it is more difficult to conduct an interview by phone, it is preferable to not conducting an interview at all. Be sure to set an appointment just as you would with an in-person interview to be sure the interviewee is relaxed and ready to devote time to answer your questions. Most phone interviews are much shorter in duration than an in-person interview – typically about fifteen or twenty minutes. Also, out of courtesy, be sure that you pay for the phone call.

MAIL OR EMAIL INTERVIEW: Busy schedules or distances across time zones might negate the ability for an in-person or telephone interview. A written interview – a list of questions with spaces for answers – might be the only alternative for reaching out to some of your relatives.

Be sure your questions are clear and to the point. Write your questions open-ended to encourage detailed answers. Keep in mind that all answers will be hand-written, so keep the list of questions reasonably short (perhaps fifteen or twenty questions). You can always follow up with a second mail interview.

Include a SASE (self-addressed, stamped envelope) for the questionnaire to be returned to you if you mail it. After you receive the response, be sure to send a thank-you note.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

When you return home, transcribe your notes or tape recording as soon as possible. You will want to do the transcription while the interview is fresh in your mind, while you can still remember those quiet inflections your relative gave during the interview.

As a part of your transcription, be sure to include the full name of the person

interviewed, where you conducted the interview, the date of the interview, your name, and any other information that might have affected the interview (i.e., her willingness, whether he seemed vague or unsure of himself). This information will help you to properly cite the interview when you refer to the information gleaned from it in your research.

A FEW INTERVIEW QUESTIONS TO GET YOU STARTED:

Where were you born?

What were your parents' names?

How many brothers and sisters did you have? What were their names?

Where did you live as a child?

Who was your best friend as a child? Do you still stay in touch?

Did your grandparents live nearby? Did you spend time with them?

What did your family do when you all spent time together?

Did your family have pets? What's your fondest memory of your pet?

Describe the house you lived in as a child. Was it in a town, city, or in the country?

Did you visit relatives often? Did relatives and/or friends come to visit you often?

Where did you go to school? What was a typical day at school like?

Who was your favorite teacher, and why?

How old were you when you first dated? What was his/her name?

What did you do in your free time when you were a teenage?

When did you first learn to drive? Describe your first car.

How did you meet your spouse? Describe your wedding day.

Where did you go on your honeymoon?

Describe your first house.

Describe your job, or your spouse's job.

How many children do you have? What are their names? Are they married now?

Did anyone in your family serve in the military? Tell me about their service.

What religion were your parents? What religious training did you receive as a child?

How old were you when you retired?

Tell me about a memorable time in your life.