

Interviewing 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. Perhaps names and dates may not be accurate, but they will be able to convey the essence of their lives.

A few tips and pointers to remember while preparing for your interview:

- Set an appointment with the person you want to interview. Eliminate the element of surprise. Explain that you are beginning to research the family history and their memories will be very helpful to your journey. Set a specific day and time to meet. Arrive promptly.
- Prepare a list of questions ahead of time. You will want to direct the questions toward the time period and relatives you want to research. Think about events in your relative's life that you would like 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.
- Listen carefully to the answers to the questions you are asking. Encourage elaboration on answers with follow-up questions. Listen actively. Show interest by taking part in the conversation.
- Use the prepared questions as a guide. 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 locations. Have her describe things using her five senses: touch, sight, sound, taste, and smell.
- Use props when possible. A photo, an old homemade quilt, the antique silver tea set ... all can elicit a flood of memories that can go beyond the item at hand.
- 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.
- Do it now. Don't wait to interview your aging relatives. It may be too late if you wait.

Phone Interview

If your relatives live some distance from you, consider a telephone interview. You will want to follow the same interview principles (plan a time, prepare questions, listen carefully). And by all means, be sure the phone interview is on "your dime". Telephone interviews are often shorter in duration than an in-person interview. They can be more intense, and you both are unable to read those unspoken clues from each other. You might want to consider more frequent (once a week) and shorter duration (fifteen minutes) phone interviews.

Mail (and email) Interviews

When it is impossible to interview a relative or friend in person, and a phone interview is equally inconvenient, a written interview may be the answer. These interview can be conducted through regular mail channels, or perhaps through email. While there are drawbacks to this method of interviewing (such as shorter answers, reluctance to divulge information that is too personal, or struggling with illegible handwriting), a written interview might be the only option. There are a few guideline to remember: 1) Limit the number of questions in a written interview to no more than 10 or 20, depending upon the length of the anticipated answer. 2) Be sure to structure your questions as open-ended, and ones that cannot be answered by a simple yes or no. 3) Personalize the questions by including specific family names. 4) Include a stamped, self-addressed envelope for the questionnaire to be returned to you. 5) Acknowledge receipt of the completed questionnaire with a simple 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).