



Register of Very Special Places

A PROJECT OF TRADITIONAL ARTS IN UPSTATE NEW YORK

TAUNY TIPS FOR DOCUMENTATION

Fieldwork Interviewing Guide

Adapted Courtesy of Place Matters, a project of City Lore and the Municipal Art Society.

Interviewing is an exciting way to gather information about people, places, and events. An interview is like a conversation, except that the interviewer does most of the listening, and the person being interviewed (the narrator) does most of the talking. Your job as an interviewer is to put the narrator at ease, listen carefully to her or his responses, and ask questions that elicit rich detail and interesting answers and perspectives on the topic you are researching.

Preparing for the interview:

- **Think about the purpose of your interview.** Ask yourself, “What do I want to know?” “Who is the best person to interview for the information and perspectives I need?”
- **Do background research** on the topic before the interview.
- **Prepare a set of focused questions** from your research and a list of topics to cover. Find out as much as you can about the person you plan to interview. Keep in mind the kind of information you will need for your final product (essay, radio program, exhibit, visual arts project, song writing, etc.) as you prepare your questions.
- **Talk to the person you plan to interview ahead of time.** Briefly describe your topic, why you chose her or him to interview, and how you plan to use the information. Giving the person a few days to think about the topic may result in a richer interview. Reassure the person that you’re not looking for an expert on your topic, but rather for their perspective, personal experiences, and memories. Indicate that copies of the information she or he provides you will be filed in a local repository in her or his community and at TAUNY and tell them that a simple [release](#) will need to be signed.
- **Test your equipment.** If you plan to record the interview, test your equipment before you go to the interview.



Conducting the Interview:

Asking good questions is the key to success of an interview and that is up to you.

- Two types of questions are essential to a good interview:
 1. Closed-ended questions get “yes” and “no” or one or two word responses. They can help you gather basic information. These questions often begin with words:
 - What (is the name of the town where you were born)?
 - Where (were you stationed during the war)?
 - When (did your family come to the United States)?
 - Did (your family enter the United States through Ellis Island)?
 2. Open-ended questions give the narrator a chance to talk at length on a topic. Devote more time to open-ended questions, which often begin with the words and phrases:
 - Tell me about (your experiences working in the mine).
 - What was it like (living on the Lower East Side at that time)?
 - Describe (a typical day of work on the farm).
 - Explain (how you shear a sheep).
 - How (did you feel leaving your family behind)?
 - Why (did you decide to take a job in the factory)?
 - See the [PLACE-BASED QUESTIONNAIRE](#) for more.
- Listen carefully to you narrator’s responses and **ask follow-up questions** to clarify or probe more deeply into a topic or to get more specific and detailed information.
- **Avoid asking leading questions.** Ask questions that encourage the narrator to answer in a way that reflects the narrator’s thinking, not your thinking.
 - Instead of asking: “Don’t you think it was wrong to close the factory?” **Ask in a way that does not reveal your opinions:** “ How did you feel about the town’s decision to close the factory down?”
- **Ask the narrator for specific example and stories** to illustrate the points he or she makes.
 - If the narrator says, “We used to get in trouble for playing games in the alley,” you could ask, “ Could you describe some of the games you played in the alley?” or “Do you remember a time that you got in trouble?”
- **Ask for detailed descriptions** of people and places and events.
- **Use your list of prepared questions as a guide**, but be flexible and change the order, ask new questions, or explore different topics that come up during the interview. If the narrator starts to talk about subjects not relevant to your topic, politely move back to the topic with a new question.

Interviewing Etiquette:

- **Be a good listener.** Show that you’re listening by making eye contact, not repeating questions, waiting until the narrator is finished answering before asking another question and asking good follow-up questions that show you are interested and are paying attention.

- **Don't be afraid of silence.** Inexperienced interviewers often rush to the next question when there is silence. Give the narrator and yourself time to pause, think, and reflect.
- **Think of your interview as having a beginning, middle, and end.**
 - Before the interview, talk informally to help both you and the narrator relax and feel comfortable talking. Explain your topic and how you plan to use the information (even if you have done this on the phone).
 - Begin with easy questions that are not too personal or threatening. This gives the narrator time to get to know you, understand what you want to learn, and decide if he trusts you enough to share personal information.
 - Move to more open-ended questions and questions that probe more deeply into your topic and your narrator's personal experiences.
 - When you have finished, ask, "Is there anything you would like to add?"
- **Before the interview begins, remind the narrator that you will ask him or her to sign a release to the archives when the interview is finished.** If he or she seems concerned, reassure him of the purpose and show the release form. Remember to have the form signed before you leave.
- **Thank the narrator** before leaving and ask if she or he would mind if you call for additional information after you have had time to look at your notes. Follow-up with a thank you note.

Analyzing and Synthesizing the Interview:

- **Review Notes.** At home or in the classroom, review your notes, correct mistakes, and fill out your observations about the interview, the setting, the interactions between people in the room, etc.
- **Write your reflections** next to your notes. Include your assumptions, observations, associations, questions, topics to follow up on, information to clarify or verify through other sources.
- **For recorded interviews** listen to the recording and make a list of the key topics. If you have time, transcribe the interview, or outline the interview and transcribe only interesting quotes and information that you may want to use in your final project.
- **Analyze your notes.** Look for evidence of the narrator's point of view, thematic connections between different parts of the narrative, interesting quotes, connections between the narrator's personal story, and larger historical narratives.
- **Contrast and compare** the perspective and experiences of this narrator to others you have interviewed and to written records. This will help you to check for accuracy and also to see how unique or broadly representative this narrator's experiences and perspectives are.

Good luck on your interview!