



# Flash Media Services

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## How to take an oral history

1. Have a start-up list of questions to get your interviewee and yourself comfortable.
2. Take some time to settle down with the subject, a time to get acquainted and become comfortable with each other.
3. Ask a question that will prompt a long answer and "get the subject going."
4. Ask easy questions first, such as brief biographical queries. Ask very personal or emotionally demanding questions after a rapport has developed. End as you began, not with bombshells, but gently with lighter questions.
5. Ask questions one at a time.
6. Allow silence to work for you. Wait.
7. Be a good listener, using body language such as looking at the interviewee, nodding, and smiling to encourage and give the message, "I am interested."
8. If necessary, use verbal encouragement such as "This is wonderful information!" or "How interesting!" Be careful, however, not to pepper the interview with verbal encouragement such as "uh-huh," said at the same time that the interviewee is speaking.
9. Ask for specific examples if the interviewee makes a general statement and you need to know more. Or you might say, "I don't understand. Could you explain that in more detail?"
10. Ask for definitions and explanations of words that the interviewee uses and that have critical meaning for the interview. For example, ask a horseman what he means by the shaft of the buggy. How was it used? What was its purpose?
11. Rephrase and re-ask an important question several times, if you must, to get the full amount of information the interviewee knows.
12. Unless you want one-word answers, phrase your questions so that they can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Don't ask, "Were you a farmer on Denny Hill during the 1930s?" Instead, ask, "What was it like farming up on Denny Hill during the 1930s?" Ask "essay" questions that

- prompt long answers whenever you can. Find out not only what the person did, but also what she thought and felt about what she did.
13. Ask follow-up questions and then ask some more.
  14. Be flexible. Watch for and pick up on promising topics introduced by the interviewee.

Sources: Various writers and storytellers, including Cynthia Flash, Jill Eileen Smith, Ira Glass, Judith Moyer and Nancy Juetten.