

Research and Write Personal Histories People Want to Read

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Course Description: Learn how to effectively prepare, conduct, record, edit, and use oral and audiovisual interviews. The presentation will also review various recording devices, software, and techniques used to edit and manage digital recordings and files.

Oral Interviews: Foundation to Writing Personal Histories

Oral interviews will form the basis for much of the personal history you will write and assemble. It will provide direction for further research.

Step 1: Define the Life Stages

The hardest part of creating a personal history is deciding where to start. Begin by simply breaking down the person's life or experiences into an outline consisting of key blocks of time or life's stages.

Life Stage

Childhood (0-11)

Adolescence (11-18)

Early Adult (18-25)

Prime Adult (25-45)

Middle Adult (45-65)

Senior Adult (65+)

Step 2: Prepare a Filing System to Organize and Preserve Research and Artifacts

Throughout your research you will collect and gather information that needs to be organized, documented, and preserved for later retrieval. You should be able to find any piece of information or artifact in your file in 30 seconds or less.

Step 3: Gather and Catalog Clues and Questions

This is not a time to edit and decide what is or is not important.

- Gathering artifacts you have in your possession that belonged to or references the individual. This is your background research. It will:
 - Help you identify who to interview and what questions to ask.
 - Help jar the memories of those you will interview as you share pictures, writings, and etc.
- Prepare a list of questions to use throughout the oral interviewing process.
- Develop a spreadsheet to catalog each artifact and identify persons of interest.

- Review and catalog each artifact.
 - Look for any and all clues. Write them down. You can decide later whether to do further research.
 - Conduct a "Good Glance." Look at the artifacts close enough to know what you have, but not so detailed that you are reading every line.
- File the artifacts in the appropriate folder.
- Make a list of family, friends, and acquaintances who you think knew the person (e.g., name, address, telephone, relationship).

Step 4: Start Oral Interviews

Oral interviews will form the basis for much of the personal history you will write and assemble. It will provide direction for further research.

4A. Organize Family, Friends, and Acquaintances List. Organize family, friends, and acquaintances into three groups.

- Groups 1: Family and friends often spoke to in the last 5 years.
- Group 2: Family, friends, and acquaintances that appeared (in artifacts) at key moments in person's life. (e.g., Bridesmaids at a wedding).
- Group 3: Family, friends, and acquaintances that were in every day activities with that person such as a friend's birthday, or a group picture in the cafeteria.

4B. Prepare for Interviews. Call each person to discuss

- The scope of the project
- Why you are calling them
- Gain permission to interview and set a date to discuss questions
- Talk briefly about their background and association with the person you are writing about
- A preliminary request to share artifacts relating to the person

4C. Recording Equipment.

Because you can't write down everything that someone tells you it is a good idea to use an audio or video recorder. Your recordings will be unique historical "documents" which other people need to be able to hear and understand easily, so it's worth getting a good quality recording.

4D. Interview Questions.

As you develop your questions,

Use plain words and avoid suggesting the answers.

- Rather than: "I suppose you must have had a poor and unhappy childhood."
- Ask: "Can you describe your childhood?"

You will need some questions that encourage precise answers:

- "Where did you move to next?"

But you also need other questions which are open, inviting descriptions, comments, opinions:

- "How did you feel about that?"
- "What sort of person was she?"
- "Can you describe the house you lived in?"

- "Why did you decide to change jobs?"

There are some points to cover in every interview:

- Date and place of birth
- What their parents' and their own main jobs were.

** 150 question resources is available in companion article.

4E. Personal appearance makes a difference. Try to match your appearance to what will best put the interviewee at ease with you and the interview process.

4F. Conducting the interview.

Before you actually begin the interview, explain to the person that

- Not all of the information provided will be used in the family history.
- They will have an opportunity to see and approve it before it's published or distributed to other family members.
- You will ask questions to prompt for ideas but they do not have to answer all the questions.
- If a question seems too personal, let me know and I'll go to the next question.
- If you tell me something you later regret, just let me know and it will be excluded.

During the interview:

- Be reassuring
- Take notes
- Keep your questions short and clear
- Don't interrupt
- Silence is OK
- Be relaxed, unhurried and sympathetic
- Don't contradict and don't get into heated debate
- Explore motives and feelings
- Limit interview length
- After the interview

4G. Save and Digitize Interviews

- Editing your recording
 - Software
 - Techniques
 - Examples

Step 5. Expand and Provide Depth to Information

- Libraries
- Internet organizations
- Sources

Step 6. Sorting Fact from Hearsay

Step 7. Write the First Draft

1. Prepare an outline of the individuals history using the general life stages
2. Other topics and sub-topics to include
3. Be honest.

4. Transfer an emotional experience to the reader (e.g., frustration, anticipations, amusement, pleasure, pity, envy, humility, gratitude, boredom, greed, pride, etc.)
5. Include real events. Include tragic, exciting, and normal every day things.
6. Use a word processor to record your writing for easy editing.

Step 8. Add Photos and Scanned Images

Step 9. Make Your Personal History User Friendly

Step 10. Organize in the following Sections

Step 11. Edit and Finalize Your Personal History