

**ORAL HISTORY of HOUSTON PROJECT**  
**University of Houston**  
**Center for Public History**

**BRUSHING UP ON ORAL HISTORY TECHNIQUES**

If you have done oral histories before the following are two excellent guidelines that will help you brush up on the techniques of taking an oral history, they are even more helpful if you have never done an oral history.

1. Go to: <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/33212.pdf>  
This is an excerpt offering guideline on how to conduct an interview from a book written by Thomas L. Charlton, called *Oral History for Texans*.

2. *Oral History Techniques*, Barbara Truesdell, Indiana University, available at [http://www.indiana.edu/~csh/oral\\_history\\_techniques.pdf](http://www.indiana.edu/~csh/oral_history_techniques.pdf)

These are excellent sources and present the basic techniques of doing oral histories. They are brief and should help familiarize you with the conducting interviews.

**PROTOCOL OF SETTING UP AN APPOINTMENT**

If you know the person or were referred to him/her by a mutual friend, a phone call or e-mail explaining who you are and how you got their contact is likely all you will need to have them agree to an interview. If the interviewee is someone you do not know, identifying yourself as an affiliate of the University of Houston, Oral History of Houston Project, doing interviews to be placed in the archives gives you some legitimacy. The more well known your interviewee is the more formality you may need to gain access to them. Whether you know the person or not, always schedule an appointment and arrive on time. It is best to conduct the interview in the person's home. If the interviewee is not comfortable with that, you can reserve a room at the U of H library or at a public library.

Let the interviewee know what you plan to talk about. You do not need to provide specific questions, but a general overview of the reason you are interviewing them. Also let them know that the interview will be recorded (video or audio) and that it will be placed in the U of H archive for researchers.

**STRUCTURE OF INTERVIEW**

This structure is meant to make each interview easier to conduct and to prepare for filing in the archives. It is also designed to facilitate the archivist's and researcher's access to the general theme and content of your work. The intent is to assist you in gaining the highest quality of information in the most efficient manner. Remember, these oral histories are going to be filed in the special collection at the M. D. Anderson Library for the specific purpose of research so try to present your interview with clarity and accessibility.

1. Always research the subject matter of your interview. If they are a public figure you can conduct an internet search, possibly read any publications they have, or activities they've been involved in. Otherwise you should be knowledgeable of topics & events you want to discuss, as well as the historical context in which the person lived.
2. Prepare a list of 15-20 questions in preparation for your interview. The majority of your questions should be open-ended, meaning that they require something more than yes/no responses, so think about the wording.
3. When you arrive at the location of the interview set up your equipment. Remind the interviewee what the project is and what you want to talk to them about. Ensure that the equipment is in working order and that there aren't any surrounding sounds to distract from the interview.
4. **Get the release form signed BEFORE you start the interview.** If you wait until after, you will probably forget.
5. Begin the recording with an introduction that states YOUR NAME, the DATE, INTERVIEWEE NAME, and the LOCATION of the interview.
6. Early on, ask about interviewee's background (where born, education, work history, hobbies, etc.). Once you and the interviewee feel comfortable you can begin asking questions about the specified topic.
7. Do not be uncomfortable with silences or with interviewees who seem to have very short answers. You can always ask follow up questions such as: Can you give me an example of what you just described? Can you remember a time when \_\_\_\_\_?
8. Have paper and pen at your side to take notes during the interview. If the interviewee mentions something that you want to follow up on, write a note and come back to it.
9. **Try not to talk about yourself.**
10. If the interviewee mentions places or names that are not clear or not well known then ask them to repeat it or spell it out for the transcriber.
11. To complete the interview you can ask if there is anything you didn't address that perhaps the interviewee would like for us to know? It is also a good time to ask whether the interviewee can suggest others that should be interviewed for the project.

**VERY IMPORTANT:** Conducting an oral history by following a structure (even if it's a flexible one) will lend more logic and continuity to the narrative. Getting sidetracked during an interview is an occupational hazard but it often enriches or adds color to the interview so don't avoid them, just be sure to come back to you to your prepared schedule when appropriate. Also remember that conducting oral history interviews is a collaborative effort involving you and the interviewee.