

## SO, YOU WANT TO CONDUCT AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW?

**Video Three: Preparing for an Oral History Interview**, presented by Jean Hardy

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This transcription part three of the four-part video series ***SO YOU WANT TO CONDUCT AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW?*** by Jean Hardy, is provided courtesy of Benzonia Public Library when you check out the Oral History Backpack from the [Library of Things collection](#) at BPL.

Be sure to watch all four videos in the ***SO YOU WANT TO CONDUCT AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW?*** series at [www.benzonialibrary.org/remembering-benzie](http://www.benzonialibrary.org/remembering-benzie) or the [Benzonia Public Library YouTube channel](#).

### WHAT IS THIS VIDEO SERIES?

This series was prepared and is presented by Jean Hardy, Assistant Professor at Michigan State University, as part of the Remembering Benzie Project for the Benzonia Public Library.

The goal of this series is to familiarize you with oral histories and prepare you to conduct them yourself.

- There are four videos in this series, including:
  - Video One: What is oral history?
  - Video Two: Components of an oral history interview
  - Video Three: Preparing for an oral history interview
  - Video Four: Conducting an oral history interview

If you are using the Benzonia Public Library's equipment available for checkout, there is a complementary video by photographer and videographer Jeff Smith on our [YouTube channel](#) that also walks you through how to use that equipment to record oral histories.

### TAKEN TOGETHER, ALL OF THESE THINGS WILL HELP YOU CONDUCT A SUCCESSFUL ORAL HISTORY!

#### OTHER RESOURCES

- Oral History Association: [www.oralhistory.org](http://www.oralhistory.org)
  - Offers lots of resources on conducting oral histories, including best principles and practices, which parts of this series is based on
- The Michigan Oral History Association [michiganoha.org](http://michiganoha.org)
- Check Benzonia Public Library's own Remembering Benzie Page at [www.benzonialibrary.org/remembering-benzie](http://www.benzonialibrary.org/remembering-benzie) and the Remembering Benzie oral history videos at the [Remembering Benzie YouTube Channel](#).

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### **VIDEO THREE: PREPARING FOR AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW**

#### **OBJECTIVES FOR THIS VIDEO**

- You will learn about selecting a topic for your oral history interview and participants that make sense.
- You will learn about the importance of background research.
- You will learn the basics of creating an interview guide and other materials you will need for your oral history interview.

#### **TOPIC SELECTION**

What kind of oral histories do you want to record?

- What topics interest you?
- What is compelling

Don't bite off more than you can chew! Some topics are just too big. Start with broad topics and narrow them down to more manageable ones.

- Personal history
  - Don't try to capture a person's entire life story.
  - Growing up in their hometown; a business they owned; their relationship with their grandparents; becoming a parent; their first job; or serving in the military.
- Labor history
  - You may be interested in a certain group of people or kind of employment.
  - For example, farmers:
    - How and why they got into farming; the kinds of crops they grow or animals they raise; how they build community with other farmers; how agriculture has changed over time.

PICKING AN APPROPRIATE TOPIC IS KEY TO A GOOD INTERVIEW.

#### **WHERE WILL THESE ORAL HISTORIES LIVE?**

- Oral histories for personal/family archives
  - Recruitment less complex, easier to come up with questions, less paperwork.
- Oral histories for local, regional, and national repositories
  - Ensure high quality, appropriate topic/questions, and right permissions.
- The destination of your recorded oral history determines how you prepare.
  - Very important: make sure the intended destination actually wants the oral history!
  - For example – The Veterans History Project
    - They collect oral histories of veterans from the United States and anyone can submit an oral history.
    - Certain forms are required for submission.
  - Getting the right permissions at the time of interview is key.

YOU'VE FIGURED OUT YOUR TOPIC AND WHERE THEY ARE GOING TO WIND UP. NOW YOU NEED TO FIGURE OUT WHO YOU WANT TO INTERVIEW.

#### **PARTICIPANT SELECTION**

- Three questions to ask yourself:
  - What kind of person are you interested in interviewing?
  - What stories and experiences fit the desired topic?
  - Whose voices aren't normally heard?
- Participant recruitment:

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- How many interviews do you want to conduct?
- Do you know prospective participants already?
- How do you contact them?

When contacting people, prepare a pitch that explains what oral histories are and what you want to interview them about.

#### INTERVIEW PREPARATION AND BACKGROUND RESEARCH

The goal of background research is to get a better understanding of your participants so you can write appropriate questions.

- Utilize the resources available to you:
  - Library databases
  - Local newspapers
  - Other community members

Also do background research on the person's life experiences.

- For example, if you're interviewing a veteran, you should learn more about the time period and place they served.

#### THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

Recall the elements of an oral history interview from Video 2:

- Intro
- Warm-up
- Questions
- Follow-up
- Closing

An interview guide is the actual document where you write down all of the questions that you plan on asking your interviewee.

#### INTRODUCTION AND FRAMING

- The introduction is where you're going to introduce yourself and the goal of conducting this oral history.
- You should go over what the interview will be about and have them sign release forms if you are using them (something I'll tell you about momentarily).
- Intros will likely be less formal if you already know the person.

#### WARM-UP

- A few warm-up questions are essential for conducting oral histories.
- Gets people comfortable talking about themselves.
- This could be something as simple as where they live, what their hobbies are, or where they grew up.

#### QUESTIONS

The bulk of your oral history interview is going to consist of basic questions you prepare ahead of time.

- No set number of questions.
  - Some people will be easy storytellers, others will need a lot more guidance and coaxing.
- When coming up with interview questions, think about your topic and background research.
  - What are you most interested in hearing about?
  - What is the purpose of the oral history interview?

I like compartmentalizing things, so I write interview questions under categories:

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- If interviewing a family member, think about capturing elements of family history – childhood, family trips, relationship with parents or grandparents, raising kids, family secrets.
- If interviewing an important community member, ask questions about their connection to local community, community service and organizations, and how they've seen the community change throughout their life.

Your questions need to be **clear, concise, and open-ended**.

Avoid yes / no questions and steer away from generalizations

Questions that begin with how, what, or why usually result in more complex and interesting responses than questions that begin with do or did.

- For example, which one is better?
  - What was it like growing up in Benzie County?
  - Did you like growing up in Benzie County?

#### **FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS**

Follow-up questions can happen at any point in the interview and the goal is to get better information from the interviewee.

- "Can you give me an example of \_\_\_\_\_?"
- "How did that happen?"
- "Could you tell me more about \_\_\_\_\_?"

These do not need to be prepared ahead of time but can be useful to include reminders in your interview guide.

#### **CLOSING THE INTERVIEW**

- Thank the interviewee
- Close on a positive note: If you've talked about sad topics, it might be useful to make sure you pivot to / return to a more positive topic before you end.
- You should also ask the person you're interviewing if they have any questions for you.

#### **OTHER IMPORTANT THINGS ABOUT INTERVIEW GUIDES**

- Interviews are difficult – not everyone is a natural storyteller. It's your responsibility as the interviewer to pay attention to how people are responding and ask questions in a way so you can get more detailed stories.
- Don't lose out on opportunities to get really great stories because you're stuck on following your pre-planned interview guide. You don't have to follow your interview guide if more interesting things come up. Be flexible and follow your interviewee along in their storytelling if that makes the most sense.

#### **OTHER INTERVIEW NECESSITIES**

Release forms

- Permission to share their oral history with others. This is important if you intend on the oral history going to an organization or institution where it will be shared with the public.
- Some institutions have release forms they want you to use. You can also search online for examples.

Recording equipment

- Recording device – camera, voice recorder, smart phone.
- Make sure batteries are charged.
- Make sure you have the appropriate tools to take notes during the interview.