

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

**Video Four: Conducting an Oral History Interview**, presented by Jean Hardy

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This transcription is part four 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 FOUR: CONDUCTING AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW**

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

- You will learn about interview basics, including how to ask the right questions, use guiding language, and take appropriate notes.
- You will learn how to create a space of respect for your interview participants and be an active listener.

#### **AT THIS POINT...**

- You should know:
- Who you are interviewing
- Where you'd like your oral histories to live (and have release forms if applicable)
- Know what the topic of your interview is
- Have created some kind of interview guide with questions

#### **INTERVIEW BASICS**

Interviews are a dynamic process that require an interviewer to elicit the oral history in the best and most respectful way possible.

We're going to cover

- Asking/wording appropriate questions
- Guiding language principles
- Note taking

#### **ASKING APPROPRIATE QUESTIONS**

The wording and asking of a question can make the difference between a bad, one-word answer and a great, story-driven answer.

- Your questions need to be spoken clearly, concisely, and worded in a way so they are open ended. Make sure your questions are written the way you are going to speak them and PRACTICE ahead of time.
- Remember:
  - Avoid yes/no questions
  - Begin your questions with how, why, or why. NOT do or did

#### **GUIDING LANGUAGE**

Guiding language is how you structure the things you say, often in the moment or during follow-up questions, to guide the oral history interview in your desired direction.

Reasons you want to use guiding language:

- Your participant is getting off topic
- They brought something interesting up and you want to hear more
- You're running out of time and want to focus on some specific questions
- If you find you have an interview participant that keeps going on tangents about unrelated topics, you can guide them to revisit something from earlier
  - "Earlier you said..."
  - "I want to revisit something you said earlier..."
- If you want your participant to speak more about something, use language that demonstrates the value of that insight and your enthusiasm
  - "It was so interesting when you talked about..."
  - "Can you tell me more about what that was like?"

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- You may also want to signal time limitations
  - “That’s so interesting, thank you for sharing that with me. I want to make sure I respect your time and I have some more questions to get through...”
- Basic probing language to use when wanting more information:
  - Tell me more.
  - Can you give me an example?
  - How did that make you feel?
  - How did that happen?
- This language isn’t complex or tricky, but is a great way to gather more information.

#### NOTE TAKING

- Note taking is an essential silent activity for conducting an oral history. Take notes that:
  - Capture interesting topics
    - Allow for follow-up questions later
    - Are ideas for new questions
    - Remind you of what was discussed
- I encourage you to let your recording device do most of the recording for you and allow your note taking to document important opportunities for follow-up and reminders.
  - Remember the best place to take notes is going to be on a physical copy of your interview guide.

#### THERE ARE OTHER IMPORTANT PARTS OF AN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW THAT ARE ABOUT SPACE AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOU AND THE PERSON YOU’RE INTERVIEWING.

##### CREATING A SPACE OF RESPECT

- You want to pick a location where your interview participant is going to be comfortable, both physically and a place where they will be comfortable talking about themselves
- Demonstrate respect by making eye contact and asking questions that show you’ve been listening
- This is also related to the importance of active listening

##### ACTIVE LISTENING

- Active listening refers to a pattern of listening that keeps you engaged with your interviewee in a positive way. It is a process of listening attentively while the other person is speaking, reflecting back on what is said, and withholding judgement and advice.
- The goal of practicing active listening is to not only demonstrate to your interviewee that you value what they are sharing, but also the act of active listening results in your getting a better understanding of what is being said through giving them your full and undivided attention.