

Valerie Yow

INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES AND STRATEGIES

In this practical piece, distilled from years of in-depth interview experience, Valerie Yow (<http://valeriyow.com>) charts a face-to-face interview from start to finish: building rapport, question techniques, listening skills, and what to do when things go wrong. She includes a useful checklist for self-critiquing interviewing skills. Edited from Chapter 4 of Valerie Raleigh Yow's, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, third edition, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.

The preliminary meeting

EVERYTHING YOU DO before the interview will contribute to the establishment of the character of the relationship between interviewer and narrator. It helps to make a brief visit to the narrator before the day of the interview (unless you already know the narrator well). Even though you have written and called, you are still a stranger. A meeting in person now, however brief, means that later you are not a stranger when you appear with your recorder.

Drop by at a time convenient for the narrator. Explain the project briefly and show enthusiasm about interviewing this person. Say something positive about the place and the person. Use some humor. This sets up the expectation that you are not a threatening person, that this could be a pleasant experience. In his book *Creative Interviewing*, Jack Douglas asserts that “small talk and chitchat are vital first steps on the way to intimate communion.”¹

I have arrived for a preliminary interview at a time when the narrator was washing the dishes. I dried them while we talked. Another asked if I had any canning jars, and I said I had a few empty ones I could bring, which I did. However, in scheduling an interview with a bank president, I was warned I would have only thirty minutes. Any preliminary meeting with him was not possible. In another project, I realized that a

physician who was on the board of the college I was researching was too busy at the hospital for me to talk with her there. I asked her to stop by the archives to meet me when she came to the college for a board meeting. She did, and this gave me a chance to show her how the project was organized, how many tapes we had recorded to that point, and so on. She started saying more positive things about the project. This preliminary meeting is not always possible, but make it happen if you can.

Places to record

At the preliminary meeting, talk about what work will be done during the recording session. Explain that the recorder will pick up sounds in the house. Insist on a noise-free environment. If the narrator wants to sit in her rocker on the back porch and the sound of car horns and heavy trucks is constant, explain that the noise will be on the recording and will obscure words from time to time. Ask her to find a different place. If the narrator wants you to come to his office but the telephone keeps ringing and the secretary keeps popping in, then point out that constant interruptions will be recorded and also they will obstruct the flow of the conversation. You might explain, "We'll spend a lot of time after each interruption trying to reconstruct the conversation to that point so we can go on." Ask, "How can we keep the telephone from ringing and stop the interruptions? Should we meet some other place?" If you are sitting in a living room and the television in the next room can be heard, then request in a firm, serious tone that the television be turned off when you come back to record. And ask the narrator to move a barking dog to another place. I have even suggested muffling a grandfather clock that chimed loudly every fifteen minutes.

The place where you meet the narrator to record makes a difference. An individual who meets you in his office will present himself differently in the conversation and will emphasize different things from the way he would if you recorded in his living room at home. Once a student of mine, recording in ethnic communities in Providence, Rhode Island, interviewed the proprietor of an Irish bar inside the bar he owned. The narrator declared several times that it is a myth that Irish men drink a lot, but in the background were the tinkle of glasses and the gurgle of liquids. His testimony would have been more convincing if the recording had been done in a different setting. And if he had recorded at home, he might not have chosen that topic to discuss at all: his life at home and in his neighborhood would have been more prominent in his thinking.

How many people get to stay?

About eight times out of ten, it is best to record just the two of you, without a third voice. The presence in the room of another person changes the interview. For example, two women who had worked together in a munitions plant during World War II wanted to be interviewed together. They had been best friends for forty years. As long as the conversation was focused on their war work, they sparked each other's memory. Answers to questions about their personal lives were truncated, however. Possibly, they thought of the interviewer as a member of the out-group and used this to solidify their feeling of being in their own in-group.

On rare occasions, however, a third person can be helpful. I have interviewed a mother in her nineties whose daughter insisted on being there. The daughter was very quiet unless there was some information for which the mother wanted confirmation, such as, "I think that was 1934 – do you remember your dad talking about this?" The presence of the daughter seemed reassuring to the mother, and she might not have talked to me otherwise. And sometimes an interpreter is required or the culture prevents an outsider from interviewing a woman alone so that a female relative must sit by the narrator's side.

On the other hand, I have had the experience of a husband insisting on staying in the room. He dominated the interview. My advice is: never permit a husband and wife to be interviewed together unless the project specifically calls for joint interviews. As much as married couples like the illusion that they are of one mind, they are not. The presence of one often inhibits the performance of another, or at least slants it.

However, in some kinds of interviewing, especially projects in the sociology of the family, the research strategy requires conjoint interviews. Anthropologist Linda Bennett and social worker Katharine McAvity discussed their research methods for a psychosocial research project on alcoholism and family heritage. They argued that there are advantages to interviewing couples together when "marital negotiation of family identity" is the general aim of research. This is the easiest way to detect lack of consensus on an issue. The spouses provoke each other to expand on information and to clarify differences.² Other researchers, however, have found that information comes out that creates or exacerbates problems.

Beginning the interview

On the day of the interview, before you take out the recorder, your comments can reduce tension. Douglas explains, "When you talk about the weather, the view from her mountain top chalet, or the lack of view from her cellar den, a certain offhandedness indicates that nothing earth shattering (like headlines) is going to happen here."³ Explain the purpose of the project again, and tell the narrator how it is coming along. Assure the narrator that he or she is not obliged to answer all of the questions. Because people do not wish to be impolite, let them know that you will not be offended if they decline to answer a question.

If your narrator is not someone who regularly grants interviews, he or she may still seem watchful and cautious. To help his students find out how a narrator might feel, oral historian Stephen Sloan required his students to conduct interviews with each other. They described being a narrator as a risky business and their feeling "pressure, uneasiness, or tension." They felt inadequate and feared they would be asked a question they could not answer.⁴ Alan Wong, when he was preparing for his first interviews, decided to be a narrator so he could gain insight about how narrators experience such a process. Asked about his family history, he felt "a bit unsure of myself as stories told to me by my parents, my aunts and uncles, and my sisters flooded my memory." He thought, "What was the truth? Was I getting it right?" He also found that he did not "tell all" and that he sometimes used humor to "mask his true feelings." He observed, "Desire to tell a good story clashes with the need to protect certain secrets."⁵

The interview situation does seem unnatural at first. It puts pressure on people to summarize experiences, to remember details, to deal with subjects they have not thought a lot about before.⁶ Say something reassuring or complain about the recorder or talk about something personal, such as how you became interested in oral history, or how you have messed up. A story I have told is about the end of an interview when I was so pleased with a narrator's suggestion that we have a glass of sherry that I forgot to turn off the recorder. She brought in her parrot to show me while we were sipping, and so the recorded interview ends with ten minutes of an important discussion punctuated by a parrot saying, "Want some."

Vanessa Allen-Brown, a professor at the University of Cincinnati, described arriving to interview an elderly lady in a close-knit African American community. The lady insisted that Vanessa have her evening meal with her. Vanessa remembered that in this culture, eating a meal together is important so she tried to help set the table, thinking, "As soon as we finish dinner, we'll record the interview." No, after they finished the meal, they had to wash the dishes. What was happening? This astute narrator used the time to get to know Vanessa, to judge her trustworthiness, to find out her true purpose.⁷

These beginning non-recorded conversations can bring up important issues. If a narrator does not like the idea of your recording, then explain that you cannot take notes fast enough and that you lose ends of sentences or beginnings of the next. You might say something reassuring such as, "In these interviews, we just ignore the recorder. Usually we forget it's on." If you are doing historical research, remind the narrator that the recorded memoir is a historical document that others will listen to and benefit from. Or, in case studies requiring confidentiality, remind the narrators that you will not use their names on tape or reveal their identities to anyone. If there is some hesitation because the narrator does not know how the conversation will sound, play the recording back after a few moments to let him or her hear the voices.

Of course, if the narrator absolutely insists that you put away the recorder, then you will have to take notes. Type them up as quickly as possible before you forget specific sentences. If you are a historian, deposit them in the archives with your audio files from other interviews: at least others will have some means of checking your evidence, but notes are not an adequate substitute for the recorded interview.

Before you begin recording, you have an urgent task: you must inform the narrator that you have a release form that you will ask him or her to sign at the end of the recording session. This form grants ownership of the interview to you, the interviewer, or the sponsor of the research or the archives. Do not ask the narrator to sign before the recording, which would be tantamount to asking someone to give up control of his or her words before the questions and the answers are known. It is like telling someone to sign and hand over a blank check.

Begin the interview by stating the name of the interviewer, the name of the narrator, the location of the interview, and the date. To any listener in years to come, explain the purpose of the interview very briefly. If you have a special relationship with the narrator, inform the listener, because this will make a difference: "The narrator and interviewer have been friends for twenty years." Then ask for the narrator's oral consent (a nod will not suffice) to the recording of your conversation that day. If this is a research project where confidentiality is required, of course you

do not give the real name. But if you are using a pseudonym, say so and explain that this is the narrator's preference. You still need acknowledgment on record that the narrator knows the conversation is being recorded.

Begin with routine questions such as, "Where were you born?" Follow with uncomplicated questions about the place or family. Non-threatening questions help both of you ease into the interview.

Building rapport

In *The Ethnographic Interview*, James Spradley observes four stages in the interview situation: (1) apprehension; (2) exploration; (3) cooperation; and (4) participation.⁸ Every first interview begins with uncertainty on the part of the interviewer and the narrator. Even the interviewer is worried: he or she does not know how the interview will go. Often the narrator says something such as, "I don't think I know enough to be of any help to you."⁹ The interview begins, and soon the interviewer and narrator are exploring the situation; this is a period of listening and observing. Spradley suggests that running through the minds of these two are questions such as, "What does he want me to say? Can she be trusted? Is she going to be able to answer my questions? What does she really want from these interviews? Am I answering questions as I should? Does he really want to know what I think?"¹⁰

The narrator will soon decide whether or not to trust the interviewer. It is thus crucial for the interviewer to be honest and straightforward about the project and to answer the narrator's questions honestly and respectfully. This may require repeated explanations of what the project is about and why he or she is there interviewing this particular individual. Douglas recalls a moment in an interviewing session that had been preceded by several sessions. He thought everything was understood. Suddenly, the narrator asked, "What is the point now? Why are we doing this?" Douglas realized that he would have to explain in far more detail than he had earlier exactly what he was doing and why.¹¹

Taking the time to make sure you understand what the narrator has said also builds trust. It is not productive to echo repeatedly the narrator's statements, but sometimes if you are not sure of the meaning, ask, "Do I understand you right? You had mixed feelings about the decision to take the plane that morning?" The narrator will appreciate your effort to represent the meaning correctly.

The interviewer should express appreciation that the narrator is offering his or her time to answer questions. Spradley suggests communicating to the narrator, "I understand what you're saying; I am learning; it is valuable to me."¹² And especially the interviewer should make it clear that the narrator's expertise or special effort is appreciated: "I know I am asking you some questions that are not easy to answer, and I really appreciate your helping me with these." Or, "You know the details of that situation better than anybody else. Talking to you really helps me understand." Or, "You've explained this so clearly that I feel like I understand it." Positive appraisal of the narrator's work in the interview contributes to the narrator's motivation to continue.

Listening

Although this may seem too obvious to mention, listen carefully. Listening with only part of your mind will be detected, and who wants to talk to someone who is only halfway listening? This means not following an interview guide slavishly but instead following the narrator's thought processes. In in-depth interviewing, because you seek the unexpected, the information you do not already know, you give the narrator scope to develop his or her train of thought. The narrator may tentatively offer another line of investigation, and careful listening enables you to pick up on this. Consider this interchange after the interviewer asks the narrator if his father was involved in the Irish Republican Army.

NARRATOR: My mother was active. She received several medals for bravery from the Irish government.

INTERVIEWER: Very good! And how about your father?¹³

The interviewer missed a very promising line of questioning. However, this does not mean that you can allow the narrator to digress to the extent that he or she uses the interview for a catharsis for some current problem not connected to the subject of the interview. (Of course, if you are writing a biography, every concern of the narrator will be of interest.) Gorden points out that afterward, in listening to the tape, the narrator may feel embarrassed or resentful that the interviewer let him talk on and on about irrelevant or trivial matters.¹⁴ I realize that I have stressed equal sharing in the direction of the interview and it seems like a contradiction for me now to advise you to return to the intended topic. You must depend on your judgment here: listen for a little while to try to understand the narrator's life and concerns better. If you judge that this is totally irrelevant, listen, but when there is a pause, tactfully draw the narrator back to the subject under discussion. Or, if you think the matter that seems irrelevant at the moment on the topic you are interested in might turn out to be very informative on another topic, just keep listening.

And ask yourself if you are really listening or listening just enough to fit what the narrator is saying into your own preexistent way of thinking. Psychologist Dana Jack describes this phenomenon: "As a researcher, I have learned that critical areas demanding attention are frequently those where I think I already know what the woman is saying. This means I am already appropriating what she says to an existing schema, and therefore I am no longer really listening to her."¹⁵ Jack works on immersing herself in the interview. To understand the narrator's interpretation of her life, she listens intently to the language: she asks the narrator what she means by a certain word; she tries to think about what may be missing. She concentrates on the "meta-statements," places where the narrator stops and then comments on what she has just said or what she is thinking. This is sometimes an indication of the individual's "awareness of a discrepancy within herself." And Jack watches for contradictions within the narrator's story — such as the individual's attempt to fit her life story to the stereotype society offers.¹⁶

Responding to the narrator

Meanwhile, the narrator is trying to follow your train of thought. When you change topics in the interview, explain what connection there is to the previous topic and how the new topic fits into the overall plan of the interview. The narrator appreciates your letting him or her know what you are doing. When the narrator wants to hear your story, tell it. This is possibly a request for reciprocity, for sharing, which the narrator needs to build trust.¹⁷

Needless to say, you do not interrupt or finish a sentence for the narrator. The matter of silence is not so easy to state categorically, however. You have to sense the narrator's pacing and keep your own compatible. If the narrator is a reflective person, pausing to think something through, wait for him or her to take the time he or she needs. On the other hand, if the narrator answers with a clipped efficiency and seems to expect a rather brisk pace, you can proceed a little faster than you would ordinarily. Gorden suggests that before you ask the next question, you should give the narrator at least a ten-second pause to see if he or she wants to add anything.¹⁸ Too long a pause is a way of putting pressure on the narrator to add something, and I suspect that this may produce resentment after a while.

Your nonverbal responses are important. Avoid responding with "Uh huh," because it is recorded and transcribed. Nod, smile, shake your head to show that you are following the narrator's story. It is important to maintain eye contact. Looking down to take notes and not looking into the person's eyes makes you seem to be more concerned about taking perfect notes than understanding what is being said at the moment. And it prevents you from observing the narrator's nonverbal behavior. Often it is necessary to keep a small pad of paper and a pencil handy to jot down names or terms for which you need to ask correct spelling after the interview or to jot down a word to remind yourself of a line of questioning to pick up on later; but make this note taking quick.

Both people, however, look away from time to time because that is what we do in any conversation. Communication researchers Byron Lewis and Frank Pucelik found that people often look up and to the right when they are constructing images, up and to the left when they are remembering images, level and to the right in constructing speech, level and to the left remembering sounds, down and to the right in concentrating on feelings, down and to the left in holding an internal dialogue.¹⁹ (The researchers warn that this represents a generalization about human behavior, one that may be reversed for some left-handed people.) You might keep these possibilities in mind as you observe the narrator's behavior.

Sometimes the interviewer can anticipate how difficult it will be for a narrator to answer a question and that the narrator may be strongly tempted to lie. Gorden advises letting the narrator know immediately that you have some information on this topic already and that you are making no judgment about it.²⁰ Another way is to depersonalize the question. For example, "I know that some women in the neighborhood donated their gold wedding rings to Mussolini's cause; of course, they did not know what was to come later in Italy. Did you know people who were asked to donate their rings?"

The usual advice is to communicate positive regard. It is difficult to do this when you are interviewing people whose values you abhor. Consider, for example, the interviewing project with former Nazis that William Sheridan Allen undertook for

his book *The Nazi Seizure of Power*.²¹ Allen interviewed a range of adherents and opponents to the Nazi regime, and these first-person accounts do indeed enlighten the reader about the reasons why the movement gained supporters. Allen had to show that he wanted to understand and that he appreciated the fact that their dilemmas were not the same that he had faced in his life. This does not mean that he had to show approval or agreement – just a willingness to listen without immediate judgment.

Take the time to review background material thoroughly on the subject of the interview. You should not show off your knowledge, but the narrator will sense that you are informed and that you take the interview seriously. Do not try to convey the impression that you are in the in-group by using jargon. This is false, and the narrator knows it. But learn as much as you can about terms specific to the topics to be discussed before the interview begins. During the interview, ask if you are not familiar with a term. Sometimes, even if you know a dictionary meaning, you may still want to ask for the narrator's ideas about the term's meaning.

These techniques will help you win the narrator's cooperation, but the most important basis for a good interview is sensitivity to the narrator's feelings. Show the narrator that you have empathy; say, "I can imagine how you felt." The narrator is grateful for this understanding. Gorden shows how the interviewer can respond with empathy to a narrator:

NARRATOR: At that time I had three babies still in diapers, and that made it a bit difficult to adjust to the divorce.

INTERVIEWER: Three babies all in diapers! How did you manage?²²

Diminishing rapport

Up to this point, the discussion has been focused on ways to build rapport. Consider also the ways that rapport can be damaged. Contrast the interviewer's reply in the next example with the previous one:

NARRATOR: At that time I had three babies still in diapers, and that made it a bit difficult to adjust to the divorce.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the problems?²³

The second example sends the message, "I am detached from this. I just need some information." Here is a similar interchange:

NARRATOR: Jim and I were going down highway 67; we didn't see the tornado, but just as we came to one of those banked turns we couldn't make it because the car was off the ground. We were jerked up in the air and I remember seeing a flash as our car hit the high-tension lines. Then we landed bottom side up in a swamp about four feet deep. One more gust of wind came and just flipped the car right side up again.

INTERVIEWER: Were you going north or south on highway 67?²⁴

Would you wish to continue to talk to someone who responded to you in the way the interviewer did in the last example? You can see that this interviewer

showed no sensitivity to the feelings of the narrator, no appreciation of what this experience was like for the person going through it.

The subtle communication of a negative attitude also can damage rapport. Gorden cites an interview with an individual in a metropolitan slum. The interviewer was taken aback by the casual attitude displayed toward middle-class ideals of parenthood and of legalities such as adoption procedures. His disapproving attitude was somehow communicated. Gorden observes, "From this point on, the respondent ceased to express herself so candidly, and any constructive working relationship was made more difficult."²⁵

Communicating attitude by your nonverbal response is something to watch out for. In interviewing farm women, Sherry Thomas discovered issues that the ideal picture of our society does not permit us to acknowledge. She said that she had expected her narrators to talk about pregnancy, child rearing, and even sexuality, but she received surprises: "What I didn't expect was, I got a lot of wife battering, incest, lesbianism, from women aged 50 to 100 in midstream America." She advised, "You have to be real comfortable about dealing with [such issues] and real able to keep that conversation going, and not by your face or your body manner or anything else put a stop to it, because it's some of the most powerful material that's going to surface, and to me, it's the material that blows the statistics wide open."²⁶

I have talked about being animated – nodding, smiling, for example – during the interview; now I am advising that you control your face and body language. It is one thing to show interest, another to show judgment.

In his discussion of inhibitors of conversation, Gorden explains that negative attitudes toward the narrator also show up as errors of omission – such as forgetting what the narrator has said and just passing over topics important to the narrator. The use of a condescending tone of voice or "cautious rigidity" (a reluctance to depart from the interview guide) also has a negative effect.²⁷

When the interviewer shows interest and respect, a desire to understand, and a sensitivity to the feelings of the narrator, a real partnership in the interview may develop. Spradley defines participation as a situation in which the narrator accepts the role of teaching the interviewer.²⁸ In other words, the narrator wants to make the interview productive. As you may have observed in your conversations with friends, an earnest and intense involvement in the process on the part of one conversational partner sparks the other's engagement. Some interviewers see the interview as a "dialectic with speech and counterspeech."²⁹ Yes, but the recorded in-depth interview is not a conversation in the usual sense: both people are aware that there is a purpose beyond conversation, that this testimony is a record.

Using skill in questioning and even going beyond

Gorden lists as interviewing skills: (1) wording the question so that it is clear and appropriate for the topic; (2) listening to the narrator; (3) observing the narrator's nonverbal behavior; (4) remembering what the narrator has said; and (5) judging the relevance, validity, and completeness of the answer so that you know when to follow up, probe, or just thank the narrator for a clear explanation.³⁰

There will be times, however, when these straightforward guidelines may not be enough. I refer now to times when the narrator is extremely troubled. Mary

Marshall Clark, at Columbia University's Oral History Research Office, and her colleagues interviewed survivors of the destruction of New York's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. She observed about the narrators: "Catastrophe imposes silence and isolates its victims." Nevertheless, the survivors wanted to record the experience because they wanted generations now and to come to know the human impact of this tragedy. Clark found special qualities are required of interviewers working with people suffering from traumatic events: ability to connect emotionally with the narrator, to maintain some self-control no matter how horrible the remembered trauma is, to convey concern, to listen critically, to suspend the tendency to fit stories into narratives offered by the media or government, to ask questions in a way that encourages explanation and meaning making, to accept contradictory explanations as narrators react to the chaos of the experience.³¹

Probing

Probing is used when you sense that something has been left out, that the narrator could give a more complete answer. In one case where an interviewer wished to explore family limitation with a narrator, the interviewer rightly gave a context for asking the question. The narrator answered with the explanation that he and his wife limited their family because the wife had a bad hip. The interviewer thought there might be additional reasons:

INTERVIEWER: Were there any other considerations that dissuaded you from having a larger family?

NARRATOR: Hell, it was expensive. I knew I wanted both of mine to go to college. And farming's an "iffy" thing. If it's not too wet, if it's not too dry, if the price of machinery doesn't go up. (laughs) You can't count on being able to take care of the ones you've got.³²

Because of the interviewer's probe, another level of motivation was articulated: higher expectations for the next generation that would require so much of the resources of this family that having more than two children would diminish the chance of realizing those expectations.

By probing, you invite the narrator to go into greater detail. Linda DiLuzio and Harry Hiller, in their study of Canadians who had to move from one place to another, found that probing can force the narrator to think more deeply about what he or she is trying to say, "perhaps even to admit things he [or she] had never verbalized before to another person."³³ This is what a narrator said to them after a probing question was asked:

This is the first time that I have ever really leveled with anyone about this move. It was always easier to just say what people expect to hear, and that way I didn't have to deal with it myself. But you asked me about all the details, who said what, and what happened when. People don't really care enough to want to hear all that, but you seemed to want to hear it and that kind of forced me to say it like it really was.

Another kind of probe is asking for the meaning of a word when the interviewer suspects it has a special meaning in a subculture or for that narrator. Often, asking the meaning of a technical word you do not understand will give you an insight that the narrator takes for granted that you already have. At the beginning of the last century, Beatrice Webb, social investigator par excellence, learned that she had to become familiar with the technical terms appropriate to a line of investigation. She says, "Technical terms and technical details . . . are so many levers to lift into consciousness and expression the more abstruse and out-of-the-way facts or series of facts; and it is exactly these more hidden events that are needed to complete descriptive analysis and to verify hypotheses."³⁴

Sociologist Arlene Daniels describes such an event in her research on psychiatrists in the military. A narrator said confidentially: "Since Colonel X has been to Vietnam, he's caught a bad case of Oudai fever." Daniels was puzzled about what that meant but kept quiet. In another conversation, she said, "I understand he has a bad case of Oudai fever." She hoped that she would find out the meaning of the word. "But this offended officer frowned and changed the conversation. Later, I learned that Oudai fever refers to the relentless pursuit of Vietnamese women: the Oudai is the name of the silken garment the women wear. And this I learned only when I discovered that the officer whom I offended was giving me a bad reputation for spreading malicious gossip." She gave up using the standard technique for "trying to learn insiders' ways without asking directly for information."³⁵

Sherry Thomas described her puzzling over the meaning of the definition farm women gave about themselves. They never called themselves farmers; rather, they said something like, "Well, really I only helped out on the farm." Thomas thought this over: "And by about the third interview I realized that I needed to find out what that phrase meant, because either I was wrong in what I was seeking to find out or something else was going on." She sensed that there was cognitive dissonance. She began asking questions such as, "Tell me what you did in 1926 on a typical day." These questions evoked responses that brought her nearer to the truth. The women told her they got up at five and milked the cows (sometimes as many as twenty-four). They did all the cream separating and milk preservation. That was just the beginning of the day; they also:

ran a poultry herd, sold eggs for money, which was a significant part of the cash income, produced all of the vegetables and fruit for the family, and did at least a third, and frequently a half, of all the field crop work for the family, as well as doing all the housework, all the cooking, all the food preservation, and all the child care.³⁶

Thomas's advice is not to stop with the socially accepted response, but to keep probing until the narrator reveals the reality of the situation.³⁷ She was able to probe by asking a different kind of question, trying a different tactic. This is a delicate matter because you neither want to "lead the witness" by eliciting the answer you desire nor make the witness feel that he or she has failed to live up to your expectations. Often, however, a general probe following a line of questioning can elicit information without prejudicing the answer. As interviewer, you sense that the narrator is still thinking about the topic or seems to be expecting further questions or might talk

more if encouraged. Ask, "You have done an excellent job in giving me insight into this problem. Is there anything else you would like to add?"³⁸

An interviewer can also use a probing question when a narrator has given a factual account but no indication of feelings. The interviewer senses that something important is being left out:

NARRATOR: So, we sold the farm and moved to town. I got a job at the dairy.

INTERVIEWER: I am imagining how I would have felt in that situation. Would you tell me how you felt about this change in your life?

Probing for a response about feelings can be problematic, however. First of all, a level of trust is required, but also the narrator's culture and gender role may affect the response. Men in our culture will sometimes have a hard time articulating feelings, and women also will be most hesitant to admit certain ones. Interviewer Dana Jack explained: "Oral interviews allow us to hear, if we will, the particular meanings of a language that both men and women use but which each translates differently. For women, the ability to value their own thought and experience is hindered by self-doubt and hesitation when private experience seems at odds with cultural myths and values concerning how a woman is 'supposed' to think and feel."³⁹

Sometimes our own anxieties or assumptions prevent us from grasping the significance of what the narrator is saying. You may feel vaguely troubled at some point in the interview but not realize what happened until the interview is over. An excellent interviewer told me about a project she had undertaken with a Russian Jewish immigrant. She asked him if he had experienced anti-Semitism in pre-World War I Russia. He talked about quotas for attending high school and added, "I was never pressed," intimating that the worst had not happened. Because the worst had not happened, she went on with the interview but felt uneasy. In the second interview, she returned to the subject, this time probing. He talked about restrictions on movement, pogroms, and derogatory names for Jews. She asked what being "pressed" meant. He explained that he had never been forced to consider discontinuing his practice of Orthodox Judaism. Her vague discomfort with his answer during the first interview tipped her off: she sensed that somehow she had not understood his meaning, the significance of "pressed" for him. She explained that the subject of anti-Semitism is an emotionally charged one for her and that she might not have wanted to hear.

In the above example, the interviewer was attuned to an internal voice. For all of us who do in-depth interviewing, being aware of our own fears, aversions, and assumptions, and checking to see where we might have failed to hear and understand fully, is a beneficial strategy.

Observing nonverbal signals, listening for distress

Always you must observe your narrator's expression, tone, gestures, and posture at the same time as you listen. You may find that you should stop probing if you feel intuitively that something is amiss.

During an interview with a narrator, a high school teacher, I asked her directly about parents' and administrators' reactions when she proposed a peace curriculum in the school where she taught. Classes in philosophy were regularly taught and so the students were used to discussing moral and ethical issues. She wanted to have regularly scheduled small-group discussions about making and sustaining a peaceful community. She was able to get enough support from administrators and teachers to implement her ideas, but she also received some negative responses. Here is an early exchange in the interview that gave me both a desire to ask questions and a feeling I had better not:

YOW: I'm wondering. You are not doing this in a vacuum. What are the other faculty saying?

NARRATOR: Off the record, I'll tell you. This is off the record.⁴⁰

When she said "off the record," I knew she felt she needed to protect herself. Her tone of voice and her pauses suggested to me that this topic was very disturbing to her. I did not probe further.

I was depending on intuition or "gut" feeling, which often plays a greater role in decision-making than we realize. Research indicates that intuition is not derived from emotion or guessing, nor does it have anything to do with the paranormal. On the contrary, intuition requires years of problem-solving; our brains unconsciously store this information and synthesize it when we need it. In "The role of intuition in strategic decision making," the researchers review the literature on this phenomenon and conclude that intuition apprehends the totality of a given situation in a flash.⁴¹ It feels like we get a sudden inspiration, but the work has been going on and information has been stored in our brains.⁴² So, trust your "gut."

I did not probe, but later we talked about her reluctance to have this part of the conversation recorded. She said, "I was placing some powerful truths about the only life and job I have directly in your hands. What would you do with them?"

Her honest, frank reply taught me a lot. I think I should have turned off the recording and asked if we could talk confidentially about what she was feeling and what she most wanted to tell me. I should have invited her questions to me about what I wanted from the interview. Then I could have asked what she would like to tell me "on the record." I chose not to continue probing because I took into account not just my research goals and uneasy feeling, but the narrator's life situation, especially her sensitivity to others' feelings, her moral code, and her life's work. This is not just an interviewing strategy: this is an ethical issue. Often now in reading ethicists in allied disciplines, I see assertions such as, "Ethical issues cannot be dealt with unless one thoroughly knows the situation and focuses on the meaning of the issue for the people involved."⁴³

Follow-up questions

The follow-up question is closely related to the probing question. The interviewer picks up a clue in the narrator's statement and pursues it. The narrator may just slide past the topic, indicating in an offhand manner that he could tell you more, as he does in the following example:

NARRATOR: Well, the thirties were lean around here. People weren't actually starving, but they weren't eating very much. By the way, I know how that DeKalb winged ear of corn sign got started. But as I said, people tried to live off hope and you get mighty thin on that.

INTERVIEWER: I'd be interested in hearing how the winged ear of corn began. Please tell me.⁴⁴

Sometimes a follow-up question phrased as a gentle suggestion can evoke information. This is helpful, especially when you have come to the end of the line of questioning and you believe the answers have been honest but that the narrator could be encouraged to reflect and go beyond a factual account. It's tricky, though, because you run the risk of "leading" the witness. Here is a typical answer from a project on mill work in Carrboro, North Carolina, that my co-researchers, Brent Glass and Hugh Brinton, and I received:

NARRATOR: They had a ball field for the workers. Christmas, gave out a turkey for each family. Picnic in the summer.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel at the time that was enough or did you wish the mill had done more for the workers?

By our follow-up question, we subtly suggested that the mill owner could have done more. To make it less of a leading question, we could have said, "Do you remember how you felt about this?"

Reason-why questions

Another kind of question is the "reason why." The reason-why question is useful when you need to know motivation. For example, the narrator has told you that a decision was made but has not told you the reason for it:

NARRATOR: We decided to go along with the administration, whole committee did.

INTERVIEWER: Why did the committee make that decision?

The "reason-why" question often results in information never found in the minutes taken at meetings or sometimes never articulated before by the narrator. In some cases, the simple reason-why question can open up a new line of inquiry. By asking, "Why did you prefer that uncle to the other one?" the interviewer obtained a detailed account of family interaction.

Clarification

Still another kind of question is aimed at clarification. The simplest kind is to make sure you and the narrator are talking about the same thing. In this example, the narrator had been discussing and comparing conditions on the home front in World War I and in World War II. He described food rationing. The interviewer asked, "Was that the situation in World War I or World II?"

The interviewer may also be confused because something has been left out: Just say, "I'm a bit confused here. Would you describe the relationship between these two people that existed prior to this particular meeting?"

Another kind of clarification question is the request for the source of the information. To establish the credibility of the account, you need to know whether the event described is a firsthand account or a handed-down story. Ask something such as, "Did you see it happen?" Establish the location of the narrator relative to the action described: "How close were you to the man who was making that speech? Was he using a microphone?" If the narrator was there but was yards away and no microphone was in use, he may not have heard correctly.

The narrator may be used to taking shortcuts in conversation, such as saying, "You know what I mean." Usually the person listens politely and just nods. During a recording session, you will have to be less polite and say, "I'm not sure of your meaning here. Would you tell me more about it?"⁴⁵

If the narrator gestures to show you how large the fish was or says the stream was only as wide as the living room and dining room together, the next person listening to the tape will have no understanding of this. As interviewer, you must indicate on the recording what the nonverbal communication means: "Would you say the fish was three feet long?" Or, "I think these two rooms together measure about twenty-four feet, so the stream was about twenty-four feet wide?"

What-if questions

The hypothetical question may be used to find out the narrator's wishes or aspirations or the things she thinks would have made her happy. "If you could have gone to work wherever you wished, where would you have worked?" Or, "You chose to go into medicine. What would your life have been like if you had followed your love, art?" You can get surprising and revealing answers about the actual situation with a what-if question.

Comparison

The comparison-type question gives the narrator a chance to explore a topic further. The question, "How do you compare working in the telephone office and working in the munitions plant?" brought out some interesting observations on social life in a small office composed of women as compared to social life in a large plant where both men and women were working. However, some narrators are not analytical, and this type of question may not appeal to them. You will be able to judge after a brief period of interview time.

Challenge

The challenge question is risky. Use your judgment as to whether the narrator can tolerate a challenge and be very careful in wording it. Make sure that your tone of voice and nonverbal gestures soften the challenge. For example, imagine that you are interviewing the mill superintendent about a strike in 1936 at his mill. He has

just told you that the strikers were armed and that a striker accidentally shot the strike leader. The newspapers reported that the eyewitnesses said the strikers were not armed. You know that the mill owner had hired armed men. You would like to find out how, in retrospect, the mill superintendent feels about what happened, even though he has given you the official line. Indeed, to ask him is to challenge the official line, and you are putting him on the defensive:

INTERVIEWER: We do know that the mill had hired armed guards. Just about everybody questioned saw their guns. I'm wondering how you felt about having these men with guns there?

NARRATOR: Needed to protect the building. Didn't want any burning, wrecking.

INTERVIEWER: Was the decision to bring in armed guards your decision?

NARRATOR: No.

INTERVIEWER: Were you against it or for it?

NARRATOR: (brief silence) I never had any trouble talking, I'd rather we kept talking. Don't like to see anybody get killed. I was afraid that would happen. (Narrator shifts feet, looks at watch, looks directly at interviewer, not smiling now)

Here, the interviewer took a chance and kept pushing to get information beyond the official version. But reading the nonverbal signals told her to stop there, at least for the time being. He has indicated, however, that he did not go along with the mill owner's decision to bring in armed men.

Below is a narrator who also could be challenged, even though this is going to puncture her long-held myth. She is describing a neighborhood in Providence, Rhode Island, in the early part of the century and her Italian American heritage:

NARRATOR: The Irish people and Italian people lived in the building with my mother and they lived next door, all along the lane. They got along so wonderfully you would think that they were all one family.

INTERVIEWER: Your family moved when you were two years old, did you say?

NARRATOR: Yes, only about five or six houses down. And they were all Irish people down there, too. Then as the Italian people started to move in, the Irish started to move out.⁴⁶

The discrepancy in the narrator's statements tip the interviewer off that a challenge is needed here: "Why did the Irish move out?" As in the preceding example, the interviewer must observe the nonverbal communication and listen to the tone of voice. If the narrator is annoyed, stop this line of questioning and return to it later, phrasing it differently.

Coping with troublesome situations

In any interview situation, the narrator keeps having to decide what to disclose, how much to tell, and what to keep silent about. There is always a kind of tug going on

within the narrator and between narrator and interviewer. You must sense from the nonverbal response as well as from the spoken words how uncomfortable you are making your narrator and stop challenging before you are ordered out.

One strategy in asking troubling questions is to stop that line of questioning at the moment you can tell from tone of voice or look that the narrator is getting upset. Wait, then return to it later in the interview, phrasing it differently, more gently, maybe more obliquely. Once, in interviewing an Italian American woman on Federal Hill in Providence, Rhode Island, I asked where she had obtained the money to start her flower business. This was a project where I was recording the life histories of ethnic women, and I was especially interested in ethnic women who had "made it in America" as businesswomen. She ignored my question but continued talking. From her tone, I knew she was offended. I did not pursue that, but instead asked the next line of questioning, about how she built up her business. At the end of the hour, my student who had accompanied me said innocently, "You sure made the business a success but you never did tell us how you got your start." I felt my heart drop to my knees. The narrator, who had meanwhile warmed up to us, said, "Oh, I stole it from my husband's funeral parlor business – I kept the books for both."

Jack Douglas describes a similar situation when he was trying to ask a personal, troubling question during an interviewing project with beautiful women. He refers to the narrator here as "the Goddess":

I try to put these [delicate questions] off until optimum trust and intimacy are established by going around them, if necessary. But always the point is to return to them by an indirect route. The hope is always that the Goddess will herself find her own way to talk about it, at her own time, and in her own words and tones. Allow her the lead once she has learned what you want to know.⁴⁷

Look at still another way to ask a troubling question. Asking a string of questions one or even two questions at the same time can confuse the narrator. You usually get an answer to only one – the last one asked. The exception to this rule against asking two questions at the same time occurs when you are approaching an emotion-laden topic. You let the respondent "off the hook." In interviewing in the Italian American neighborhood in Providence mentioned above, I learned to say, "Were some people in the community for Mussolini and some against him?"⁴⁸
[. . .]

Errors in testimony

Sometimes the narrator is just wrong about some detail. You do not wish to point that out in such a way that you hurt his or her feelings. Unless the error is seriously confusing the narrator and preventing the conversation from going forward, keep silent. You can put a note correcting the error in the transcript or the interviewer's comments to the recorded interview. If it is causing serious trouble, say, "Just a second. Let's check this date – I'm a stickler for dates. Let's see, the war ended in 1945, so do you think this might have been . . .?"

Chronology is indeed one of those areas where narrators are apt to depart from the expected answer because people often remember things according to significant life events rather than dates. Alessandro Portelli explains this process: "Historians may be interested in reconstructing the past; narrators are interested in projecting an image. Thus, historians often strive for a linear, chronological sequence; speakers may be more interested in pursuing and gathering together bundles of meaningful relationships and themes, across the linear span of their lifetimes."⁴⁹ Portelli quotes from an oral history transcript to show how this may be done:

AMERIGO MATTEUCCI: One more thing I remember, about Bianchini's farm. It was a farm with thirty-four hands. On Sunday mornings, the overseer would come in and say, "Say, you guys, no going to town today. We have work to do . . ." Can you believe that? It was slavery. That's what it was, slavery.

Portelli comments, "He wishes us to perceive the slowness of change in the lives of farm workers."⁵⁰ Interviewers ask when this occurred so they can establish a general time frame; but the narrator has another objective – to indicate what was significant from his or her point of view.

Very often, it is neither time nor chronology but the association of events that is important, as Barbara Allen points out. In reflecting on her experiences interviewing in middle Tennessee and south central Kentucky, she writes that the stories her narrators told her were not in chronological order. They were not organized around topics either:

for they dealt with more than just the episodes of violence that were the ostensible subject of the interview. Rather, they seemed to be grouped according to the association the narrators made among the events they were recounting, the individuals involved in those events, and the relations that bound those individuals to each other and to others in the community.⁵¹

Follow the thought process of the narrator, and allow him or her to develop the story as needed. The narrator may well answer all the questions you have; if not, you can return to them later in the interview. If a date is not correct, but the narrator insists on it, ponder this question, as Portelli advises: What significance might the switch have for the narrator?

Another troubling situation occurs when the interviewer assumes a meaning the narrator has not given to something. Beware of expressing the narrator's feelings or drawing a conclusion that he or she has not stated. Instead of saying, "I conclude that . . ." just ask, "What do you conclude from that experience?"

Detecting trouble

In 1986 and 1983, oral historian Alistair Thomson interviewed veterans of Australian regiments in World War I. He concluded that "memories are affected by strategies of containment, by ways of handling frustration, failure, loss or pain." He found that

Interviews touching upon painful memories require a balance between sensitive probing and reading between the lines. The interviewer has to notice silences, sudden changes of topic, even humor (which can mask unease or embarrassment). Bodily movements, such as restless hands, shuffling feet, and facial expressions, can be indications of painful feelings.⁵²

To get some idea about what is going on in the narrator's mind, pay attention to the nonverbal signs that Thomson suggests. Notice also squirming, glancing at a wristwatch, and making a comment about what he or she still has to do that day. If the narrator is losing interest or desires to get out of a situation that has become painful. Switch to something he or she really wants to talk about. Drooping eyes, yawning, and stretching might prompt you to ask if he or she is tired and would like to continue at another time. The narrator who crosses his or her arms over his or her chest and stares at the interviewer is working up some hostility. Soften your challenges, give the narrator an expression of appreciation for what he or she has offered, and forgo for the time being asking questions that you know will cause discomfort.

The narrator who resents your questions at some level, conscious or unconscious, may attempt to gain control of the direction of the interview. Turning your questions to questions he or she asks you is one way to do this. Being vague in his or her answers, mumbling "I don't know," is another way. Sometimes the narrator will keep the interviewer on the defensive by continually asking for clarification of the question. Sometimes the narrator will talk in such a low tone of voice that the interviewer can barely hear.⁵³ Or he or she will encourage constant interruptions that will sabotage the interview. Usually, the anxious narrator just talks about a remotely related subject and does not answer directly. Or else he or she takes the conversation on a completely irrelevant tangent. Or he or she gives short answers and refuses to elaborate.

These are tough situations. If you continue to get "I don't know," try some open-ended questions about a non-threatening topic. You might say something such as, "Tell me more about your childhood. I'd like to hear more about those trips to the farmers' Market with your grandmother." (Of course, you should not jump around in the conversation: your question has got to be on the topic discussed or you must have a reason for changing suddenly.) If you are getting answers in a scarcely audible voice, try saying cheerfully, "Let's listen and see if we are getting a good sound quality." Listening to the recording may reveal to the narrator how strange this stumbling person sounds, and he or she may decide to speak a little louder. Ask only non-threatening, routine questions until you sense that he or she is relaxing.

Remember, though, that the narrator's reticence may indicate that he or she is worried about your questions.⁵⁴ If the narrator keeps obstructing the interview by going off on a tangent, explain again, in different terms this time, why these questions are important to you and how he or she will have the right to restrict use of the tape if this is personal information he or she does not want made public. Or you might "put all the cards on the table" by saying something such as, "I notice that you change the subject when I mention your father. Would you prefer not to discuss this?"

Consider that the narrator may have good reasons for not answering your questions. He knows that if his current employer ever heard his answer to a particular question or even found out he had talked about a particular incident, he would be fired. Or, she had a deep allegiance to her family and she did not want to damage a family member's reputation. Or, the interviewer wanted the narrator to discuss

something further that had caused the narrator such emotional pain he or she did not want to discuss it again. Oral historians Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki assert: "We nevertheless believe that the extent to which people choose or are unable to go deeper is often influenced by how they survived, how their memory influenced their sense of self, and how secure they feel in their present lives."⁵⁵ Respect the narrator's judgment: if he or she has expressed a strong aversion to discussing a topic, cease to probe; go on to another topic.

Consider one last situation: the narrator breaks down and weeps. You could not have known that you would touch on a topic that would evoke such sad memories for the narrator. At one point in our mill village project, I blithely asked the standard question about courtship practices in the early part of the century. The narrator started to cry as she remembered a sweetheart she had loved fifty years ago. When this happens, be silent for a few minutes. Every person is entitled to express his or her private grief.

British oral historian David Jones, in his article "Distressing histories and unhappy interviewing," points out that one of the reasons why people cry is that this is a way to communicate the importance of the remembered experience.⁵⁶ It hurts, but making sense of what happened by talking about it out loud helps. Acknowledge the narrator's distress and apologize for stumbling onto a topic that was painful. Ask the narrator if he or she would like to go on with the interview. If the narrator gives assent, ask if he or she wants to go on with this particular discussion. As Sean Field reminds us, we offer a safe place for the narrator to talk about emotionally troubling incidents or feelings in the past.⁵⁷ We listen without judgment.

Jones describes an interview in which the narrator talked about sexual abuse by her father. She said that when her young daughter suffered such abuse by a friend of the family, she talked to her daughter about her own experience to show that she truly understood. Jones concludes, "Something about the way she told me here, made me feel that it was safe territory. Very simply she is telling me that she has talked about it."⁵⁸

In another project interviewing families with a mentally ill member, he asked himself whether anybody should be doing this kind of interviewing. He realized that his own distress in hearing such painful things influenced him. But also, he realized some good might come of this work: "I came to think that I owed those people. I owed them that I should help others understand their point of view, and some of the very mixed and difficult feelings they have to manage."⁵⁹ Try to figure out if the narrator's purpose in recording outweighs the pain of dredging up severely painful feelings. If the narrator does not think it is worth it, stop.

A truly insightful, unique in-depth interview is a work of art. But you have to be "on your toes." Paul Rosenblatt described the experience best:

I think good qualitative interviewing requires one to be able to move among various internal perspectives and, at times, to be working simultaneously with several of them. One must be fully tuned in to the people one is talking with, but one must also be thinking about what to make of what is being said, what is being left out, one's emotional reactions, how others in the room are reacting, how what is being said linked to other things the speaker said.⁶⁰

As the interview winds down, thank the narrator on the recording. After you turn off the record button and you are chatting with the narrator, the narrator thinks of something else to add. Quickly turn on the recorder and don't turn it off until the last minute. And if he or she starts talking again, unpack the recorder and turn it on again. Always ask, in addition, for names of other people to interview and written documents that will lead you further in your research. Ask if there are photographs or letters he or she would like to share with you. If there is any indication at all that the narrator has more to tell you, ask for a second interview. On the second and third interviews, rapport improves. Your questions stimulated memory, and the narrator will continue to think about them during the intervening time. You also will think of questions you would like to ask. Interviewer and narrator now have a history together on which they can build.⁶¹

Ending the interview

You have thanked the narrator and turned the recording button off; now is the time to give the release form to the narrator. Explain how the release form is to be used: "This will allow me to use the information in my book." And, "This will allow people interested in this community's history who come into the library to listen to your tape." If you plan to place the collection of interviews on a website, this information, as well as information about other kinds of public presentations that you have in mind, should be included on the release form. At the least, the release form should contain a general phrase such as, "such educational presentations as the interviewer shall deem appropriate." Give the narrator time to read and think about this form.

Explain options concerning use of the interview: restricting access to the recording, sealing portions of the recording for a specified number of years, and sealing the entire recording for a specified time. Be sure to write the narrator's decision under the designation "Restrictions." A final possibility is anonymity, which must be stated on the form if this is the narrator's choice. If there are no restrictions, ask the narrator to write "None" and initial it.

Obviously, the advantage of having the signing take place then is that you can take the release form with you. If the narrator insists that you leave it so a son or daughter or spouse can look it over, try to get a date specified when you can return to pick it up. Otherwise, give the narrator an addressed, stamped envelope and request that you receive it in the mail by a specified date.

As soon as you get home, write a thank-you letter and the notes about the interview. Write the notes immediately while the information is fresh in your mind. If you are a historian, you will need these for the interviewer's comments that are deposited with the recording in the archives. Your comments are important because they help the reader understand the context in which this testimony was recorded, so include details, write a rich description in a couple of paragraphs.⁶² Putting off writing these context notes and procrastinating about the thank-you letter will result in a backlog of work. And the longer you wait, the harder it is because you will forget observations.

As you reflect on the interview, consult the checklist for critiquing interviewing skills. You can assess your interviewing techniques; for me, every interview is a

learning opportunity. You may wonder if it's worth all the effort and whether you have needlessly left both you and your narrator limp with fatigue. I think nine times out of ten, both narrator and interviewer learn. When narrators express in words feelings that have not been given words before, describe places and people significant in their life story, and make sense of experiences that have been haunting them, there is a feeling of discovery. Gary Kenyon and William Randall believe that this "affords them a peculiarly liberating self-acceptance." They remind us that in-depth interviews give narrators the chance to stand outside and look at their lives with a new perspective: "This is my story."⁶³

Checklist for critiquing interviewing skills

Positives

- 1 Found a reasonably quiet place to have the interview.
- 2 Found a convenient time for the narrator to give the interview.
- 3 Explained the purpose of the research. Explained the choice of using one's own name or anonymity.
- 4 Recorded narrator's name, interviewer's name, date, and place where recording is taking place, as well as narrator's consent.
- 5 Worded each question in a way that was appropriate and easy to understand.
- 6 Listened carefully.
- 7 Remembered what the narrator had said.
- 8 Without being obvious about it, observed the narrator's nonverbal behavior and responded appropriately.
- 9 Indicated empathy when appropriate.
- 10 Showed appreciation for the narrator's help.
- 11 Followed the narrator's pace in talking.
- 12 Explained reason for change in topic.
- 13 Probed when appropriate.
- 14 Stopped probing when narrator's verbal or nonverbal behavior showed distress.
- 15 Used a follow-up question when more information was needed.
- 16 Asked a challenge question in a sensitive manner.
- 17 Requested clarification when needed.
- 18 Used a two-sentence format when introducing a line of questions that might be problematic.
- 19 Thanked the narrator.
- 20 Explained the purpose of the release form and indicated where the recording will be housed. Secured a signature on the release form, or at least a definite date when the signed release form will be given to the interviewer.

ves

forgot to record an introduction at the beginning that gives narrator's name, interviewer's name, date, and place where the recording took place.

led to explain the project.

did not get narrator's verbal consent.

interrupted the narrator.

finished narrator's sentence.

kept repeating what the narrator had just said.

referred something the narrator had not said.

tried to take up an important topic that the narrator mentioned.

made irrelevant, distracting comments.

ignored narrator's feelings.

tried to give an empathic response when narrator described distress about an event.

asked a leading question.

asked several questions at the same time (unless the two-sentence format

was used as a strategy to frame the question in such a way that it became non-threatening).

took over the interview with a long monologue about one's own

experiences.

did not give the narrator a second's pause to allow him or her to decide

whether he or she wanted to add something.

assumed understanding of an unfamiliar term, without asking the narrator

what it meant.

tried to explain how the recorded information may be used.

tried to explain that depositing the recording in an archive may mean

that it will be available to others via the World Wide Web.

tried to give an explanation of choices, such as anonymity, to protect

personal information (with the warning, of course, that government

may use its right of subpoena to obtain a recording, whether anonymous

or not).

turned off the recorder and left it off even though the narrator thought

something further he or she wanted to say.

For this test, give yourself five points for every correct answer in Part I.

For every failure from this outcome five points for every failure in Part II. (Yep, it's

Douglas, *Creative Interviewing*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985, p. 79.

A. Bennett and Katharine McAvity, "Family research: a case for interviewing

cases," in Gerald Handel (ed.), *The Psychosocial Interior of the Family*, 3rd edition,

New York: Aldine, 1985, pp. 75-94, see pp. 76-84. See also Ralph LaRossa, "Conjoint

and individual interviewing as a research strategy," *Case Analysis*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1978,

Negatives

- 1 Forgot to record an introduction at the beginning that gives narrator's name, interviewer's name, date, and place where the recording took place.
- 2 Failed to explain the project.
- 3 Did not get narrator's verbal consent.
- 4 Interrupted the narrator.
- 5 Finished narrator's sentence.
- 6 Kept repeating what the narrator had just said.
- 7 Inferred something the narrator had not said.
- 8 Failed to take up an important topic that the narrator mentioned.
- 9 Made irrelevant, distracting comments.
- 10 Ignored narrator's feelings.
- 11 Failed to give an empathic response when narrator described distress about an event.
- 12 Asked a leading question.
- 13 Asked several questions at the same time (unless the two-sentence format was used as a strategy to frame the question in such a way that it became non-threatening).
- 14 Took over the interview with a long monologue about one's own experiences.
- 15 Did not give the narrator a second's pause to allow him or her to decide whether he or she wanted to add something.
- 16 Assumed understanding of an unfamiliar term, without asking the narrator what it meant.
- 17 Failed to explain how the recorded information may be used.
- 18 Failed to explain that depositing the recording in an archive may mean that it will be available to others via the World Wide Web.
- 19 Failed to give an explanation of choices, such as anonymity, to protect personal information (with the warning, of course, that government may use its right of subpoena to obtain a recording, whether anonymous or not).
- 20 Turned off the recorder and left it off even though the narrator thought of something further he or she wanted to say.

To score this test, give yourself five points for every correct answer in Part I. Subtract from this outcome five points for every failure in Part II. (Yep, it's unfair.)

Notes

- 1 Jack Douglas, *Creative Interviewing*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985, p. 79.
- 2 Linda A. Bennett and Katharine McAvity, "Family research: a case for interviewing couples," in Gerald Handel (ed.), *The Psychosocial Interior of the Family*, 3rd edition, New York: Aldine, 1985, pp. 75-94, see pp. 76-84. See also Ralph LaRossa, "Conjoint marital interviewing as a research strategy," *Case Analysis*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1978,

- pp. 141–9. For a discussion of the opposite point of view, see Marie Corbin, “Problems and procedures of interviewing,” appendix 3 in J.M. Pahl and R.E. Pahl (eds), *Managers and their Wives: A Study in Career and Family Relationships in the Middle Class*, London: Penguin, pp. 286–306, see pp. 294–5.
- 3 Douglas, *Creative Interviewing*, p. 82.
 - 4 Stephen Sloan, “On the other foot: oral history students as narrators,” *Oral History Review*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2012, pp. 298–311, see p. 303.
 - 5 Alan Wong, “Conversations for the real world: shared authority, self-reflexivity, and process in the oral history interview,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1, Winter 2009, pp. 239–58, see pp. 250–2.
 - 6 Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson, *Listening for a Change: Oral Testimony and Community Development*, Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1995, p. 62, taken from J. Mitchell and H. Slim, “Listening to rural people in Africa: the semi-structured interview in rapid rural appraisal,” *Disasters*, vol. 15, no. 1, March 1991.
 - 7 Vanessa Allen-Brown, Roundtable: “So, What Does Building Trust Mean, Anyway? Sharing Our Interview Stories and Reflecting on the Craft of Oral History,” 47th Annual Meeting of the Oral History Association, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, October 9–13, 2013.
 - 8 James Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*, New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979, p. 79.
 - 9 Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, p. 79.
 - 10 Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, p. 80.
 - 11 Douglas, *Creative Interviewing*, p. 100.
 - 12 Spradley, *Ethnographic Interview*, p. 81.
 - 13 Valerie Yow (listed as Valerie Quinney) and Linda Wood, *How to Find Out by Asking: A Guide to Oral History in Rhode Island*, Providence, RI: National Endowment for the Humanities Youth Planning Grant and the Rhode Island Board of Education, 1979, p. 20.
 - 14 Raymond L. Gorden, *Interviewing: Strategy, Techniques and Tactics*, 4th edition, Chicago, IL: Dorsey Press, 1987, p. 251.
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