

How do I ask the questions?

1. In general, have a list of topics in mind, not specific questions, word-for-word, and not a specific sequence. You may, however, want to have a start-up list of questions to get your interviewee and yourself comfortable before you change to your topic list.
2. Do plan the topic and form of your first substantial question after the "settling down" phase. Ask a question that will prompt a long answer and "get the subject going."
3. Ask easy questions first, such as brief biographical queries. Ask very personal or emotionally demanding questions after a rapport has developed. End as you began, not with bombshells, but gently with lighter questions.
4. Ask questions one at a time.
5. Allow silence to work for you. Wait.
6. Be a good listener, using body language such as looking at the interviewee, nodding, and smiling to encourage and give the message, "I am interested."
7. If necessary, use verbal encouragement such as "This is wonderful information!" or "How interesting!" Be careful, however, not to pepper the interview with verbal encouragement such as "uh-huh," said at the same time that the interviewee is speaking.
8. Ask for specific examples if the interviewee makes a general statement and you need to know more. Or you might say, "I don't understand. Could you explain that in more detail?"
9. Ask for definitions and explanations of words that the interviewee uses and that have critical meaning for the interview. For example, ask a horseman what he means by the *shaft* of the buggy. How was it used? What was its purpose?
10. Rephrase and re-ask an important question several times, if you must, to get the full amount of information the interviewee knows.
11. Unless you want one-word answers, phrase your questions so that they can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Don't ask, "Were you a farmer on Denny Hill during the 1930s?" Ask instead, "What was it like farming up on Denny Hill during the 1930s?" Ask "essay" questions that prompt long answers whenever you can. Find out not only what the person did, but also what she thought and felt about what she did.
12. Ask follow-up questions and then ask some more.
13. Be flexible. Watch for and pick up on promising topics introduced by the interviewee, even if the topics are not on your interview guide sheet.

Asking questions – further information:

A schedule or list of questions is a good idea at the start of a project although you may find you don't need one as time goes by. Be careful not to stick to a list of questions too rigidly, let the conversation flow naturally.

1. **Ask 'open' rather than 'closed' questions.** Easy to say but not always easy to do. An example of a closed question – a question which invites a yes/no answer – would be 'You felt terrible didn't you?'. An 'open' question would be

'How did you feel?' followed up with, 'Why did you feel like that?' if necessary.

2. **Use plain words and avoid suggesting the answers:** 'How did you feel about working as a housemaid?' rather than 'It must have been awful having to be a servant', and 'Can you describe your childhood?' rather than, 'I suppose your childhood was poor and unhappy?'
3. **Maintain eye-contact.** This shows you are interested and enables you to encourage your interviewee with visual cues rather than speaking over the recording. Use lots of nodding!
4. **Clarify odd words** or things you are not sure about – phrases like 'cutting the vamp' (the boot and shoe trade). If you don't ask at the time you may never know!
5. **Don't be afraid to ask**, but don't interrupt or butt in. Make a mental or physical note to ask later. Particularly with older people, leave a pause at the end of their sentences as they may not have finished speaking.
6. **Respect people's opinions** even if you don't agree with them. This is not the time for you to debate your political or cultural opinions with someone.
7. **Be aware of tiredness** – not just the exhausted 96 year old you have been grilling for three hours, but your own tiredness as well. Take a break or come back another day.

FURTHER READING & WEBSITES:

www.ohs.org.uk

www.tellmeyourstories.org

'Recording Oral Histories' by Valerie Yow

'Doing Oral History' by Donald Ritchie

'The Oral History Reader' ed. by Rob Perks & Alistair Thomson

'The Stories We Live By' by Dan McAdams

'The Voice of the Past' by Paul Thompson