

## Oral History Interview Questions

### Some general principles:

1. Do the background work before you do the interview. If you are interviewing a former railway worker, for example, you should know enough about the railway to gain the person's confidence and to help you be aware of issues that might come up during the interview.
2. The best material is often the unexpected material. Try to elicit stories and then go with the flow, even if it takes you in a different direction than you had anticipated. See the **overview**.
3. In general, do not correct the person's historical memory. You are there to get their perspective on the past. At a later time you can compare the interview with other sources, including other interviews. As well be sensitive about their feelings. Vivid memories often have strong emotions attached to them. See the **overview**.

### Interview questions

1. Start with basics, for example: place and date of birth, family, places lived in, education, occupations, etc.
2. In general use **open questions**. These are questions that can **not** be answered in a few words. Some examples:
  - a. Why did your family move from Prince George to Squamish?
  - b. How did your family get along after the move?
  - c. What happened to you and your family after the flood?
  - d. Tell me about the home you lived in.

According to Thomas Charlton, whose work we have relied on for these examples (see below), the "Tell me about..." is a very effective interview technique.

3. **Closed questions** are those that can be answered in a few words. They can be effective to elicit specific information. Some examples:
  - a. When you moved to Squamish, how long did it take to travel from Vancouver?
  - b. Who was your first boss?
  - c. What kind of food did the grocery store carry?
  - d. How old were you when you left school?

Be careful not to push people too hard on closed, factual questions. They may not remember and, as a consequence, feel inadequate and lose their enthusiasm to be interviewed.

4. **Funnel questions** are a set of related questions that move from the general to the specific:
  - a. Why did you join the railway after school?
  - b. What kind of training did you have to become a brakeman?
  - c. How long were your shifts?
  
5. **Inverted Funnel questions** are the opposite. They move from the specific to the more general. It is a good technique to get someone started on a topic.
  - a. How many people died in the 1980 flood?
  - b. How many people were injured?
  - c. What kind of help was offered to the victims?
  - d. How did this flood compare to the one of 2003?
  - e. Tell me about disaster planning after the 1980 flood.

Again, be careful not to push people too hard on factual questions.

**Printed Source material:**

Charlton, Thomas L. Oral History For Texans, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Austin: Texas Historical Commission, 1985. We relied a lot on Chapter Three, "Oral History in Texas: How to Interview."

Ritchie, Donald A. Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Charlton, Thomas L., Lois Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, ed. Handbook of Oral History. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006.

**On-line material:**

"Doing Oral History." [www.tntech.edu/history/oral.html](http://www.tntech.edu/history/oral.html)  
This is a very rich site that is a list of oral history resources.

Canadian Oral History Association. <http://oral-history.ncf.ca/index.html>

American Oral History Association. <http://www.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/>

Oral History Society (UK). <http://www.ohs.org.uk/>

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