



Special Collections INTERVIEWER GUIDELINES

(Adapted from the Southern Oral History Program at UNC - Chapel Hill.
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Special Collections at UNC Asheville welcomes the participation of students, faculty, and community members who are conducting oral histories as part of their research. We want to work closely with interviewers as their research progresses to provide bibliographical references, regional contacts, and access to our growing collection of interviews about the Asheville and Western North Carolina.

If an interviewer takes on an oral history project for possible inclusion in the Oral History Collections at UNC Asheville, we expect the interviewer to follow a standard procedure for conducting interviews and to assist the Special Collections in the archival process. Listed below are the Special Collections's procedures. To ensure the highest quality interviews, please review this material before you go into the field.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

- 1) **Contact your interviewee first by phone or email and then send a letter of confirmation.** You may want to send the life history form with the letter and ask that the interviewee complete it prior to the interview.
- 2) **Reserve/secure recording equipment.** Many interviewers use their own equipment, whether a laptop (using Garage Band, for example, or Audacity), an iPod or iPhone (with iTalk) or a digital recording device. Digital recorders are available at the Ramsey Library Circulation desk (for UNCA students, faculty, and staff).

Whether you use your own equipment or borrowed equipment, *make certain you leave ample time for testing and learning how to use the equipment.* Test the recording process and make sure you know how to monitor sound levels during the actual interview. As an added precaution, be sure to check the sound levels early in the interview. If there are background noises (fans, air conditioning, etc.), or other problems with the recording, this will be the moment to address such issues.

- 3) **Conduct background research prior to your interview.** Along with reading related

secondary materials, you will want to do additional primary research. If your interview is related to other Special Collections interviews or collections, you might want to ask Special Collections staff if you could listen to/ review previous interviews.

4) **Develop a list of questions.** Bring this list of questions (along with a notepad and pen) to the interview. You will want to refer to these questions during the interview but you should not feel constrained by them. The point is to listen carefully and let your questions flow from what the interviewee says while at the same time steering toward the points you want to cover.

5) **Assemble the necessary forms you need for the interview.**

- Release form/deed of gift *without* restrictions (two copies, one for the interviewee)
- Release form/deed of gift *with* restrictions (two copies, one for the interviewee)
- Life history form (interviewee may have lost the original and need new one)

DURING THE INTERVIEW

Set aside approximately 1 1/2 to 2 hours for the interview to have time to set up equipment, answer any questions, and conduct the interview.

7) **Set up and record an opening announcement.** Prepare your equipment and make sure that you and the narrator are comfortable and ready to talk. At the start of the interview, make an opening announcement with key information including the interviewee's name, your name, the date, the location, and the topic you will be discussing in your interview.

8) **Ask general “life history” questions first.** We recommend you begin your interview by asking for basic contextual information (when and where the interviewee was born, family background, etc.). You may want to base some of these questions on the life history form to clarify any questions you have. To avoid abrupt interruptions, you may jot down notes on key names, events, dates, during the interview, so that you can clarify these points at an appropriate moment. *Do not* ask for information on tape about the interviewee's current address, telephone number, or other contact information.

9) **Pay attention to names and proper nouns.** During the interview, make notes of any names or proper nouns that you might have difficulty spelling later on. Once the interview has ended, ask the interviewee to clarify the spellings of those words.

10) **Have the interviewee sign two copies of the Release Agreement/Deed of Gift.** Keep one for Special Collections and leave the other signed copy with the interviewee. Go over the interview agreement and explain that the interviewee can decide whether to have restrictions or not. Explain that the interview, transcript, and other materials will be deposited in Special Collections and will be available for scholars and students to access. Remember that we cannot accept interviews for which we have no agreement.

In the course of this conversation, be sensitive to any hesitation on the interviewee's part. Emphasize the importance of preserving these stories and making them available to later generations. Reassure the interviewee that these are spoken reminiscences, not polished, grammatical essays. If it becomes clear that the interviewee will allow the interview to be used only with restrictions, ask him/her to fill out the form “deed of gift with restrictions” and be prepared to suggest which restriction should be checked. Make sure that dates for the expiration of restrictions are noted. In case restrictions are desired that are not covered by our forms, put the interviewee in contact with Special Collections.

Finally, find out whether the interviewee would like to have a copy of the recording. Explain that the audio is in data format (.mp3 that plays on a computer, not a CD player) and ask if he/she would like to have an audio copy instead.

11) Inquire about any materials that the interviewee may want to deposit along with their interview. Documents, photographs, or other materials enhance the archival record for future researchers. When appropriate, ask your interviewees whether they have historical photographs, letters, or documents they would be willing to share and/or donate to the archives. If so, please contact Special Collections about how to proceed.

12) With his or her permission, take a photograph of the interviewee. A good photograph is a well-lit, nicely framed shot of the interviewee in a place of their choosing. If there is a third party present, ask them to take an “action” photo of you and the interviewee talking (or chatting after the interview is completed), as well.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

13) Write up a field journal entry immediately following the interview. The journal entry includes your personal reflections about the interview, frank opinions about the interview process, notes on key themes or points, and research ideas. You might describe the setting in detail, write up notes about the conversation you had with the interviewee before and after the interview, or make notes to yourself about unexpected moments during the interview. The field journal will aid you in writing the more polished, public field notes and final papers. It will also help you generate ideas for future interviewing and research.

14) Write up field notes, drawing from your reflections in the field journal entry. The field notes are the edited version of your field journal and will be made public online. Your field notes should include the following:

- Your name and that of your interviewee and the date, time, and location of the interview.
- A one-paragraph description of the interviewee and why he/she was interviewed.
- A one-paragraph description of yourself and why you interviewed this individual.
- A description of the interview itself; describe the setting, other people present; any

pertinent events that happened prior to, during, or after the interview; and your reflections on dynamics of the interview/visit.

These field notes will be critically important to you and subsequent researchers. These notes will be kept on file in Special Collections unless for some reason you feel that is more appropriate that they are not.

15) **Neatly and consistently label your recording.** Audio files should be named as follows: Interviewee last name, Interviewee first name, interviewer first and last name, day, month, and year (spelled out). Example: Doe, John interviewed by Fred Smith, 11Nov2010. Include the interviewee's name, date, and your name on disk and on the jewel case.

16) **Send the interviewee a thank you letter.** The interviewee has been kind enough to take you into his or her home and help you out with this project. A thank you letter in writing is critical. If the interviewee has requested one, include a data copy (.mp3) or audio of the interview in your letter.

If you have any questions about this process, please contact Special Collections at speccoll@unca.edu or (828) 251-6645.

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