

# APPENDIX C:

## Guidelines for Conducting Interviews

These guidelines are designed to encourage consistency of procedure across individual interviewers and at different times. Using these guidelines can also help an interviewer avoid some types of problems. This guideline assumes there will be an audio recording of the interview session. The description below includes individuals in three different roles:

- 1) The *interviewer* is the person who is asking questions and guiding the session.
- 2) The *subject* is the person whose oral history is being captured during the interview.
- 3) A *future listener* is a person who, either as a transcriber or an investigator, will listen to the recording of the interview.

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- I. The interviewer must listen very carefully to the subject.
    - A. Eye contact and nods are good indications of careful listening.
    - B. Maintain an alert and interested stance, avoiding over-enthusiasm, the appearance of disinterest, or critical reactions.
    - C. Silence can be an effective and useful tool, even if it leaves gaps on the recording. Sometimes, a subject benefits from the chance to reflect before giving a response in order to remember relevant information.
    - D. “Read” the subject’s mood and adjust the interview session accordingly; a negative mood can adversely affect the results. Pay attention to whether the subject is becoming tired, bored, angry, or reticent and react appropriately.
    - E. Seek motivation for the subject’s actions as well as a description. Some useful questions for teasing out motivation are:
      - a. Why did you do that?
      - b. Why did she/he do that?
      - d. If “that” had not happened, would you have done what you did?
  - II. The interviewer must be aware of sensitive issues and keep the subject fully informed.
    - A. Explain that if a question comes up that they prefer not to answer they are free to decline.
    - B. Explain that it is fine to request that the recorder be turned off during discussion of the answer to a particular question.
    - C. Explain the use to which the recordings will be put and who will have access to them.
    - D. Avoid questions that are of personal rather than general interest, such as questions about divorce and other difficult life passages.
  - III. The interviewer must ensure that future listeners will understand what they are hearing.
    - A. Avoid non-verbal gestures that will not be seen by the future listener and may create confusing or incomplete interactions on the recording.
    - B. Verbalize topic shifts with transition statements such as “Now tell me about ...” so that future listeners can understand the progression of the interview.
    - C. Verbalize encouragement. For example, while visual cues such as a nod or a smile may be a productive style of interaction in regular conversation, the lack of explicit spoken prompts may lead to an incomplete record or cause a future listener to misinterpret interactions.
  - IV. The interviewer must keep control of the interview
    - A. Keep an eye on the time. Interviews vary greatly in length but going more than 2 hours is counterproductive because both the subject and the interviewer become tired. The interviewer must avoid running out of time before having the chance to ask crucial questions.
    - B. Keep the interview purpose in focus. The interviewer must multitask, keeping track of what the session has covered as well as where it must go.
    - C. Help the subject stay on track. When presented with several choices, the interviewer must decide which branch to follow down a tree and when to chop off a branch. Some subjects may go off on a tangent; it is the interviewer’s job to minimize the impact of these diversions without interrupting the flow of the interview.
    - D. Determine when and how to follow up. For some items, the interviewer will choose to follow up immediately with related prompts to delve more deeply. For other issues, the interviewer must remember to return and explore further later. A pen in hand for jotting down reminders can be a valuable tool, as long as its use is not too distracting for the subject.
    - E. If done politely, it is OK for the interviewer to challenge or contradict the subject, for example if they contradict something from earlier in the interview.
    - F. Keep the questions out of the subject’s sight. Seeing the questions could lead them to multitask and think about a future question while answering the current one.