

18 Ways to Get the Most from Family Member Interviews

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Sometimes it seems like interviewing another member of your family would be a breeze, right? The fact is that getting a parent, grandparent, aunt, or uncle to actually sit down and be interviewed is half the battle. Quite a bit of preparation is needed on your part as the interviewer, and you need to have some basic skills which you'll use during the interview if you want great results.



- ☐ **Be prepared.** Make sure you have all your equipment and your questions or prompts. There are times when an opportunity for an interview pops up unexpectedly. Make sure you are adept at improvising; having an app on your smartphone is good insurance!
- ☐ **Multiple interview subjects help to focus on relationships.** Having two or more persons as part of an interview can allow for a natural exchange of comments and those comments in turn, give some insight into the relationship between those people.
- ☐ **Use the grandkids.** Sometimes it can be difficult to get older family members to answer questions. Consider using the grandchildren to ask the questions. No grandparent can resist telling their story to an interested child.
- ☐ **Use props.** Photos and family mementos are great to elicit stories and bring back memories. Bring the props out one by one.
- ☐ **Ask permission.** Keep track of your time and if necessary, ask if you can extend the interview. If using a digital recorder or smartphone app, ask permission of the interview subject and also take time to explain the tool or the process.
- ☐ **Fly solo (mostly).** Plan on doing the interview in a one-on-one format. Sometimes having others around can be inhibiting unless you are at a family gather such as a wedding or a holiday meal. Especially when dealing with difficult topics, make sure that the interview subject is comfortable telling their story with those in the room.
- ☐ **One question at a time.** Don't bunch several questions together in one long question. Short, open-ended questions asked one at a time work best.
- ☐ **Don't interrupt.** If inspiration strikes and you think of a good question, jot it down and save it for another part of the interview.

- ☐ **Don't challenge inaccurate information.** During a response to a question, you may see that the information offered conflicts with your research or what others have offered. Don't contradict and don't challenge. You'll have time to process the information and to put it into context of your family's history later on as you compile and prepare the contents for preservation and sharing.
- ☐ **Redirect and bring them back.** Sometimes a person will go off on a tangent and speak about a topic that is not relevant. Deftly and gently bring them back around to the original question. Having the question written down and in a position where the interviewee can refer to it will also help with focus.
- ☐ **Check the time.** If you and your subject have agreed on a set end time, respect this and schedule another interview if necessary.
- ☐ **Don't interrogate.** Some older relatives may not offer up names and dates in the beginning; don't pepper them with questions. Circle back with questions such as "What was Aunt Cora's maiden name?"
- ☐ **Transcribe right away.** Don't put off transcribing the oral interview if that is part of your project. Do this while the details of the interview are fresh in your mind.
- ☐ **Don't tire out your subject.** Most interviews should be one hour or less in length. Ideally the response for each question should take about five minutes and the entire interview should last no longer than 45 minutes. In reality, the interview should stop when you first see that your subject is getting tired. Remember, you want the interview to be a positive experience and possibly lead to future interviews.
- ☐ **Don't frame the discussion.** If your research shows that a person was hard to live with or perhaps had difficult relations with others, don't offer those details on the initial question. See what the interview subject response with and then follow-up with "Well, I heard that . . ." or "Uncle Charles told me that . . ." and offer your evidence.
- ☐ **Silence counts.** It is fine if your interview subject is silent for a short time; generating memories is hard work! These gaps can be edited out later on.
- ☐ **Don't show off.** The interview is not about you and your skills. Your family member is the star so let their star shine.
- ☐ **Send a thank you note.** Make sure the interview subject is thanked and is appreciated for their contribution. This can also ensure future interviews with the same person.