

CHAPTER 1 ORAL HISTORY

This section is contributed by the Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore (NAS). NAS is the official custodian of Singapore's collective memory and is responsible for the collection, preservation and management of Singapore's public and private archival records.

INTRODUCTION

Oral history is the collection and documentation of memories through recorded interviews. Your interviewees will recollect and share stories of their lives and experiences, people they have met and places they have been. They will also add their personal feelings and opinions to their stories, making the past come alive.

WHAT YOU NEED

For oral history recording, it is advisable to use a professional recorder and microphone. Otherwise, you may use your mobile phone too. If you wish to make a visual record, you may use a video camera.

It is useful to have a pen and notebook with you for taking down important points and follow-up questions while your interviewee is talking.

Equipment and tools checklist

- ✓ Recording device (audio recorder, video camera or mobile phone)
- ✓ Microphone (if necessary)
- ✓ Spare batteries
- ✓ Pens
- ✓ Notebook





HOW-TO GUIDE

1 Decide on the theme and focus

Decide on your research theme and interview focus. For example, your research theme could be “school days”, and your interview focus could be “my favourite lesson”.

You can start by thinking about yourself and your objective. What are you curious about? Whose memories do you want to capture? What is interesting about the person’s background or story?

To get ideas for your theme and focus, you may wish to check out the resources at the National Library and National Archives of Singapore (NAS) in person. Online resources such as NewspaperSG (newspapers.nl.sg) and Access to Archives Online (a2o.nas.sg) are also helpful.

2 Choose your interviewee

Identify an interviewee who is willing to share the types of experiences you want to capture. For a start, your interviewee could be your parent, grandparent or teacher.

3 Prepare your questions

Ask more **open-ended questions**, beginning with “Why”, “How” and “What”, to allow your interviewee to share more information and his or her personal feelings.

A picture indeed paints a thousand words — but would it not be even better to hear the story behind it?

How was it like studying in a village school?



Do you know that these students were celebrating the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II? Ask your interviewees about the types of celebrations they had in the past, which you rarely hear today.



Ever wondered how grocery shopping was like before there were supermarkets?



How were kampong residents affected by floods during the 1950s? Get your interviewees to share their personal experiences coping with events in the yesteryears.

Photos courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

Open-ended question

How do you feel about being a member of the school band?

This question encourages the interviewee to share his or her thoughts in detail.

Closed-ended question

Did you like being a member of the school band?

This question requires merely a “Yes” or “No” reply. The interviewee does not get the chance to elaborate further.

You may order your questions chronologically, or you may arrange them such that one question leads to another smoothly.

Do remember to cover basic personal information at the start of the interview, such as the years spent in school and his or her age when a particular incident took place. This will help listeners understand the interviewee’s background and relate to the interview better.

4 Conduct a pre-interview session

During the casual pre-interview session, **share your objectives and scope with your interviewee**. Use memory aids such as photographs, newspapers and publications to evoke his or her memories. Your interviewee may bring up new, interesting topics that you may add to the interview scope.

5 Conduct the actual interview

During the actual interview, **pay attention to your interviewee so that he or she is more willing to share**. You need not follow your prepared questions exactly; go with the flow of your interview and ask for more details when necessary.

Always remember to get written agreement from your interviewee for the use of the interview. Make a copy of the agreement for your interviewee.

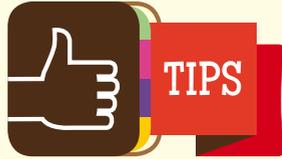
6 Document and disseminate

Always back up several copies of your recordings. It is also a good gesture to send your interviewee a copy of the interview.

To facilitate searches, prepare a synopsis, or summary, of the interview. You may also want to **transcribe the recording to provide quick access to its content**. When you transcribe, you will need to listen to the recording and document its content word for word in writing. Actions and emotions should be indicated within brackets, for example (interviewee smiles). You may choose to transcribe only selected or notable parts.

7 Upload your story

Email your audio file of not more than 20MB to singaporememory@nlb.gov.sg. Include your personal details such as name and contact number and a synopsis of your submission.



- Familiarise yourself with your recording device before the interview, and remember to press 'record' just before you begin your interview!
- During your pre-interview session, look out for ambient sounds that will add noise to your recording, such as telephone rings, heavy traffic and electrical appliances.
- Remember to turn off your mobile phone (if you are not using it as a recorder) and encourage your interviewee to do so too.
- During the interview, nod at appropriate times to show that you are listening. Smile and maintain eye contact with your interviewee.
- Try not to interrupt your interviewee. Avoid acknowledging with terms like "yes" or "I see", which will sound unnecessary on playback.
- When transcribing, don't change your interviewee's choice of words and tenses, as the speech reflects his or her social background.
- If the interview was not conducted in English, you may also consider translating it into English to share it with more people.



Photo courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore

During an interview, maintain eye contact with your interviewee, nod and smile at appropriate times. Your interviewee should feel comfortable with you and the environment.

ORAL HISTORY RECORDING SAMPLES

For sample oral history recordings and transcripts, check out the National Archives of Singapore's Access to Archives portal at a2o.nas.sg

MORE ON ORAL HISTORY

Books

Memories & Reflections: The Singapore Experience - Documenting a Nation's History Through Oral History by Oral History Centre

The Oral History Manual by Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan

Online

Steps to Conducting Your Own Oral History Project by the National Archives of Singapore

Practical Advice: Getting Started by the Oral History Society (UK)

How To Interview - Part 3: Tips & Tricks



SHARING OF
PERSONAL
EXPERIENCE

JOURNALISTIC INTERVIEW

PAULINE LOH

Pauline Loh is a journalist, magazine editor and award-winning book author. She shares with us her interviewing experiences as a journalist. More details on page 17.

How do you prepare for an interview session?

After ensuring that I have the interviewee's name and contact number, I will do further research on the interviewee and the story angle, and email a list of questions so that he or she has time to prepare the answers. In my email, besides introducing myself and arranging for a date, time and place, I will check with the interviewee the language he or she is comfortable with; if necessary, I will arrange for an interpreter. It's also important to state the length of interview time (usually one to two hours) and give my contact number in case of changes.

Which interviewing experience impacted you the most?

Once I interviewed an 80-year-old blind woman who was the sole

caregiver of her husband who was suffering from dementia. Nobody else was staying with them. She measured out her husband's medicine by feeling the sizes and shapes of the pills. He was incontinent, and she detected his urine spillage by smell. He could leave the house and she won't realise it because she was blind. She would wait for the police to call. I was shaken by the fact that there were people living in such desperate plights in prosperous Singapore.

Could you share your experience of a challenging interview?

In my second year as a news reporter, I had to interview a grieving husband whose wife had been electrocuted to death by a faulty water heater. I read up the police reports so that I wouldn't have to ask unnecessary questions. I introduced myself as a reporter upfront. He was still in a state of shock and talked disjointedly.

An interview session in progress.



Photo courtesy of the National Library Board

I tried to keep my notebook as unobtrusive as possible. I did not interrupt, not even to ask questions. I maintained an interested and sympathetic facial expression. I kept the interview short so as to not prolong his grief. After the interview, I expressed my condolences and thanked him for his time. From this experience I learned that it is important to show sympathy and not to interrupt.

Can you give some tips on how to conduct a meaningful interview to those new to interviewing?

Always be punctual for interviews. If you are not confident about taking notes fast enough, bring along an audio recorder. To help your interviewee open up, remember to make eye contact and smile. Ask open-ended questions, and don't interrupt his or her answers. Show empathy through facial expressions; never rebuke an interviewee or moralise. Don't talk about yourself. Always be courteous — introduce yourself, thank the interviewee, and smile.