

## Oral History Interview Exercise

Use **chapter 8** (“**Interviewing: Unstructured and semi-structured**”) as guidance, paying attention to these issues:

- getting started
- probes
- prepare a list of questions (a “guide”)
- tips for getting people to open up
- presentation of self
- why people are inaccurate reporters, and what to do about it
- how to frame questions (‘social desirability’ effect, etc)

See these two websites for additional information:

[Step-by-step guide to oral history](#)

[Life history interview](#)

The first is about oral history, the second about life history interviews in particular. The first of these not only gives guidance about interviewing techniques, but about the nuts and bolts you will need if you decide to use this in real research – release forms, etc.

### General Instructions

Do **TWO** oral history interviews. Plan on 30–60 minutes per interview. Take notes (recorder optional). You may do these with people you know, but not close friends (one person can be an older relative). If you find people at an institution (senior center, nursing home, etc) be sure to ask permission from the person in charge of the facility. In asking permission for the interviews, explain what you are doing and something about the topic (“hi, my anthropology class is doing interviews on x”) and how long it will take, before asking permission (“may I ask you some questions about..?”).

Use one or more of the methods mentioned by Bernard to enhance recall. Try the different probes and see how they work.

Write up a short summary of what you did, what you learned, what worked well, and what didn’t, and send to me via turnitin.

### Oral history interviewing tips

Have a theme in mind that you want to ask them about, and prepare some questions, but be prepared to listen and follow their leads.

Some people will open up and talk if you introduce a fairly general question (“tell me about...”), and this has the advantage that they will talk about what is important to them. But not everyone is a born storyteller. You might then find it helpful to introduce specific questions to help them recreate the past experience in their mind. If you want to learn what it was like for an older person

when she was growing up, you might find it helpful to ask specific questions to mentally move her back in time to the house where she grew up, the shop floor where he worked, etc. What did it look like? Smell like? Sound like? If it is someone younger, you could ask about specific experiences, perhaps their first crush, a favorite teacher, bullying at school, relationships with other family members, etc. You are trying to get at the lived experience.

Studs Terkel was famous for his ability to get people to open up; it reportedly came from a genuine empathy and non-judgmental curiosity.