

Guide to Interviews

The purpose of your interview is to get the person you are interviewing to tell you a story. Sometimes you will know exactly what story you want to hear, but sometimes you will not. It is a good idea to go into the interview with a list of questions so you will have a starting point, but don't feel that you have to stick strictly to the questions you thought up in advance. Listen to what the person you are interviewing says and let that guide you. Some questions will not get much of a response, but others will.

When you find a subject that the person wants to talk about, listen! Quite often, as you listen, you will think of other questions you want to ask. Wait until the person stops talking (never interrupt!) and ask those questions. Take notes or record the interview. (If your interviewee is comfortable talking before a video camera, you can make a video of the interview, but be cautious about using this technique because many people find it hard to speak with a camera on them.)

Always make sure that you have written down the person's full name and the date of the interview. If the person mentioned other people or places, check to make sure you have the correct spelling of all names.

Interview Questions

You want to ask questions that will get the most response. Avoid asking questions that can be answered yes or no. Instead, ask open-ended questions.

Suppose you are interviewing your grandmother about her school days. Below you will see two lists of questions -- the yes and no questions and the open-ended questions. Study these and then make a list of your own, open-ended questions.

Yes or No Questions (to be avoided)

Was school different when you were my age?

Did you like school?

Did you have to walk to school?

Open Ended questions (good ones to use)

How was school different when you were my age?

What did you like most about school?

How did you get to school?

Be ready with follow-up questions. If your grandmother says she walked to school, ask her how far. Who walked with her? What did she see along the way? Get as many details as you can!

Do not be pushy. If there is a topic (such as a person's age) that your interviewee obviously does not want to discuss, let it drop. Remember that interviewees are doing you a favor by granting you an interview. Treat them with courtesy and appreciation.

Let your interviewee proofread you turn it in. Provide him/her with a copy of the final draft.