

SPOHP INTERVIEW BEST PRACTICES

ITEMS TO BRING TO EVERY INTERVIEW:

1. Marantz recorder	For archival-quality audio
2. Deed of Gift	SPOHP's release form, must be signed
3. Extension cord	Simple two-prong is ideal
4. Camera/iPhone	Take photos—with permission!
5. Interview guide	Questions/talking points
6. Note pad or paper	For follow-up questions
7. Pen	For taking notes, getting signatures, etc.

“Question-asking in oral history interviews is an art, individualized and even intuitive.”

- Charles Morrissey

The standard SPOHP interview introduction:

“This is __[**your name here**]__, it's __[**Month, day, year**]__, and I'm sitting here with __[**interviewee, plus anyone else present**]__ in __[**general location—not specific address**]__. Thank you for joining me today.”

- May I ask you to please state your **full name**? (Don't forget maiden names!)
- **When** and **where** were you **born**?



Create a safe space for the narrator(s) to share and reflect.

Be **calm and patient**—become **comfortable** with the interviewing process, the **equipment**, and **yourself**.

A good interview is a **guided conversation** that emphasizes the **narrator's voice**. In that conversation, **simple, open-ended questions** are best. Better answers emerge from **meaningful dialogue** than one 'brilliant' question; oral history interviews are often **indirect** and **expansive**.

The interview guide is only that—a guide, to refer to during a lull in conversation. **Avoid interrupting** the narrator, and **try not to cut off tangents** or rambles. Instead, as people are speaking, **take notes to ask follow-up questions later**. And as the interviewer, remember that **the interview is not about you**.

STRENGTHS OF ORAL HISTORY:

Asking **why** particular decisions were made

Evaluating existing sources' information

Evoking what the experience was like

The **meaning** of the stories to the narrator

Remember the archive: the interview is a gift, and you need to respect that gift.

“You don't change the community, the community changes you.”

-LDAP founder Génesis Lara

GOOD KINDS OF FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

Sourcing / situating • How did the narrator learn about/encounter this information?

Detail questions • Probe generalities for specific details, examples, or stories

Following/Fleshing out • More info about people, themes, places that come up

Experiential description • Firsthand description of what an activity or process was like

Exploring laden terms • Words like “adventure” or “racism” are complex and can be unpacked

Two-sentence sensitivity • e.g. “I have heard/other people have said [X]. What has been your experience?”

AVOID / MINIMIZE QUESTIONS THAT ARE:

Leading • Strongly implies a correct or preferred answer
“*Isn't a local restaurant the best kind?*”

Double-barreled • Two questions embedded in one
“*Did you do most of your drinking at bars?*”

Frontloading • A cluster of questions asked all at once
“*Can you tell me about your parents, your school, your neighborhood, and what chores you had?*”

Prescriptive / value-laden • Dependent on laden terms
“*Was there an earth-shattering moment that made you aware of segregation?*”

Flatly confirmational • Information already in archives
“*So, do you remember the old Macy's downtown?*”