

TIPS FOR INTERVIEWING ON FAMILY FOLKLORE*

1. Start with a question or a topic that you know will elicit a full reply from your subject, such as a story you have heard him tell in the past. This will give your relative confidence in his ability to contribute something of value to your collection.
2. Avoid generalities. "Tell me about your childhood," for instance, often elicits nothing more than a list of names and dates.
3. Ask evocative questions. Nothing can kill an interview faster than a long series of questions that require only yes or no answers.
4. Face up to the fact that there will be some information that you will not get. You may be the wrong sex or age. A relative may simply not trust you with sensitive data. If you feel you must have the missing material, you may be able to solicit the help of another relative or friend as an interviewer.
5. Be aware that role switching will occur. You have changed from a son or daughter to an interrogator. Both you and your informant may be uneasy in these new roles. A low-key approach in a natural setting should help relieve some of the discomfort.
6. Show interest. Encourage your informants as much as possible. Interject remarks whenever appropriate. Take an active part in the conversation without dominating it. Learn to be a creative listener as well as a good listener.
7. Know what questions you want to ask, but don't be afraid to let your informant go off on a tangent. He or she might just touch on subjects of interest that you never thought to ask about.
8. Never turn off the tape recorder unless asked to. Not only does it break the conversation, such action suggests that you think some of the informant's material is not worth recording.
9. Use props whenever possible. Documents, letters, photo albums, scrapbooks, home movies, and other family heirlooms can all be profitably used to stimulate memories.
10. Be sensitive to the needs of family members. Schedule your sessions at a convenient time. Older people tire easily; cut the interview off at the first sign of fatigue. Don't slight family members who show interest in your project. Interview them, even if you have reason to believe their material will be of minimal value.

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11. If possible, prepare some sort of written report for the family as a tangible result of their participation. Remember to save all of your tapes, notes, and any other documentation that you have accumulated. Label everything with names, dates, and places.
12. Ideally, all tapes should be indexed and transcribed as soon as possible after the interview. You will be more conscientious about documentation if you place yourself in the position of your great-grandchild who, many decades in the future, will be using your project as a source for his reconstruction.
13. Before publishing diaries, memoirs, letters, or other written artifacts, you would be wise to find out about copyright, not the recipient nor the present owner of the letter. The same principle holds true for tape-recorded oral history and folklore—the speaker, not the tape owner, holds all rights to his material. Most family members will gladly allow you to make use of whatever resources you need for documenting the family's traditions, but it never hurts to be prepared with copyright information. The Copyright Office at the Library of Congress will send a packet of information upon request (Copyright Office, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20560).

*Amy J. Kotkin, Holly Cutting Baker, Family Folklore Interviewing Guide and Questionnaire, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibits Service, 1977).