

## Handout 22: Purposes of the Pre-Interview Meeting

*Session: The Pre-Interview Meeting*

An Oral History source is a living source. The narrator is a human being and is at the center of your Oral History project. They have feelings and boundaries and it is important that you approach them with empathy and care. This is entirely different from how you might approach a library or an archive where you may go to read a 400-year-old manuscript. The manuscript doesn't care whether or not you look at it, or how much time you spend with it, or whether you smile or frown at it. As such, you need to proceed with care when dealing with your narrator to ensure they feel comfortable with you and that they are fully aware of their role in the Oral History process. They may be flattered that you chose to talk to them, they may be intimidated, or they may be indifferent, but it is your responsibility to ensure they are *fully* informed of the entire process. Plus, they are your guide to the past and so you need to make sure you have a good relationship before you embark on your journey.

The actual Oral History interview proceeds from start to finish with a series of questions and responses in a dialogue between the researcher (or interviewer) and the narrator. But since the narrator is not a database of cataloged and stored information in alphabetical or chronological order, the relaxed flow and pace of the conversation makes all the difference. Moreover, the interview always takes place in the present where the interviewer prompts the narrator to remember or recall events/experiences/people from the past. The process of recalling or remembering involves different types of memory, from cognitive memory (related to learning skills and functionality) to autobiographical memory that is strongly influenced by emotion. This kind of remembering is a highly personal experience that is dependent on the mutual trust you instill during the recorded interview. Trust is the basis of the shared authority between narrator and interviewer, and the pre-interview meetings are integral to the trust-building process that is at the heart of Oral History.

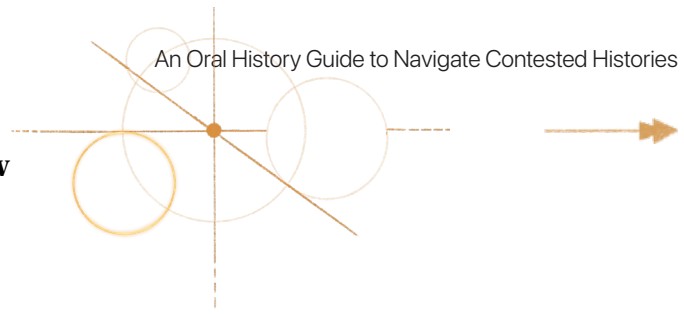
### **i. Explain your project and the narrator's participation in the project:**

If your narrator is not accustomed to talking about themselves or controversial topics, and the like, this is your chance to calm their nerves and reassure them. If they show reluctance, explain why their story is important to the overall project. Tell them their testimony is an integral part of the learning process that allows them to share their own experiences and memory in their own words, with their own voice. Explain to them that their contribution helps you understand more about the past so that you can visualize it and make it part of your understanding. Emphasize the importance of hearing individual stories to build understanding and empathy across generations and perspectives, especially in the context of a contested history. Though we may not always agree, talking about individual experiences in the past is an important step towards reconciliation.

### **ii. Establish Rapport to get to know your narrator:**

The face-to-face pre-interview meeting gives you a chance to decide if this is the right person to interview. Maybe their memory isn't as coherent as you previously thought; maybe they are not as responsive as you thought; maybe their experience is too similar to someone else's and therefore doesn't add to your understanding of the issues. So use this time to go over the *general aspects* of the narrator's life. However, make sure *not* to





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discuss things in detail, save that for the recorded session. If they immediately jump into a juicy anecdote, stop them, tell them that this is exactly what you want to record and to save it for the recorded interview.

### iii. Establish rapport for your narrator to get to know you:

After the two aforementioned points, you should have established some rapport. While you have been evaluating the narrator, your narrator is also evaluating you. They are deciding how serious you are and if you are worth their time. Remember they are giving *you* their time. They may be sharing things with you that they have never shared before, not even with close family and friends. This is the time for you to make a good impression on them. It is not an exaggeration to say that the rapport built during the pre-interview meeting will influence, and actually determine, the course and quality of the recorded interview.

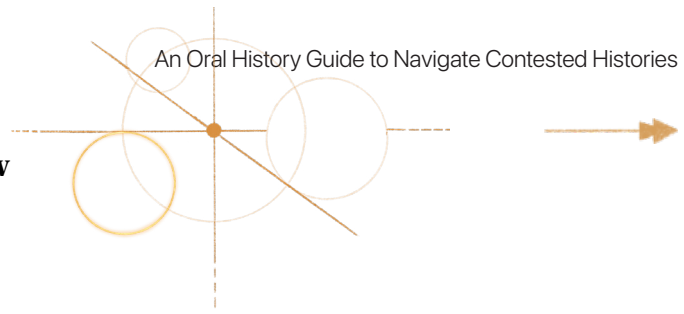
### iv. Reach additional potential narrators through the snow-ball effect:

The pre-interview meeting is also a good place and time to ask the narrator to suggest other possible narrators, candidates, or colleagues who might agree to be interviewed. One narrator can lead to another like the telephone game (telephone cassé). This effect may be particularly helpful if your narrator lived or worked in various places or contexts, such as a school, hotel, factory, or a governmental institution. At the same time, it is important to consider that the narrator may be recommending someone whose perspective is not much different from their own. And in the interest of collecting multiple perspectives, this might not be useful in the context of a contested history.

### v. Explain and plan the logistics of the recorded interview:

- **Duration:** inform the narrator about the time needed for the interview (1.5/2 hours). Exceeding 2 hours is usually too long. If you need more time, schedule another interview session.
- **Location:** decide on a quiet spot to do the recording – away from ticking clocks, horns, telephones, noisy refrigerators, external noises. It would be ideal to record in a familiar and comfortable environment for the narrator.
- **One-on-one:** explain to the narrator that it would be ideal to conduct the session alone with them, because they require your undivided attention. The presence of others in the room may distract the narrator, or the narrator may be interrupted by others who want to ‘correct’ their account. Even if you’re accompanied by a fellow researcher (to take notes, help with equipment, and observe), the interview should be between only 2 people: the researcher and the narrator.
- **Personal background sheet (Handout 27):** The pre-interview meeting is when you fill out an information sheet about the narrator as part of the meta-data of the interview. This is part of the documentation that needs to be attached to the sound recording as it is deposited in the archive.





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In general, the purpose of the pre-interview meeting is as much about preparing the interviewer as it is about preparing the narrator to know exactly what to expect. The only acceptable surprise to a narrator during an interview is the degree of **spontaneity** that might arise from it, resulting in them remembering more than expected and/or the degree of enjoyment and fulfillment of the overall interview experience. The pre-interview meeting also serves to stimulate a narrator's memory during the interval between the pre-interview meeting and the actual recorded interview.

The pre-interview meeting is also the moment when we verify if the narrator is suited for our research project, as we find out here what the experiences of the narrator might be, and if they are in the right condition to go through the interview process. This means that we informally assess their physical and/or mental stamina. Are they able to withstand at least 60- 90 minutes of intense conversation? Is their memory sharp enough to share specific details concerning their past experience? Do they have a first-hand or eye-witness account of the events related to your research topic? Do they demonstrate a willingness to contribute their story to your project, are they eager to share? If you've (or your group) already interviewed several narrators, how does this narrator contribute to the multiple perspectives/points of view surrounding the contested nature of your topic. Does this narrator have a different story or memory of what happened? If their account is too similar to those you've already collected, this narrator might not be the best candidate for your research project (See *Session Narrator Selection* for detailed criteria).

Once you feel that all of the above points are covered, two additional steps need to be taken during the pre-interview meeting:

- Rough Outline of the Interview (Handout 23)
- Informed Consent Form (Handout 24)

