

Handout 29: Questions as a Research Tool

Session: Interview Questions

Asking questions is such a part of our daily life that we don't necessarily consider it a research tool. We habitually ask "how are you?" as the first question in a string of daily niceties. But let's consider how many different ways there are to ask "how are you." Asked in passing, it's just another way of saying hello, but asked differently, deliberately and with eye contact, it can be a very direct way of finding out how someone is feeling or faring. And that's just it, how the question is asked and how you listen to the answer transforms a question from a basic social exchange into a surprisingly powerful research tool.

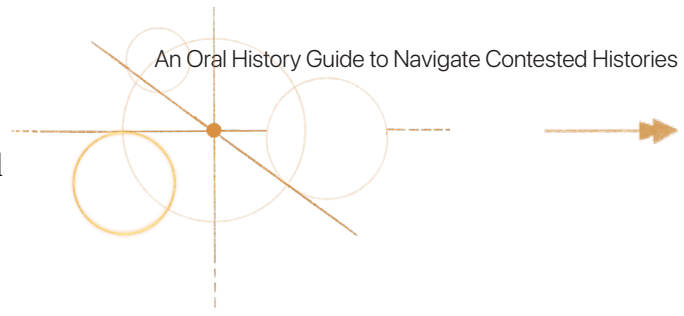
The power of asking questions lies in the type of questions asked, how they are asked, how closely we listen to the answers, and then, how we let that process repeat itself to build a dialogue or a conversation. Questions provide guideposts for a narrator that can steer the conversation in one direction or another throughout the narration process. The more guideposts you provide, the longer the narrative journey will be. Depending on how much of a talker they are, some narrators may need more guiding questions than others. Like everything else in life, there is a logic behind asking questions. While some people ask questions easily (and it depends on the person to whom you are asking), others find it more difficult. Some may feel that asking too many questions is impolite and intrusive. But in an Oral History interview, that is exactly the point: to inquire, to understand, to learn more, to get closer to the picture of the past conjured up in the narrator's memory.

So how do we start? It's a good idea to begin with questions the narrator will enjoy answering. Easy questions, or **warm-up questions**, related to basic facts and family (where were you born, in what year were you born, how many siblings do you have, etc.). These questions break the ice and make your narrator (and you) more comfortable. We then move to **specific questions** (seeking a defined or focused response, such as, "where did you go to school or university?" "what is your profession or career?" "what kind of work do you do?").

The two most interesting types of questions are **open-ended questions and follow-up questions**. Open-ended questions are questions that focus on the *why*, the *how*, and the *'tell me more about'* kind of questions. They are the opposite of **yes/no questions**, which should be avoided because they can be answered with a simple yes or no (i.e., "did you like your teachers?" will elicit a much less interesting answer than "can you tell me about your favorite teachers?"). They can also be merged into **two-sentence format questions**, where the first sentence provides some background and the second is in the form of a question ("you were a serious basketball player in school, how did that play into your decision to go into sports psychology?").

Follow-up questions are probably the most important types of questions because they accomplish two goals at once: i) they demonstrate that you are **actively listening** and ii) and that you are therefore fully attentive, which is one of the most important forms of non-verbal communication that cannot be underestimated. Your attentiveness signals your respect for the narrator (they feel respected and heard), and, because follow-up questions are **spontaneous**, they may lead you down a path that you didn't anticipate. Since follow-up questions are based on the narrator's response, they are questions that you couldn't have possibly prepared (i.e., you ask your narrator about their favorite teacher and they answer saying it was their math teacher





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because she was much younger than the rest of the teachers and tried to teach them in a different way. So, a follow-up question could be “how did she teach differently than your other teachers?” or “why was she so much younger than the other teachers?” or “how long did she teach you?”). Then, these answers could elicit more follow-up questions and so on.

Spontaneity will, in fact, reveal more than you expect, and even more than the narrator expects. Once in a while, allow answers to veer off the main course, as this shows that you are a **good listener**. It also shows that you respect the narrator as a partner in making this history and that you are giving her/him the opportunity to share the authority and the outcome of the recorded interview. You never know where the stories might lead, and they might be narrated for the first time. People, especially the elderly, don’t often have the opportunity to share their life experiences, so you may be getting to know this person in a way no one else has known them.

This is particularly important in cases where your narrator also happens to be a relative. Because you have a shared history together, some information may be taken for granted and therefore left unmentioned. You need to be aware that it may be necessary to state the obvious. For example, if you are interviewing your grandmother, you know very well who she married and who her children are, but for the record, you would need to ask her that (what is to you) obvious question. *Remember that the recorder is the third party in the room, the audience, and that audience likely has no idea who your grandmother, or you, are.*

Finally, always keep in mind that the narrator knows more about their life than anyone else, and if you give them enough room by **listening** to their responses, they may give you information that you wouldn’t otherwise expect. Questions should always be framed to **encourage** the narrator in his/her recollections. Be eager to learn what the narrator shares and, at the same time, be aware that **you are not** an investigative journalist, pinning down the facts or questioning the authenticity of the narrator. Otherwise, the interview will lack life and spontaneity. Again, it is **how** you ask the question that determines the richness of the answer. In journalism, the interview is a means to an end (the published article or broadcast), while in Oral History the interview is the end itself.

To summarize, the five types of questions used in an Oral History interview are:

- warm-up or easy (to answer) questions
- specific questions
- two-sentence format questions
- open-ended questions
- follow-up questions

