

Handout 30: The DO's and DON'Ts of Asking Questions

Session: Interview Questions

I. The DO's:

DO use a mix of specific and open-ended questions. For example, "What was your first serious job?" followed by the open-ended question "How did your first job determine your future path?". In addition to the specifics of who, what, where, and when questions, ask why and how. Use openers such as "Tell me about..." or "Tell me more about..."; "Describe" and "Explain". These questions will provide more interesting answers.

DO use a two-sentence format: the first sentence gives a bit of background on the importance of your question, the second asks the question. For example: Many date the civil war's beginning to the April 1975 bus incident. What were you doing when you heard the news?

DO have follow-up questions: When the narrator says something that inspires another question, be sure to follow-up with that question rather than just moving on to the next question. This is where you need to be flexible, not just sticking to your own list of questions, but rather let other questions arise from the discussion. Follow-up question: How did you feel when you heard the news?

DO, most importantly, LISTEN TO THE SILENCES: If you ask a question and there is no immediate reply, wait. Do not fill the silence yourself. Wait for 10 (long) seconds, sooner or later the narrator will break the silence, sometimes with information that they would not have thought of before. The silence must be filled. It is part of having a conversation. If the interviewer doesn't fill the silence, then the narrator will, and sometimes, this results in the best part of the interview.

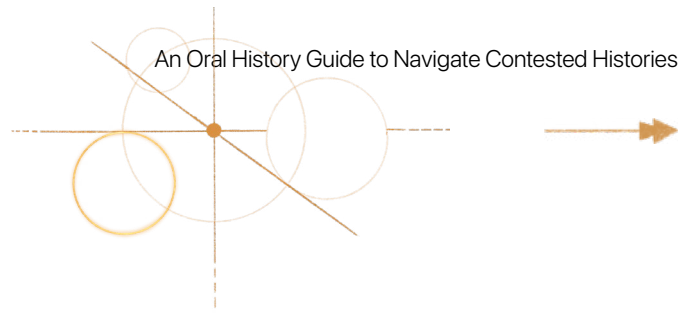
II. The DONT'S:

DON'T limit yourself to simple "yes/no" questions, rather replace them or follow them up with questions that allow explanation and detailing. You want your narrator to delve deep into themselves. Instead of asking, "Did you go to a public school?" ask "What was your school like?" The name of the school will usually come up in the answer.

DON'T ask a double question without intervals. Asking two questions at once is confusing to the narrator and likely to result in only one being answered and the other forgotten. If you want to ask two questions, ask them separately. Multiple questions lumped together in one sentence rarely get fully answered.

DON'T rush through the question sheet. The interview is not a race. Listen to the narrator and pursue interesting avenues of experience with follow-up questions. In other words, use the set of questions as a guide, as a map of the story, not an interrogation list. The questions shouldn't be a rigid agenda that imposes itself on the





Handout 30: The DO's and DON'Ts of Asking Questions

Session: Interview Questions

interview, but should be flexible enough to allow the exchange to flow. Even though you might have a great list of questions, remember to avoid over-conformity to your questions, as this will prevent the narrator from telling his/her story.

DON'T ask leading questions. Leading questions give your narrator an idea of what you think the correct answer to the question is and might push the narrator to give you your answer and what they believe you want to hear, not theirs. For example, "Wasn't the bus incident a response to an assassination attempt?" Instead ask, "Can you tell me what you know about the bus incident of April 1975?" Or, "Why do you think so many people consider the bus incident of April 1975 the event that started the war?"

DON'T cut off or interrupt your narrator. This gives the impression that you are in a hurry, that you just want to finish the task and are really not that interested in what they are saying. Digression often leads to more in-depth responses and unexpected exploration of important areas of knowledge.

What-if?

These What-if questions are a good way to check-in with oneself before an interview, to be ready for different scenarios that might arise when talking to narrators:

- What if the person doesn't know anything about what they are being asked?
- What if the person is shy or afraid?
- What if there is a specific topic they don't want to talk about?
- What if the person becomes upset while talking, and cries? What if they are too upset to continue?
- What if I can't think of another question to ask?
- What if they ask me about myself?
- What if

