



Genealogy SA
Helping find your family history ✨

Oral History

The following outline can be used to structure a family oral history interview and contains examples of specific questions.

Interviewing family members is one of the first steps to discovering your family history. It's also the step people most often regret not taking—we've heard countless researchers say 'I wish I'd asked Dad/Gran while they were around.'



Starting a family oral history project — and, crucially, seeing it through — requires a bit of preparation and time. Maybe you think there's no one left to interview, or you're reluctant to call Great-aunt Mary and pepper her with questions. Then, how do you record the interview and cite it as a source? Planning is the key so before you visit that unsuspecting relative, consider how you'll accomplish the key steps:

1. Define your project

Clarity is important in telling an entire family history in any form — but especially as an oral documentation — it is a daunting project, so start small. Don't just look at the interview as an opportunity to do genealogical research. Rather, see it as a chance to spend time with a family member and let him or her talk about his life. The family stories and information will follow.

2. Keep others involved

Brainstorm with as many family members as you can before starting an oral history. Get the family involved and find out what people think the key things are that need to be recorded: stories, landmarks, maybe even family sayings or jokes and family traditions. People have different memories of the same event and you need to represent that in a way the family feels comfortable with.

Start by interviewing older members of the family, but don't stop there. Also talk to people in your generation (their parents may have talked more or told different stories than your parents did), family friends and neighbours.

When you call to schedule your visit, say, 'I'd like to find out more about our family history, and I was hoping you'd tell me some of the old stories.' Ask if you can see your relative's old photos during the visit. If the relative doesn't know you well, it may help to bring along someone more familiar to them. You could even ask that person to make an introductory call on your behalf.

3. Use quality equipment

Smart phones can be used for video and audio documentation — in general, the newer the model, the better the recording. Those seeking higher quality may want to visit the website of Oral History Australia for more information. Video conferencing services such as Skype and FaceTime offer recording options — especially useful for interviewing distant relatives. Inexpensive editing software is easy to find; often, as with Apple's iMovie and Microsoft's Movie Maker, it is preinstalled on most computers. Many websites offer free video or audio-editing tools.

4. Asking your questions

Prepare a list of questions, but use it as a guide, not a rigid framework. It's OK if the conversation leads to topics not on the list. You may hear surprising genealogical details and stories. If the interview ranges far off course, you can gently redirect it. As your questions are answered during the course of the conversation, check them off. Sometimes a reticent relative will open up if you're doing some activity together, such as taking a walk, or other activity you both enjoy.

Professional Oral Historians advise framing questions in a way that invites expansive answers. Ask about first memories, or about happiest (and saddest) moments. The idea is to get a conversation started. Starting by interviewing a favourite older relative for practice, is suggested. Remember, it's not just about turning on the recorder and saying, 'Tell us about the good old days.'

Looking at old photos can spark memories, so bring along several showing the people you want to ask about. Bring a family tree too, if you have one that is relevant to your person. If your relative has old photos, bring your scanner/smart phone/tablet and ask permission to scan them. Offer to digitally repair any tears or creases (if you're able to) and make prints or put them on CDs to share.

Jot down pertinent details during the interview, but writing the whole time is distracting. Instead, ask permission to use a digital recorder or video camera.

5. Keep your word

If you've said you'll speak to every family member, or if you've pledged to send everyone a copy — carry through on those promises.

6. Enjoy and appreciate the experience

Building a family oral history entails effort, no question, but all that advance planning should yield a fun and fruitful project. Family oral histories can build an appreciation for listening and telling stories as well as building bonds that knit together the generations.

7. Some suggested questions may be:

- What did you do during the summer/winter months when you were a child?
- Did you have pets? What were their names?
- What are your strongest siblings or best friend memories?
- What are your earliest memories of? Smells/sounds?
- What did you think you wanted to be when you grew up? Did it change, or did you get to do this?
- How did you get to know the local girls/boys and what sort of dates did you go on?
- Did you ever have a boyfriend/girlfriend your parents didn't approve of?
- Did you like school? How did you do and what were your favourite subjects?
- How did you get to school? Walk/bus/ride horse or bike, other?
- What was your first job and how did you get it? Did you ever get fired or promoted?
- What is the secret to a good relationship? (If the person is or was married.)
- How are you like your parents? How are you different?
- What makes you laugh the hardest?
- What is the bravest thing you have ever done? The scariest? The dumbest?
- What would I be surprised to learn about you?
- What was to hardest decision in your life?
- What do you remember about events in your area/district?
- How did World War II affect your family? Other World events?

8. Always be prepared

Never be without a notepad and pen at a family gathering. Family history can come up during the most casual conversations over dinner or during halftime at sport.

9. Transcribing

Transcribe the interview while it's fresh in your head. You could write out the whole thing, or listen to it and just transcribe parts you're interested in. You also can have a transcription service do this for you, but if the interview is on tape, send a copy and keep the original.

10. Citing Information

To cite information from the interview in your genealogy software, follow this format:

Title: Oral interview with Elizabeth Marie (Schmidt) Wilson of Gawler, SA

Date: 20 March 2018

Author: Margaret Wilson, interviewer

Publisher: Notes by Margaret Wilson

Location: Margaret Wilson, Tanunda, SA

11. Follow Up

Don't forget to send a handwritten thankyou note within a few days of the interview and other items you may have promised.

Useful Links

<https://www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/>

https://www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/files/oha_guidelines_for_ethical_practice_2007.pdf

<http://www.nla.gov.au/what-we-collect/oral-history-and-folklore>

<https://www.nfsa.gov.au/about/what-we-collect/oral-history>

[State Library of South Australia Oral History Collection](#)

[State Library of South Australia, J.D. Somerville Oral History Collection](#)

<http://www.asra.asn.au/>