

The Third Degree: Tips for a Successful Interview

Getting the most from your pursuit of dead ancestors often means pursuing living relatives. Yet, strangely, the art is too-little cultivated and too-little practiced. Often, our pursuit of genealogy is confined to digging up data about dead people we've never heard of, from archives infested with estate lawyers, insurance sleuths, and fellow genealogists. But our living relatives—and friends of relatives—can imbue our family story with more human interest than a slew of property records and albums full of family photographs.

Internet mailing lists frequently carry messages urging us to dig out the recorder and record a conversation with the oldest relatives we can find. Almost as often, the same lists carry plaintive requests for advice on how to conduct an interview. Interviewing is an art, not a science, but you don't have to be Barbara Walters to practice it well. Basically, an interview is a structured conversation, with records carefully kept of what is said.

If you have no elderly relatives handy, start with any relative you can find who will hold still for you. Most folks—not just antiques—love to relive the highlights of their lives, especially for the benefit of an interested, and perhaps admiring, youngster of more tender years. You'll be surprised what insights they can offer about other relatives, now dead or inaccessible. Some of my most interesting interviews have been with uncles, aunts, and unrelated friends of the family who told me many things about my father, who died when I was only ten.

I offer herewith some general guidelines I developed by observation and practice over the past forty-five years as a professional interviewer for newspapers, magazines, and television news and panel shows, and also as a family historian and amateur genealogist.

Know Your Interviewee

The first rule of fruitful interviewing is to know as much as possible about your topic and your interviewee before you begin the interview. You should have a specific objective, or a short list of objectives, to accomplish in that particular interview.

Bring with you all your notes on what you want to cover, including family group sheets that need to be verified or expanded (and bring extra blank ones), copies of any documents that might be pertinent, and photographs of people and places to be identified. These can often trigger memories you will want to pursue in detail as the interview progresses.

Be Prepared

When you have decided on Aunt Jennifer, contact her by telephone, postal mail, e-mail, or any other means, to arrange a mutually agreeable time and place for the interview. This is especially important if it requires travel. Try to pick a time when neither of you is under time pressure.

Choose a quiet place, reasonably immune from interruptions and distractions, away from street noises if possible, with the T.V., radio, and any background music turned off for the duration of the interview. Try to arrange for someone to answer the telephone and take messages. Not only would such sounds disturb the interview, they become even more intrusive when you play the tape back.

Writing for the nine-thousand-plus members of the ROOTS-L computer mailing list, Jeannie Josephson¹ said her husband Lynn's nephew had recorded nearly six hours of Lynn's parents as they reminisced "about their years as children, their courting, hardships they encountered, games and entertainment they took part in. . . . Their voices reveal their personalities as well, for you detect happiness, sorrow, surprise, and even a chuckle . . . now and then." Lynn's parents had been dead for two decades, and he had no idea the tapes existed.

Give a lot of thought to the topics you want to cover. An interview that is allowed to drift into a rambling monologue quickly becomes useless. Bring a list of topics with you to the interview, but don't write out your actual questions; that's too rigid and confining. It's wise to do this before you decide whom to interview, to give yourself freedom to choose those who are most likely to be helpful. You may want to begin with the oldest, or frailest, person on your list.

Topic possibilities are endless, but usually you should pick a few of those most important to you. Begin with them, moving on to others as time permits. If the interview discloses unexpected topics, be ready to pursue them. They are the pots of gold at the end of your interview rainbow.

Prepare a list of family traditions that your interviewee might be able to verify, correct, expand, or refute. You might want to share some of these with your interviewee a week or so before the interview, to get the memories flowing freshly again.

List each topic to be covered on separate sheets of paper, to leave room for lots of notes. This allows you to add more sheets if necessary, and helps greatly when you try to sort out all those scribbled notes. Don't forget to bring several blank notepads and a good supply of your favorite writing implements. Mechanical pencils are far superior to the old wooden kind that require a sharpener just when you are writing furiously to keep up. Also be sure you have a small tape recorder with fresh batteries, a supply of replacement batteries, and a large supply of blank tape.

Establish Ground Rules

You should establish some clear ground rules before you begin. Work out a very explicit understanding with Aunt Jennifer about such things as use of the tape recorder and how you should handle sensitive information. Once your agreement is reached, recite into the tape recorder your understanding of what you agreed to, and ask your aunt if that is an accurate reflection of what you agreed on. That way, no one will be surprised later.

Explain how the information will be used. Aunt Jennifer may be more open and specific about some topics if she knows it will not be made public during her lifetime. I was in my sixties when an ancient relative told me in confidence that his father had been abused as a child. I agreed not to disclose details in a family history while he lived.

A Comfortable Environment

Try to conduct your interview in an environment where both of you feel comfortable—at a scheduled time, in a scheduled place, as immune from interruptions and distractions as possible.

A recorder is a great aid to keeping your notes complete and accurate, but it is not foolproof. Use it as a back-up to your notes—not vice versa. Take written notes as if the recorder were not there. Often the sound of a cough, a door slamming, the scrape of a chair on the floor, or a ringing telephone can obliterate a key word. Or the tape could run out two minutes before the passage

you need, so don't forget to change the tape regularly. It's amazing how fast a good interview will eat tape.

Remember that secret taping is a criminal offense in many states. (That's why it's a good idea to have the recorder in plain view, and to record your ground-rules agreement; this heads off possible problems later.)

Try to avoid having a third person present during the interview. Another person, even one who sits silently and listens, can impede the flow of the interview. The interviewee may not feel comfortable talking about certain subjects in the presence of another person. And the other person may inject a new question or topic before you're ready, cutting off a fruitful line of discussion. A guest who interrupts with his or her own questions, or even with facial expressions of approval, disapproval, distaste, or surprise, could have a disastrous effect on the session.

Getting Started

A few minutes of informal chit-chat with your interviewee at the beginning of the session is usually a good idea, especially if this is your first contact. It helps to break the ice and, if you and your subject are not already well acquainted, it helps each of you get a feel for the other.

But when you begin the actual interview, make a clear break. Straighten yourself in your chair, open your notebook with a flourish. Pull over the tape recorder and start it; make a brief test recording and play it back to be sure it is working properly. Then put the recorder between you and your interviewee, a little closer to the other person than to you.

Open the session with a statement to the tape recorder such as, "This is Dilbert Doe, with Jennifer Jones in her living room in East Podunk, West Dakota. We're starting at 2:15 p.m. on 21 March 1998 and we'll be talking generally about her large family and her experiences growing up around Heartbreak Hill. How old are you, Aunt Jennifer?" Then you recite your understanding of the ground rules, and get her assent and her acknowledgment that she is aware of the tape recorder and does not object. Remember to get audible responses to your questions, not just a nod or a shake of the head.

Begin with basics: "Would you tell me your whole name and spell it for me? Is that your maiden name? Did you ever have any nicknames? What was your husband's name? When were you married? Where? Was it a first marriage for each of you?" (Get complete information on each husband, with birth and death dates, other marriages, children by other wives, etc.) "You had several children with him, I believe. Would you tell me who they are, in order of birth? And when and where they were born? Are they all still living? Where? Do you remember their spouses' names? When did your husband die? Where? What caused his death? Oh! I didn't know he was an artist. He fell off a ladder? Gee. I didn't know that. Why was he on the ladder? Restoring the ceiling mural at the Sistine Chapel? Gosh! That's very interesting."

Follow up to get the date of the accident and details of how it happened. Now you have a vivid new episode of family history. You need details that will let you verify and amplify the story. "If he was an artist, are any of his paintings on display? Where? Did he sell many? Do you have a list?"

Please note my heavy emphasis on verifiable detail. Asking for it is the only way you will get that kind of information. If you simply ask a general question and let Aunt Jennifer drone on, you'll get little but generalities. Detailed information normally does not pop out of anyone's mouth when he or she is engaged in conversation.

If Aunt Jennifer is reticent about some details, back off a bit, lead the conversation elsewhere, and tactfully come back to the topic toward the end of the interview. In general, it is good to save the difficult, sticky questions for last, after you have everything else you wanted, or all you expected, or as much as you're going to get. Thus, if you inadvertently step on a verbal land mine and your interview comes to an abrupt halt, you lose only the material you couldn't have gotten anyhow. Do this near the beginning and you may lose the whole interview.

All during the interview, you have been building rapport, sending the message that you are a sensible, benign person who can be trusted not to betray confidences. For that reason, you can't just charge in with an opener about whether her third husband committed suicide. And if your subject is still reticent at the end of the interview, don't push it beyond the limit of politeness.

When you're ready to end the interview, use the same pantomimes as at the beginning. Flip your notebook shut. Turn off the recorder, stretch, or lean back in your chair, and say something like, "Well! That wasn't so scary, was it? I really enjoyed it; hope you did too. I learned a lot. When I write this up, I know I'm going to find a bunch of loose ends. Can I call you back to check on some details?" (Don't forget to get her phone number, if you don't already have it.)

Then take Aunt Jennifer out to lunch, or dinner, or at least share a cup of coffee or a soft drink. And be sure to promise her a copy of whatever you publish from the interview.

1. Jeannie Josephson, PO Box 579, Payette, ID 83611; e-mail: jj@cyberhighway.net. Quoted by permission.

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