Interviewing Relatives

Basic Principles
Interviewing elderly relatives is the first step in family history research. Interviewing a relative, you gather facts about family history and stories about the past, and you record the voice and personality of an individual. Relatives will often protest that they know little, or remember nothing. But you may be surprised at the amount of factual information conveyed in reminiscences. Interview anyone who might be helpful—not just grandparents and parents, but collateral relatives like aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Conducting the Interview

- Schedule the interview at a time when your relative is likely to have energy and feel lively.
- Before the interview, make a list of questions you would like to ask and facts you would like to know.
- Record the interview, but do so in a non-intrusive way. If your relative resists being videotaped, don’t force the issue. Audiotape captures the person’s voice and personality, and the facts they impart, just as well.
- Ask open-ended questions that encourage reminiscing. For example, you might ask, “What kind of person was your father?” or say “Tell me about your father.”
- When asking about facts, do not ask “yes or no” questions, such as “Do you remember your mother’s maiden name?” Instead, simply ask, “What was your mother’s maiden name?”
- Find more than one way of eliciting the same information. For example, if a relative does not remember his mother’s maiden name, you can ask, “What was her brother’s name?”
- If a relative digresses from one story to another, let him or her do so—do not interrupt. Take notes during the interview about topics and facts that you still have questions about and ask them later in the same interview or in a follow-up interview.
- Without interrupting, it is fine to show that you are listening by nodding, smiling, and otherwise reacting to what your relative is saying.
- Relax and enjoy yourself, and encourage your relative to do the same.

Resources at the Center for Jewish History
The collections at CJH include many recorded oral histories, diaries, and autobiographies.

Genealogy Institute Reference Books


