

Recording Oral History

A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences

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VALERIE RALEIGH YOW

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CHAPTER 3

Preparation for the Interviewing Project

STRATEGIES FOR QUESTIONING

When you have the topical outline for the interview format, you are ready to plan the questioning strategy. Do you start with a broad question and proceed to the narrowly focused question? When do you use questions that elicit a simple yes or no? And when do you use questions that allow the narrator to handle the topic any way he or she wishes? Do you tip off the narrator to the answer you are looking for by using a “leading question,” or do you just specify the subject you expect the narrator to deal with?

Consider first the use of the leading question—the kind of question that indicates what the interviewer wants as the answer. In the past, this has been a technique interviewers were taught never to use because the narrator will be likely to give the indicated answer. He or she wants to be cooperative or polite or just wants to finish the ordeal. The interviewer learns nothing new, only what he or she has asked for. I blush over a memory at the beginning of my interviewing career when I asked people who had worked as children in a cotton mill before World War I (project mentioned above), “You didn’t like mill work?” Fortunately, they risked disappointing me by not giving the expected answer. One narrator explained, “Honey, if you had ever chopped cotton in the hot sun, you would see why I liked mill work.”

Another way to tip off the narrator about what you want and expect in an answer is to set the stage. For example, the interviewer says, “Serbs are not for free trade. Are you?” If you know the narrator is from an ethnic background with a history of strife with Serbs, this is a sure way to bias the answer.⁵

Raymond Gorden argues that a leading question can be used to assure the narrator that he or she can go against the requirements of etiquette or polite agreement. In this situation, you are fairly certain that the narrator knows the information and you are confident that he will not be influenced by your wording. The narrator already knows you well enough to realize his answer will not harm the relationship he has with you.⁶ Look at this example from Gorden:

INTERVIEWER: What time did the meeting start, 8 or 8:30?

NARRATOR: We always start at 7 as we did last night.

INTERVIEWER: Did you just have an informal discussion?

NARRATOR: No, we also had a speaker from Columbus.

INTERVIEWER: Was his talk about the usual sort of things which education people have to say about child psychology?

NARRATOR: The topic was, "What can the taxpayer buy for his school tax dollar?"

INTERVIEWER: Oh, I see. Did you feel that the speaker had little of value to say as is so often true of people speaking on this topic?

NARRATOR: No, he had quite a bit to say; we selected him because of his objectivity.⁷

In this excerpt it is obvious that the narrator knows exactly what he wants to say and will not be swayed by the way the interviewer asks the question. However, the interviewer could have gotten the same answers in this case by asking the question without prejudging and thus making it a leading question. And even Gorden advises, "It is a good plan to avoid the use of leading questions rather than hope they are of the harmless variety unless the situation calls for their intentional use."⁸

A closed-ended question calls for a short answer such as yes or no, a date, or a number. It can be used profitably at the beginning of a line of questioning. If the interviewer needs to know what it was like to raise a family during the Depression, he or she must first find out whether the narrator was married at the time and had children. "No" means you have to follow a different topic. Or if the interviewer needs specific, factual information before progressing along a line of questioning, he or she can ask a closed-ended question, expecting a short answer, for example, "How many people were living in the house at that time?" Or the interviewer may need to clarify something, such as a date: "Let's see, what year would that have been?" The problem comes when you elicit a string of one-word answers. When that happens, start thinking about questions that open up the possibilities for the narrator to choose the direction and

to elaborate. (Otherwise, you could have given a paper-and-pencil test, which calls for limited choices and short answers.)

Whereas the closed-ended questions above gave the narrator only limited choice in the answer, the open-ended question allows the narrator to answer any way she wishes. If the narrator had answered "yes" to being married during the Depression, the interviewer would have asked one more closed-ended question, "Did you and your husband have children at that time?" If the answer was "yes," the interviewer would have followed with an open-ended question: "We want to know how mothers and fathers managed to raise families during the Depression. Could you tell me how you got by during the hard time when your husband was out of work?"

There are degrees of open-endedness. Consider these questions Stanley Payne offers from a wartime survey among farmers:

What would you say have been your main difficulties in farming during the past year?

How did those difficulties affect your farm production?

What are some of the shortages that have bothered you the most?

As you look forward to your farming this next year, what in the line of supplies or equipment is causing you the most concern?⁹

Each question becomes more restricted in the range of choices in the answer. With the first question, the narrator is restricted only to talking about the past year, but he can define difficulty in any way he wishes and talk about it in his terms. In the second, the narrator must focus on farm production. By the third, he must discuss not just production problems but specifically shortages connected with production. By the fourth, he must answer in terms of supplies and equipment. Each level of specificity in the expected answer has its use for the interviewer, but the questions remain open-ended because the narrator is still free to talk about his experience as he sees it and to elaborate as much as he chooses.

Think about the best strategy for you to choose, given your topic: Do you start with a broad question and gradually limit the scope of the answer? Or do you start with more focused questions and come to a broad question at the end of that progression?

Usually a broad question is the most open-ended you can ask, such as, "Please tell me about your life during the Depression." Much depends on the narrator's interest in and acquaintance with the topic and readiness to deal with broad questions. A workable strategy is to use a broad question at the beginning of a line of questioning and then pick up on what the narrator says and ask more specific questions. The advantage of the broad question coming

at the beginning of a line of questioning is that the narrator follows his or her own thought processes or paths of association. You can learn much that you did not even guess, including a new framework in which to view this topic. Rob Rosenthal, who interviewed people in Seattle to find out how their experiences in a general strike had changed their lives, explains the advantages of a broad question: "Letting people talk about their worlds with as little structure as possible is a good way to see things through their eyes, and ensure against interviewer bias."¹⁰

Figure out if the narrator is at ease with this approach (the broad question, then the specific questions): some are not and prefer that you just ask specific questions; others relax and enjoy "picking up the ball and running with it." A broad question I have used successfully at the beginning of a line of questioning is, "I'm very much interested in knowing the details of daily life. What was a typical workday during the week like for you in those years?" Or "When you were a young girl living on the farm with your mother and father, what was a typical Sunday like?"

One kind of broad question to be concerned about is the comparative question. In interviewing academics in a liberal arts college in New England, I began with a broad question: "How do you compare your experience as a woman teaching at this college in the 1930s with your experience here in the 1970s?" The narrators enthusiastically launched into descriptions, anecdotes, and reflections that usually lasted at least half an hour. It was obvious that the narrators had talked about this among themselves; and not only were they used to this kind of comparative question but also they had considered this particular one already. I concluded that a comparative question at the beginning of a discussion is useful when you know that the narrator is invested in the success of the interview, tends to like this kind of question, will probably be interested in the particular question, and has much information in detail about the topic.

On the other hand, the comparative question at the beginning of the line of questioning may not be profitable if the narrator has not thought about this question before and is not used to this kind of analytical approach. At the beginning of the mill village project, I asked the women of the first generation, "How has your life been different from your daughter's?" They seemed dumbfounded. I thought about their reaction: if someone had asked me that question out of the clear blue sky, I also would have been stymied. I changed strategy and asked a series of focused questions about their lives, often asking how their daughters did the same things now. The very broad question I saved for the end; in that way, I was able to get full answers.

Providing a context for the question is very helpful. The narrator is trying to follow your train of thought just as you are trying to follow hers. The narra-

tor wants to know why you are interested in this topic. Oral historian Charles Morrissey calls this "the two-sentence format" and advises the interviewer to use similar wording in the question as was used in the introduction to the question. Morrissey gives the following example:

INTERVIEWER: In oral history interviews, after asking a person why a decision was made, we often ask why a different result didn't occur. During the merger discussions, did you at any time expect a different result to occur?¹¹

Consider another example in which providing a context accomplishes two tasks. This kind of exchange took place in an interviewing project with farm families in northern Illinois in the mid-1980s:

INTERVIEWER: It's puzzling to social scientists that Americans in rural areas started limiting their families in the last century and then drastically in this century. No one knows who made that decision—father or mother—and why. We can't call them back and ask these questions but we can ask the generation who married in the 1920s and 1930s. So, I would like to ask you. I notice that your parents had six children, while you and your wife had two. Did you make a conscious decision? (narrator nods yes) Who made the decision?

NARRATOR: Well, we pretty much decided together. Well, my wife would have liked more children, but I didn't. With her bad hip and all, we knew it wasn't a good idea to have another baby.¹²

Because of the explanation, the narrator understood why the question was important to the interviewer. Also, this is a situation that could come close to being too personal for this narrator's sense of propriety, but by putting it into the context of scholarly investigation, the interviewer was able to avoid offense.

In the same interviewing project among farm families in Illinois, my co-researcher Terry Shea and I decided our interview guide was too focused on material things. We began to add questions on perception of quality of life. One question we asked, in the general context of religion, was whether the narrator had had a spiritual experience. None had. Undoubtedly they thought I referred to a religious experience within the context of a church service because we had just been asking about church-related topics. The intense, emotional feeling of "being saved" was not part of their religion. Only later did I realize that I should have explained what I meant by a "spiritual experience" and left my definition open enough to allow them leeway in answering. Also, I should have placed my question in a different context because the sequence of questions implied a kind of experience I did not intend to refer to.

KINDS OF WORDS AND PHRASING TO AVOID

Just as gaining skill as an interviewer depends on planning a strategy for asking questions, it also means becoming sharply aware of your own use of words. In *The Art of Asking Questions*, Stanley Payne has a witty discussion about this. Clarity is the rule of thumb here. All of us know not to ask the “can’t win” variety such as, “Still beat your wife?” or use a confusing question such as, “What is Mickey Mouse, a cat or a dog?” What is more difficult to discern are things such as “unintended specificity.” When an interviewer asks, “How many books do you have on your bookshelf?” the narrator does not know whether he should run over and count them or not. And academicians use specialized words so often that they do not stop to think that these are not in everybody’s vocabulary. “Do you eat the flesh of sensate mammals?” is an exaggeration of pompous speech, of course, but it is useful to scrutinize choice of words for appropriateness as you write out questions. Or the interviewer may blurt out a question before thinking about the possible double meaning: “Do you ever get down on the farm?” The narrator may think, “Does she mean depressed?”¹³

Worse still is when the interviewer uses words that indicate he or she thinks the narrator is not very intelligent: “How do you feel about your income tax—that is, the amount you have to pay the government on the money you take in during the year?” A better way to phrase a question when you are not sure the narrator will be familiar with a term you are using is to describe, then add the term: “How do you feel about the amount you have to pay the government on the money you take in during the year—I’m referring to the federal income tax here.”

Or the interviewer can go wrong by asking, “What year did you get the electric?” The narrator knows that the interviewer is not “just folks.”¹⁴ The interviewer strikes a false note by using slang words or colloquialisms and also insults the narrator.

Using a conversational style is fine. End the sentence with a preposition if you feel like that is clear. And if in the interview, you fumble, that is all right because people fumble in conversation and this implies that you are thinking things through, too, as you speak. You look a little more human, a little less in control of all the words flying about. It is confusion and talking down to the narrator that is the concern here.

Avoid the use of emotion-laden terms as you phrase the questions in the guide. If the narrator chooses to use such words, he or she reveals something important about attitude. But the interviewer should not suggest it. Research indicates that phrasing of the question influences the narrator’s remembering. In one project psychologists Elizabeth Loftus and John Palmer reported two experiments conducted with people who viewed a film of a car accident. Later, in questioning the viewers, the experimenters phrased one question, “About

how fast were the cars going when they smashed into each other?” This question elicited higher estimates of speed than when the researchers asked the question using such terms as “collided, bumped, contacted, or hit” instead of “smashed.” On a retest a week later, subjects who had been queried with the verb “smashed” were more likely to remember they had seen broken glass—although there was no broken glass shown in the film.¹⁵

Gorden suggests sentences like these in which changing just two words makes a critical difference:

How do you feel about East Indians moving into this area?

How do you feel about East Indians invading your neighborhood?¹⁶

Scrutinize the questions you are planning to use for terms that might influence the answer.

BOX 4.1. Checklist for Critiquing Interviewing Skills

Positives

1. Found a reasonably quiet place to have the interview.
2. Found a convenient time for the narrator to give the interview.
3. Explained the purpose of the research. Explained the choice of using one's own name or anonymity.
4. Recorded narrator's name, interviewer's name, date, and place where recording is taking place, as well as narrator's consent.
5. Worded each question in a way that was appropriate and easy to understand.
6. Listened carefully.
7. Remembered what the narrator had said.
8. Without being obvious about it, observed the narrator's nonverbal behavior and responded appropriately.
9. Indicated empathy when appropriate.
10. Showed appreciation for the narrator's help.
11. Followed the narrator's pace in talking.
12. Explained reason for change in topic.
13. Probed when appropriate.
14. Stopped probing when narrator's verbal or nonverbal behavior showed distress.
15. Used a follow-up question when more information was needed.
16. Asked a challenge question in a sensitive manner.
17. Requested clarification when needed.
18. Used a two-sentence format when introducing a line of questions that might be problematic.
19. Thanked the narrator.
20. Explained the purpose of the release form and indicated where the recording will be housed. Secured a signature on the release form, or at least a definite date when the signed release form will be given to the interviewer.

Negatives

1. Forgot to record an introduction at the beginning which gives narrator's name, interviewer's name, date, and place where the recording took place.
2. Failed to explain the project.
3. Did not get narrator's verbal consent on the recording.
4. Interrupted the narrator.
5. Finished narrator's sentence.
6. Kept repeating what the narrator had just said.
7. Inferred something the narrator had not said.
8. Failed to take up an important topic that the narrator mentioned.
9. Made irrelevant, distracting comments.

(continued)

BOX 4.1. (continued)

10. Ignored narrator's feelings.
11. Failed to give an empathic response when narrator described distress about an event.
12. Asked a leading question.
13. Asked several questions at the same time (unless the two-sentence format was used as a strategy to frame the question in such a way that it became non-threatening).
14. Took over the interview with a long monologue about one's own experiences.
15. Did not give the narrator a second's pause to allow her to decide whether she wanted to add something.
16. Assumed understanding of an unfamiliar term, without asking the narrator what it meant.
17. Failed to explain how the recorded information may be used.
18. Failed to explain that depositing the recording in an archive may mean that it will be available to others via the World Wide Web.
19. Failed to give an explanation of choices, such as anonymity, to protect personal information (with the warning, of course, that government may use its right of subpoena to obtain a recording, whether anonymous or not).
20. Turned off the recorder and left it off even though the narrator thought of something further he wanted to say.

This checklist is intended to be a way for the reader to review some main points in this long chapter. To score this test, give yourself five points for every correct answer in Part I. Subtract from this outcome five points for every failure in Part II. (Yep, it's unfair.)

Some items are based on Raymond Gorden's list of interviewing skills: Raymond L. Gorden, *Interviewing: Strategy, Techniques and Tactics*, 4th ed. (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1987), 43. Others are paraphrases of discussions in chapters 3 and 4 in Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3d ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).