HOW TO CONDUCT A LIFE STORY INTERVIEW

These tips were developed by the Life Stories Project and can be adapted to fit the age group or project you are working with.

Tool box:
Sound recorder or video camera with tripod, charged batteries, headphones, consent form.

RESEARCH AND PRE-PRODUCTION

Research Questions: Why are you doing this interview? What kind of advanced research will you do? Are there specific themes you want to address that will guide your interview? Why do you think the subject has agreed to the interview? Are the expectations on both sides clear? Preparing for an interview may also involve a pre-visit and preliminary research related to the subject.

Audience/Outreach: Prior to conducting a life stories interview, you and the interviewee should consider your audiences. Who would you like your work to reach and why? Who can benefit from your story?

Interview Questions: Formulate a short list of questions that will guide your interview. Ten questions are sufficient for a one-hour interview.

Location: In collaboration with your interview subject, choose a location for the interview. What does the location of the interview say about the interviewee?

Recording Technology: Choose a recording technology that you are familiar with. Practice using the technology prior to the interview and make sure the batteries are charged. If you are video recording, recruit someone to manage the camera, so that you can focus on the interviewee. Prior to the interview, ensure that the interviewee is comfortable with the recording technology you plan to use.

CONSENT

Sample Consent Form

Once the interview has been organized, review the consent form with the interviewee and discuss any concerns or questions that he or she may have. The consent form is an agreement of trust. It outlines: the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, the places and venues where the interview may be seen and distributed, how the interview will be used, and what benefits and risks this use might present for the interviewee.

When reviewing the consent form with the interviewee, ask him or her to consider the audience that will be viewing the interview. How might this audience impact what the interviewee decides to share or keep private? Once this question has been considered, the interviewee and the interviewer both sign the agreement. The interviewer and the interviewee should each keep a copy of the consent form. It is an agreement of trust and a practical way to exchange contact information. We have a sample consent form on our website.

PRODUCTION: THE INTERVIEW

If you are bringing a technical crew (e.g. videographer, sound recorder), make sure you schedule enough time to set up. Do not rush the interview and allow the interviewee time to answer the questions.

POST PRODUCTION

Blog: Write a short reflection 24 hours following the interview to record your impressions of the interview. We have included a sample in this chapter.

Blog Examples

Transcription: Transcribe the interview and review the transcript. Make a copy of the transcript, so you will have one to archive and one to turn into your 'paper edit.' On the copy, highlight the most interesting parts of the interview with your target audience or final goal in mind. This is useful later in the editing process.

Shared Ownership: Send a copy of the interview and the transcription to the interviewee. Once he or she has reviewed the material, provide the interviewee with an opportunity to comment, delete, and/or add any additional content.

Rough Cut: Using your 'paper edit,' create a rough cut (draft) of the interview. Ask the interviewee to review the revised material, allowing them to delete and/or add additional content. Include interviewees in the post-production process as much as possible, but keep in mind they may feel awkward at first *seeing* or *hearing* themselves. They might also have time constraints.

Final Cut and Outreach: Following the editing process, prepare a final version of the interview for distribution. Give the interviewee copies of his or her interview.