

Interviewing Techniques
Charles Baclawski, PhD

- I. Interviewer job
 - a. keep interviewee talking.
 - b. Keep interviewee on topic.
- II. The keys to good interviewing
 - a. Be friendly
 - b. Be concerned about others
 - c. Be accepting
 - d. Engage in active LISTENING
- III. Before the interview starts:
 - a. To record or not to record
 - i. Audio
 - ii. Video
 - iii. Paper
 - b. Make the interviewer comfortable.
 - i. Physical
 - 1. Physically Comfortable chairs (for both of you)
 - 2. Temperature, humidity, etc. good
 - 3. Remembering takes work, watch for tiredness, when interviewer exhibits tiredness, schedule a follow up interview
 - 4. Avoid having tables or other furniture between you and the interviewee.
 - 5. Try and be in a quiet place outside of the main flow of traffic.
 - a. Kids running in and out
 - b. Loud air conditioners
 - c. Quiet but not necessarily private.
 - ii. Emotionally: relaxed, confident, trusting
 - 1. Avoid making recording devices apparent, keep them off to one side, smaller is better.
- IV. Question formation
 - a. Have a list of questions that cover the information and are designed to get you started.
 - i. Do not expect to use them all in the order you planned.
 - ii. Be flexible, come up with your own as the interview progresses.
 - b. Open and closed end questions
 - i. Closed: can be answered with a yes or no, or a short answer with only facts
 - ii. Opened: Cannot be answered with a yes or no. Almost always start with "how", "why", and "what if". Be careful with why questions. It is often interpreted as accusatory, causing interviewee to turn off.
 - iii. Tips for asking open-ended questions:
 - 1. Be genuinely interested in your audience. A genuine curiosity will help you to create open-ended questions that are meaningful and will help you to reach your goal or get the information you need. When writing your questions, spend time thinking about what you would really like to know from your respondents.

2. Generally, questions that start with 'what' are good, non-biased open-ended questions. For example, "What did you think of today's workshop?" or "What would you like to learn more about?" give the respondent the opportunity to answer without being influenced by the person asking the question.
3. Questions that start with "how" are good for understanding the thought process of the respondent or how things were done over a period of time.¹

c. Two Step Questions:

i. Two Step Question:

1. Confirm topic.
2. Pursue line with an open-ended question.

ii. Example:

1. "Earlier you talked about how you and your sister were often the only kids around to play with while you were a kid. What kinds of games did the two of you play?"

V. Conducting the interview

- a. Be confident. Everybody likes to talk about themselves.
- b. Be conversational.
- c. While the focus is on the interviewee, it is ok to talk about yourself. Your similar experiences can make the interviewee more comfortable and more easily open up to you.

VI. Starting and throughout the interview

- a. Begin by introducing yourself and the interviewee.
- b. Thank them for taking the time for the interview.
- c. Tell them the purpose of the interview.
 - i. Why you are conducting the interview.
 - ii. What you plan to do with the interview.
- iii. Let them know that they do not have to answer any questions, especially those that may make them uncomfortable.
- d. Ask them if they have any questions about the above questions.
- e. Ask them if it ok to proceed with the interview.
- f. If there is ANY possibility the interview may someday end up in an archive, ask them to authorize researchers to access and use the information in the interview. Then you also agree to it. Interviews are a joint performance of you and the interviewer. Anyone who speaks during the interview needs to provide this type of release.
- g. Listen carefully to the interviewee's comments.
 - i. Interviews bring up past memories, some that are not comfortable to recall.
 - ii. Sometimes interviewees will become emotional – crying, speaking softly, or even angry. Sometimes you may start to stop them and they will want to keep going, but do not pressure them to continue.
 - iii. Sometimes they will say things that are shocking.
 - iv. Remember, you are not a therapist. Trust your instincts and stay in your safe zone.
 - v. ENJOY THE EXPERIENCE – EACH ONE IS DIFFERENT

¹ Emma Cullen, How to create open-ended questions. Mentimeter Feb 7 2019. <https://www.mentimeter.com/blog/stand-out-get-ahead/how-to-create-open-ended-questions>

Conducting a One Hour Personal History Interview²

Set aside an hour -- use a timer to ease your mind, and theirs -- and find a comfortable place to write.

Use a legal pad and a ballpoint pen, a typewriter, or a computer. Or if writing is difficult for you, talk into a tape recorder or digital voice recorder to be transcribed later.

Find a comfortable place to sit and visit, comfortable for the interviewee. Explain the assignment and ask their permission to interview them (if you are using a recorder, have this on the recording, also be sure to let them know it is being recorded and ask them for permission to record it).

Begin with their name. Simply write "their name is..."

Have them tell you how they got their name, what it means, their nicknames, etc. If they were named for Aunt Matilda or Grandpa George, write that down.

Now record everything they can tell you about where they were born: the name of the hospital or the address of the house or the location of the farm. Add details about the weather, the time of day, and the day of the week.

List the names, birthplaces, and birth dates of their parents, brothers, sisters.

List the names of the schools they attended, including college. They may be tempted to begin a long story about the time they and their best friend got lost collecting for a paper drive. Resist the temptation. Straying from the assignment will run into overtime.

List the organizations they joined as a child - Brownies, Girls Scouts, Boy Scouts. Did they play the tuba in marching band?

List important Church dates, such as their baptism and other ordinances.

List the different places they lived and dates. Why did they go there? Why did they leave?

List the date, location, and other significant details of their wedding & marriage. Then list their children and their birth dates. Mention important changes in their family - a child's marriage, deaths, divorces, and so forth. Remember, keep to the bare bones of their life, You only have one hour, so stick to the facts. They can flesh things out in later "hours" if they like.

Describe how they have spent their adult life - at work, at home, and so forth.

You're done! Make a clean copy of your work and give it to them. These can make GREAT Christmas or Birthday gifts. If you like you can use page protectors and insert their copy into a three-ring binder. The binder will make it easy for them to add material later on. Advise them to keep this history with their baby book and journal. They can continue to write in their journal. Their one-hour life history will be a fair representation of their life. They never have to worry about writing their life history again if they don't want to.

Of course, they may want to think about it again. They can add more to their life history in one-hour increments. Try one of the following options. When they finish a project, make a clean copy and put it in their binder.

² Carol Huber "One-Hour Life History" *Ensign*, June 1994.

Write a story about an event in their childhood. The story doesn't have to have earth-shaking significance; it just has to mean something to them. Begin like this: "I remember when I was seven..." They will be amazed at what they remember!

Elaborate on any of the topics in the first history. Describe in more detail than they were able to before.

Perhaps they have already written some stories about their life and their family. Locate them and add them to three-ring binder.

Add photographs to their history. Seeing the faces and places described in the text can help it come alive. They can purchase archival-quality pages to hold photographs; or copies of their photographs can be made on a copy machine and included in their binder.

How about a romance chapter? Write the story of their courtship, engagement, wedding, and honeymoon.

Write some memories of their children. Reminisce on their babyhood and the cute things they said and did.

Write about themselves as they see themselves. How do they feel and what do they think? Describe themselves, not just physically, but with other interesting details: that they cry over sentimental movies, love baseball, and hate beets.

Write about their best Christmas, summer vacation, or annual family outing; write about any holiday or vacation, for that matter.

Make lists. For example, what are their favorite foods?

Write about items in their home that have a special meaning to them. If their son cut his teeth on the back of a chair, write about it. And mention any furniture handed down to you from a loved one.

Write a one-page annual update of the highlights of the past year.

Make a fancy cover for their binder, add index tabs, or think up more topics.

Gradually, they will write a life history rich in detail. But don't think about that. For now, have fun in just one hour.

One-Hour Life History

By Carol Huber

Writing a life history sounds like a monumental task, but it can be done in an hour. It's easy. It's even fun. Here is one way to begin:

- Set aside an hour—use a timer to ease your mind—and find a comfortable place to write.
- Use a legal pad and a ballpoint pen, a typewriter, or a computer. Or if writing is difficult for you, talk into a tape recorder and have someone else transcribe it.
- Begin with your name. Simply write “My name is ...” Tell how you got your name, what it means, your nicknames, etc. If you were named for Aunt Matilda or Grandpa George, write that down.
- Now write everything you know about where you were born: the name of the hospital or the address of the house or the location of the farm. Add details about the weather, the time of day, and the day of the week.
- List the names, birthplaces, and birth dates of your parents, brothers, and sisters.
- Name the schools you attended, including college. You may be tempted to begin a long story about the time you and your best friend got lost collecting for a paper drive. Resist the temptation. Straying from the assignment will run into overtime and make you reluctant to return to your history.
- List the organizations you joined as a child—Primary, Brownies, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts. Did you play the tuba in a marching band?
- List important Church dates, such as your baptism and other ordinances, and your Church callings.
- List the date, location, and other significant details of your marriage. Then list your children and their birth dates. Mention important changes in your family—a child's marriage, deaths, divorces, moves, and jobs. Remember, keep to the bare bones of your life. You only have one hour, so stick to the facts.
- Describe how you have spent your adult life—at work, at home, and so forth.

You're done! Make a clean copy of your work. Use page protectors and insert it into a three-ring binder. The binder will make it easy to add material later on. Keep this history with your baby book and journal. Continue to write in your journal. Your one-hour life history will be a fair representation of your life. You never have to worry about writing your life history again if you don't want to.

Of course, you may want to think about it again. You can add more to your life history in one-hour increments. Try one of the following options. When you finish a project, make a clean copy and put it into your three-ring binder.

- Write a story about an event in **your childhood**. The story doesn't have to have earth-shaking significance; it just has to mean something to you. Begin like this: "I remember when I was seven ..." You will be amazed at what you remember!
- Elaborate on any of the topics in the first history. Add the details you had to skip before.
- Perhaps you have already written some stories about your life and your family. Locate them and add them to your three-ring binder.
- Add photographs to your history. Seeing the faces and places described in the text can help it come alive. You can purchase archival-quality pages to hold photographs; or copies of your photographs can be made on a copy machine and included in your binder.
- Write down your testimony. This is important for every Latter-day Saint. Schedule a special time, perhaps on fast Sunday. Seek the Spirit of the Lord.
- How about a romance chapter? Write the story of your courtship, engagement, wedding, and honeymoon.
- Write some memories of your children. Reminisce on their babyhood and the cute things they said and did.
- Write about yourself as you see yourself. How do you feel and what do you think? Describe yourself, not just physically, but with other interesting details: that you cry over sentimental movies, love baseball, and hate beets.
- Write about your best Christmas, summer vacation, or annual family outing; write about *any* holiday or vacation, for that matter.
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- Write a one-page annual update of the highlights of the past year.
- Make a fancy cover for your binder, add index tabs, or think up more topics.

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