Oral histories can be great tools for preserving the story of a community, but there are several things to be aware of ahead of time.

Interviews should be conducted in accord with any prior agreements made with the interviewee, which should be documented for the record. Always obtain a signed informed consent form prior to the interview. Go through it with the interviewee and then both interviewee and interviewer should sign. If any caveats or considerations should be taken with the interview, write those in on the consent form. Also go over the project and its scope and leave time for questions.

Other things that may be included pre-interview may be to say what topics will generally be covered, a description of the interview process, the plans for preservation and access, and the narrator’s expectations for the oral history and what topics may be most meaningful to them. Interviewers will be provided with questions as a guideline, but can feel free to follow the conversation where it leads. It may be beneficial to fill out a cover sheet ahead of time to save time covering basic biographical questions in the interview itself.

Both parties should agree in advance to the approximate length of each interview session. Given the unpredictability of the setting, however, the interviewer should be flexible and prepared for the session to be cut short, interrupted, or possibly to run long, if both parties agree.

The interview should be conducted, whenever possible, in a quiet location with minimal background noises and possible distractions.

Before starting the interview, the interviewer should record a lead in at the beginning of the audio recording including the name of narrator and interviewer, the full date (day, month, year), the location of the interview (without listing a personal address but saying narrator’s home), and the fact that it was recorded as part of the Scott County Community Memory Project.

Interviewers must respect the rights of interviewees to refuse to discuss certain subjects or to impose conditions upon the interview. Respect the opinions and version of story of the interviewee. Be aware of imposing too much of yourself into the interview.

Tips for conducting oral histories:

* Open up a new topic with a large, open-ended question that allows the interviewee to describe their experience at length. Questions that begin, “Tell me about…” or “Can you describe..” are good ways of stimulating the interviewee’s memory and allowing them to generate their own story. In general, ask broad questions first, and then get more specific in your follow-up questions.
* Listen actively. Once the narrator has finished answering the question, be ready to come in with follow-up questions for greater detail, context, or clarification. If you think an interviewee has made a factual error, ask a follow-up question, but do not argue with their interpretation of events. Remember, this is their turn to tell their story. You could also use statements such as “criticisms at the time” or “arguments I have heard” to redirect them or help them elaborate without becoming confrontational.
* Remember that what you are after is the story of the interviewee’s experience.
* The general rule for oral histories is don’t interrupt. Interruptions disrupt the flow of their narrative and break concentration. Wait until they complete a story to ask a follow-up question. You may wish to take a note of something to come back to later. With long-winded or rambling interviewees, you may need to jump in very quickly when a story is completed to redirect back to your questions or the topic at hand.
* Since memory is not chronological, the interview may jump around. In some cases that is productive in making connections. In some instances, however, you may feel they are ranging too far afield and will want to indicate that you want to bring them back to the time period you were discussing.
* To avoid having the questions feel choppy and disconnected, clearly indidcate shifts in direction or how one question relates to another. (“We’ve talked about X, but now I’d like to move on to..” “I’d like to follow up with something you said previously”)
* Yes-or-no questions are useful for clarifying a specific detail, but otherwise should be avoided. Similarly, avoid leading questions or statement such as “It must have been difficult for you to live that way.” Such comments can foreclose opportunities for the interviewee to share their own thoughts on an issue.
* Don’t start off the interview with highly personal or sensitive questions. Interviewees generally become more relaxed as the interview goes on.
* A good way to wrap up is to “signpost” by saying that we’re approaching the end of the interview and ask if there is anything they would like to clarify or add before ending.
* The best interviews flow as a natural conversation and allow people to be themselves.