

## The Personal Interview

**Directions / Suggestions:** Successfully doing historical interviews is a skill that is developed over time with practice, practice and more practice. In general, the skill of conducting interviews is a skill that transcends the study of history and may be practiced in a wide range of activities, both in college and careers. Here are a few suggestions to help you develop this important skill.

- 1.** The personal interview **should be conducted AFTER you have a fairly good understanding** of the subject matter / person under examination. That way you can ask high quality, critical thinking questions. You should demonstrate to your interviewee that you are serious minded and knowledgeable. Most people will respond positively if they understand your inquiry is worthwhile, and they will try to contribute more than what you already know.
- 2.** Ask 'open' rather than 'closed' questions. Easy to say but not always easy to do. An example of a closed question – a question which invites a yes/no answer. Bad example: Do you know who Winston Churchill is? An 'open' question provides more information – Good example: 'How did you learn about.....?' followed up with, 'What do think is the most important think to know about....?'
- 3.** Use plain words and avoid suggesting the answers. Bad example: Don't you think John Locke contributed to the development of Western representative governmental philosophy? Good example: What do you know about John Locke's influence on government?
- 4.** Maintain eye-contact. This shows you are interested, listening and enables you to encourage your interviewee with visual cues ... pause and take notes as needed...after their speaking... not while the interviewee is speaking.
- 5.** Perhaps, start with a board ranging historical background, historical context of your subject to help the interviewee recall prior knowledge, at least provide the time and place of the subject.
- 6.** Don't be afraid to ask, but don't interrupt or butt in. Particularly with older people, leave a pause at the end of their sentences as they may not have finished speaking. Give people time to think! Follow up questions are appropriate.

- 7.** Respect people's opinions even if you don't agree with them. This is not the time for you to debate your political or cultural opinions with someone about the subject matter. Keep an open mind; you never know what you may discover.
- 8.** Be aware of tiredness – not just the exhausted 96 year old you have been grilling for three hours, but your own tiredness as well. Take a break or come back another day.
- 9.** Have a prepared list of 5 – 10 questions... but do not limit yourself as your interviewee may provide "pearls of knowledge" of which you were unaware. Follow up questions are appropriate.
- 10.** **HAVE FUN /** be thankful...at the interview AND after 24 / 48 hours, do a follow-up **THANK YOU ...** let them know you appreciate their time....remember, time is the stuff life is made of...if you waste someone's time, you waste someone's life. Be respectful.