

Retooling How We Ask Questions

When conducting an interview, asking questions, or participating in an oral history interview there are several important points to carefully consider:

- For more formal interviews, make a Safety Statement saying that you're going to ask some questions but that they (the interviewee) does not have to answer anything that is uncomfortable or sensitive.
- Structure your questions by asking from safe to sensitive.
- Be aware of your body language. Sit facing the interviewee and be aware of your "best" posture, eye contact, hands, relaxed affect, etc.
- Don't interrupt the Interviewee while they are talking.
- Allow the Interviewee plenty of time. It is often when the person is thinking about something important to say that they become quiet. If you interrupt with a question, you may lose what they were about to share.
- Do not talk about yourself. This is your time to listen. Even if you think you are being empathetic, do not bring conversation to you and your life or opinions.
- Ask questions using your kindest, most trusting voice.
- Ask open questions (not Closed). Open questions allow the interviewee to speak with breadth and depth and can't usually be answered in one or two words. Example of Closed Question: Was life different in 1940? Example of Open Question: Can you tell me what life was like in 1940?
- Do not ask questions that lead your subject toward a response or a judgment from you. Example of leading and judgmental question: Wasn't it tough growing up in a poor part of Chicago? Example of a nonjudgmental question: Could you tell me what it was like growing up in your Chicago neighborhood?
- Create thoughtful follow-up questions. Listen to responses carefully, then request more information through phrases such as: Tell me more about... I'd like to hear more about... I'm still wondering about... How else would you describe... Let's go back to _____ and share with me more about...



• L I S T E N I N G F O R A C H A N G E •

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