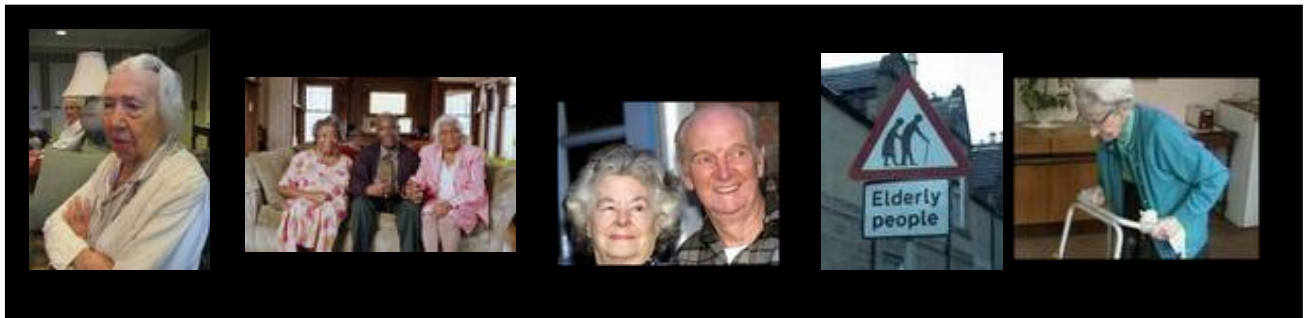


# Interviewing the Elderly



## *Some considerations...*

### Setting up the interview

- If you do not know the interviewee, you may wish to have the person you originally got the interviewee name from make the initial contact to let the interviewee know that you will be contacting them. (Like the rest of us, the elderly have to deal with telemarketers, etc.) If this is not possible, be sure to say, "I got your name from \_\_\_\_\_."
- Be polite and respectful. You may have to clearly explain the project to the person.
- Once the interview time is set up, send a written reminder and call the person on the day of the interview to remind him/her.

### Arriving to conduct the interview

- Introduce yourself. Be patient if the interviewee has forgotten you were coming to conduct the interview.
- Make sure the tape recording devices are very close to the interviewee, particularly if he/she has a quiet voice.

### During the interview

- Explain to the interviewee that you want them to talk about the specified time period – to share his/her memories (e.g., "Tell about your memories of being young in the 1920s.") **DO NOT** start out asking if the person remembers specific events from the period. This might make the interviewee feel bad if he/she cannot remember specific events.
- Don't worry if the interviewee starts talking about topics from other time periods (e.g., World War II). This is perfectly fine. Gently steer them back to the time period.
- The interviewee may have difficulties remembering specific details he/she wants to share with you. Let the interviewee know that he/she will have a chance to add additional information later.
- Ask questions at the end but if you sense the interviewee is having a difficult time remembering specific events you may wish to discontinue asking detailed questions.

- Remember that some memories may be very emotional for the interviewee.

### **During the interview**

- Thank the interviewee for his/her time.
- Send a thank you card to the interviewee.

## **Some things to consider when interviewing elderly war veterans**

- Oral history is very demanding in terms of time and emotions and this can be particularly true of war oral history.
- Always be on time for meetings. Your interviewee may be nervous, so do not keep them waiting.
- Be flexible. You may be offered a cup of tea when you arrive, or your interviewee may want to get started immediately. Follow their lead.
- Do not continue with a question line if your interviewee is reluctant to talk about something. Move on to another topic.
- Be patient. You are asking your interviewee to remember events and feelings that occurred more than 60 years ago. Give them time to think.
- If your interviewee becomes agitated or disturbed because they cannot remember some detail, reassure them that it doesn't matter and move on to another question.
- If you sense your interviewee is becoming tired, end the session and if possible arrange to come back at another time.
- Talking about the past can be an emotional experience, and you should allow time, while you are still with them, for your interviewee to wind down after the interview. This is especially so if they have been talking about things which may have upset them.
- It is the interviewer's responsibility to ensure that interviewees are not left to cope by themselves with any strong emotions that the session may have evoked. This is particularly important if the interviewee lives alone. If you have any serious doubts about the welfare of a veteran, contact [Veterans' Affairs](#) whose job is to care for war veterans and their needs.
- Always write a letter of thanks after the interview.

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# **A Guide to Recording Oral History**

<http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/from-memory/guide-vets.html>

***"Oral History is not only a tool or method for recovering history; it is also a theory of history which maintains that the common folk and the dispossessed have a history and that this history must be written."***

Gary Okihiro - "Oral History and the  
Writing of Ethnic History"

Oral history offers a unique view of the past. What makes oral history distinct is that a **story** is being told. The **way** in which the story is told - what is left in and what is considered unimportant - can tell much about a person. It is history that begins and ends with personal experience.

Collecting oral histories can teach many skills: researching, interviewing, active listening, organizing material - just to name a few.

