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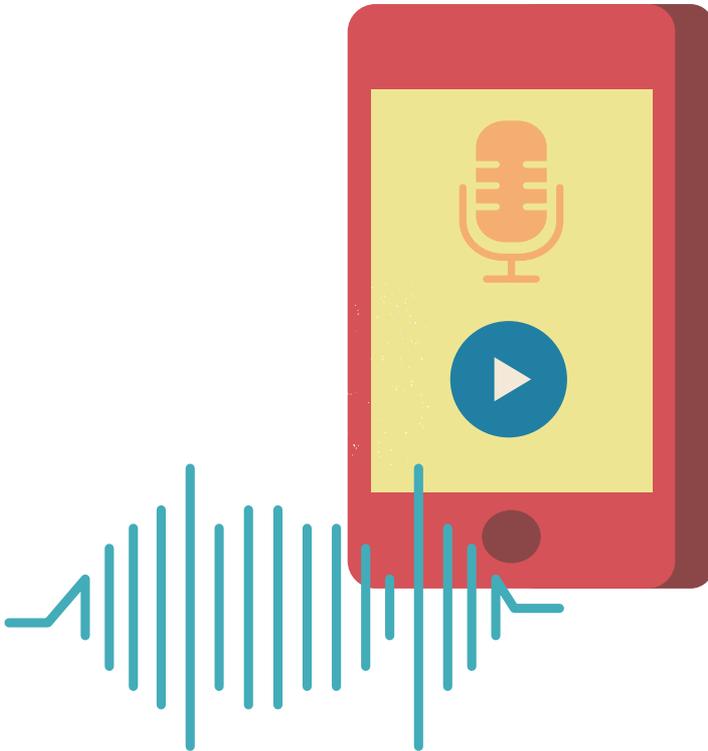
**1.**

# **Introduction**

# What is oral history?

At its most basic, oral history involves something human beings have been doing for thousands of years: telling stories and relating experiences to each other.



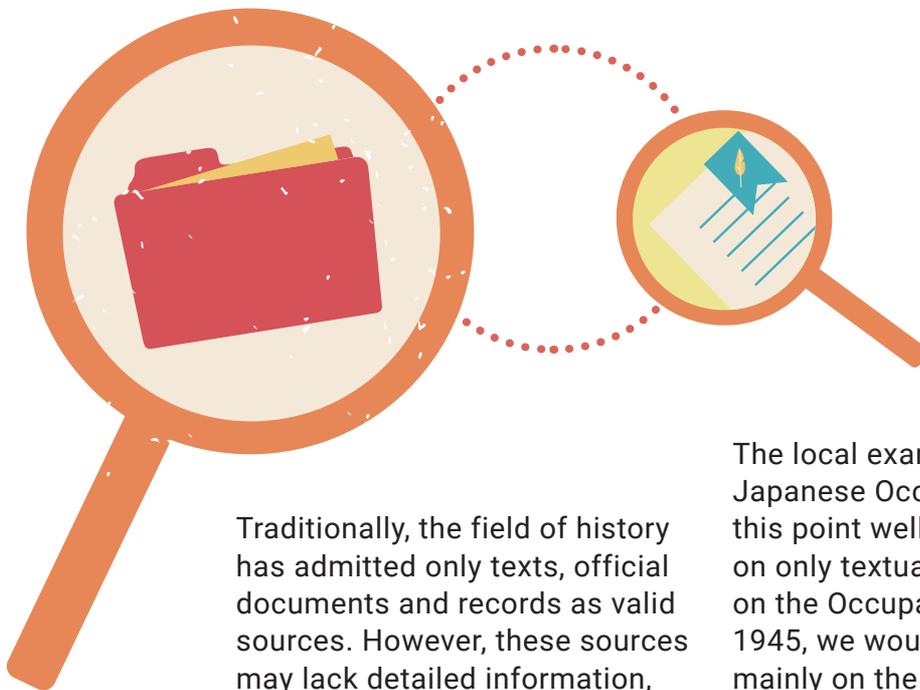


From tales around the fire to books to social media, talking about the things that have happened to us and how we feel about them is intimate and familiar. This familiarity is what makes oral history a simple to use, yet powerful tool for information gathering. Practically every day, we use aspects of oral history.

Oral history methodologies have been developed as a means of recording, documenting and preserving information and personal recollections that would otherwise be lost with the passing of the individual. The semi-structured interview process is a key tool in these methodologies.

Oral history interviews produce an individual's account of past events and experiences. They are an insight into the thoughts and feelings of people that were active participants in, witnesses to or observers of these events and time periods. What these people say, and how they say it, provides unique perspectives into individual thought processes, emotions and motivations as well as cultural values.

# Why use oral history in research?



Traditionally, the field of history has admitted only texts, official documents and records as valid sources. However, these sources may lack detailed information, reflect only certain points of view and include inaccuracies. Crucially, the top-down perspective omits the details and narratives of how people lived, worked and interacted within a society, leaving the picture incomplete.

The local example of the Japanese Occupation illustrates this point well: If we were to rely on only textual sources to report on the Occupation years of 1942-1945, we would be depending mainly on the Syonan Shimbun newspaper and fragmentary government records. Through the National Archives of Singapore's oral history interviews, we are now able to comprehend the life experiences of those who lived through the Occupation and understand this period more fully.



In this light, oral history, containing the narratives and recollections of individuals, can help to fill in information gaps and reveal areas not covered by textual sources. It is also an essential tool to understand official sources and place them in context.

Oral history is invaluable towards understanding heritage and culture, the nuances of which are not easily gleaned from textual sources. From the perspective of readers and consumers of heritage and history publications, videos and online media, a personal story or memory remains one of the best ways to pique interest and draw them into the narrative.

A lot of the time, oral history is the only means of recording the experiences, perceptions and culture of the average person. History is often dominated by the perspectives and deeds of prominent, powerful people, but studying only the elite results in limited understanding. Oral history can be used to include people not afforded a voice in the mainstream narrative.



Oral history interviews are dialogues between two or more human beings and, as such, will contain inaccuracies, biased or selective accounts, and personal perspectives. You have to be aware of these characteristics before using oral history accounts in research projects.

**Here are some tips to consider:**

Before utilising oral history as a source:

**1)** Consider the interviewee's background and credentials. For example, if you are researching Kampong Lorong Buangkok, the insights of a person who has lived there would be more valuable than those of someone who has only heard of or visited the kampong briefly.

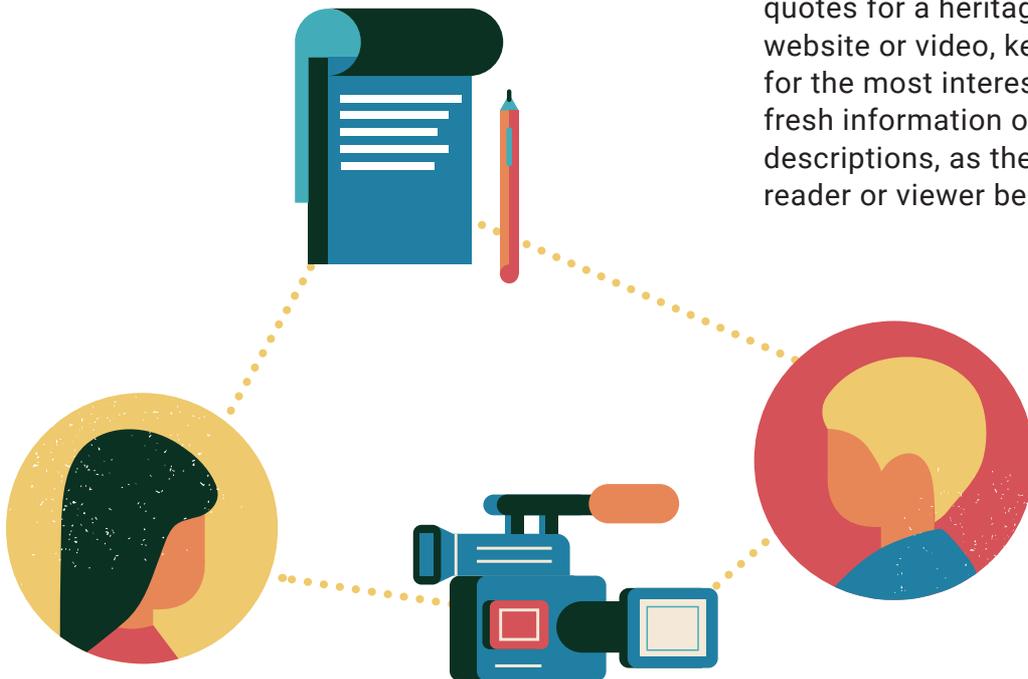
**2)** If you are researching the history of hospitals, the perspectives of nurses, doctors, other medical staff and patients would be more highly regarded than those of people who have never visited a hospital.

**3)** Once you are convinced that an oral history interviewee is a credible source and has information that is relevant to your research project, you can verify the facts presented in the interview. Cross-check with official government or institution records, newspaper articles, academic journals and publications. If the narratives are not aligned, the different sources may not necessarily be wrong – they may simply be presented from different points of view. Acknowledge this in your research, and note inaccuracies and errors. Do not uncritically accept assertions or recollections.

Oral history provides the human angle to our understanding of events, places and people. Bringing together different sources, from oral history to official records, will make your research stronger, more credible and interesting.

Once you have completed your interviews, allow the insights and information gleaned to inform your research project, rather than simply reinforce preconceptions and existing research. You will often find that oral history provides new ways of looking at things.

When it comes to selecting quotes for a heritage publication, website or video, keep an eye out for the most interesting stories, fresh information or engaging descriptions, as these are what a reader or viewer best relates to.





After you have decided on the narrative of your project, use oral history quotes or anecdotes to support or illustrate key points, as well as to entice further reading. For projects that are mainly composed of oral history accounts, it is important to construct a coherent narrative that covers multiple angles of the topic.

# Limitations of oral history

For oral history to be used as a valid tool of historical or heritage inquiry, the limitations of the medium must be considered. By nature, the stories being collected are personal, selective and subjective, reflecting the perspective of a single individual. The reconstruction of the past in the interviewee's mind may also introduce errors. Only by understanding these limitations and assessing them critically can we effectively use oral history.

At times, interviewees may introduce factual errors, misconceptions or biases in their recollections. Interviewers have to know their subject well enough to identify these problematic areas. One method of dealing with conflicting or inaccurate testimonies is simply to interview more people, which will help to corroborate accounts or establish consensus conclusions.



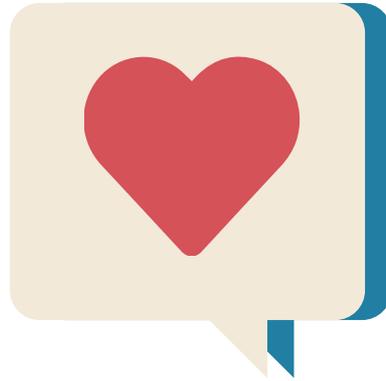
# Privacy and ethical considerations

The interviewee must be able to trust you with his or her personal information. Therefore, it is your responsibility to ensure that the interviewee is clear on:



Before embarking on an interview, you must obtain the interviewee's consent.

To be able to give informed consent, the interviewee must be an adult and able to comprehend the implications of the interview, his or her answers and how they will be used (in any publication or other media).



# Well-being of the interviewee and ethical considerations

Consider the well-being of the interviewee before deciding to proceed with interviews. In some cases, an interviewee may have important information to share, but also be in poor physical health. You should assess whether conducting the interview will take a toll on the health of the interviewee, as well as his or her willingness to do the interview. The interviewee's health takes priority – do not proceed with the interview if it would overly tax the individual. If the interview is to go ahead, ensure that you adjust the duration, keeping in mind his or her health.



In an oral history interview, you may touch on topics that are sensitive or controversial. The interviewee may also make defamatory statements or release sensitive information. In these cases, you should warn the interviewee of potential consequences (for example, defamation suits) and confirm if he or she wants to proceed with these statements on public record. You can word your responses during the interview accordingly, such as repeating a question on whether the section can be made available to the public.

An interview may bring up recollections that are painful for the interviewee. Be aware of these potentially sensitive areas, show empathy and steer your questions to avoid causing trauma. An oral history interview involves gathering stories, and an interviewer may be focused on “getting the story”. However, the interests of the interviewee are foremost – do not compromise the well-being or wishes of the interviewee.

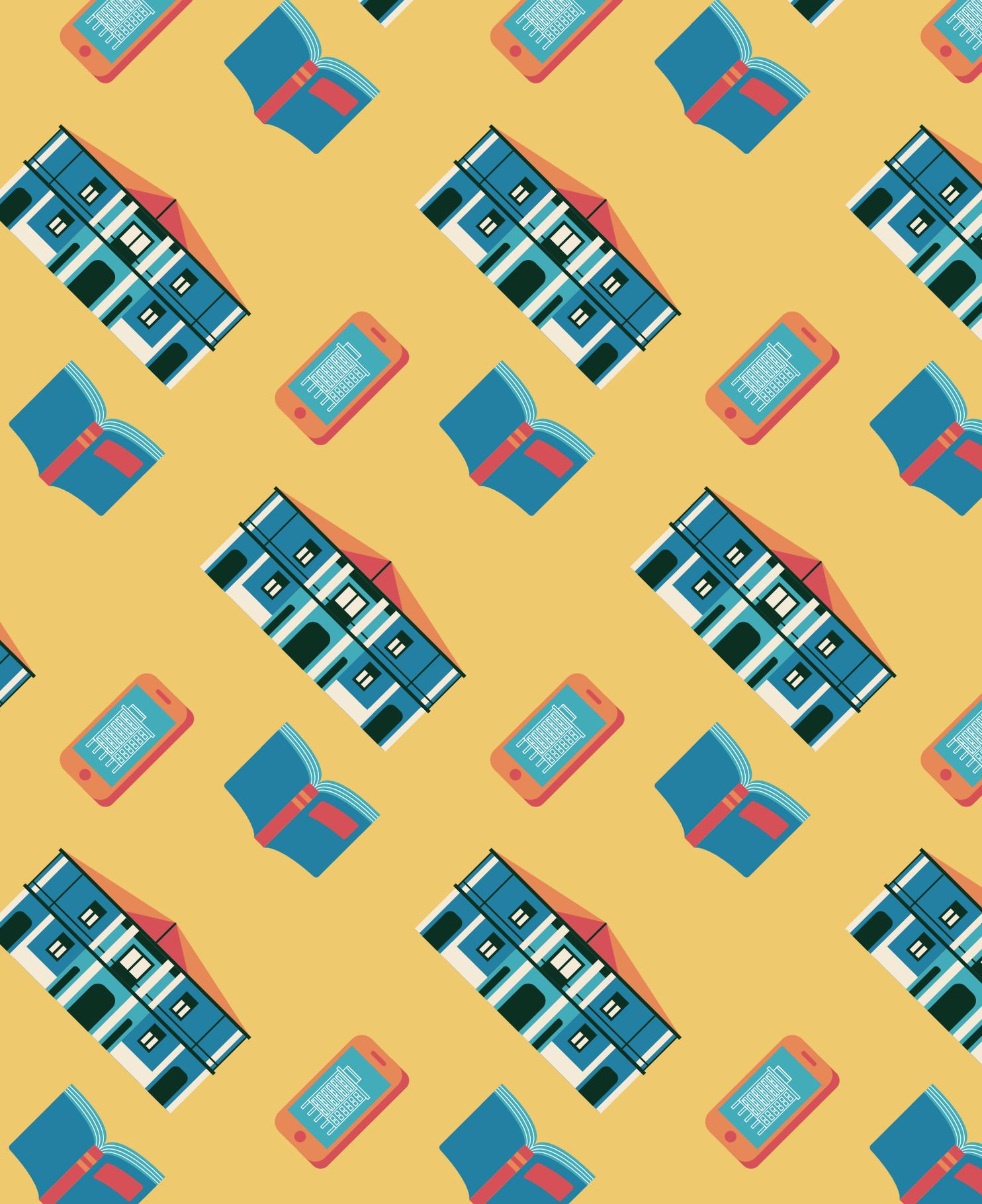
An interview may bring up recollections that are painful for the interviewee. Be aware of these potentially sensitive areas.

# Privacy

Before an interview, confirm with the interviewee that he or she is willing to be named.

Keep in mind, however, that you will not be able to directly quote an anonymous source in a publication or video, except in circumstances where anonymity is required for the protection of the source. Consider as well the privacy of other people mentioned in the interview – remind your interviewee to avoid mentioning the personal details of others, or anonymise these details by editing them out from publication.





**2.**

**How to  
plan an  
oral history  
project**

## STEP 1

# Preparation

Before you embark on an oral history project, you should be clear about two things:

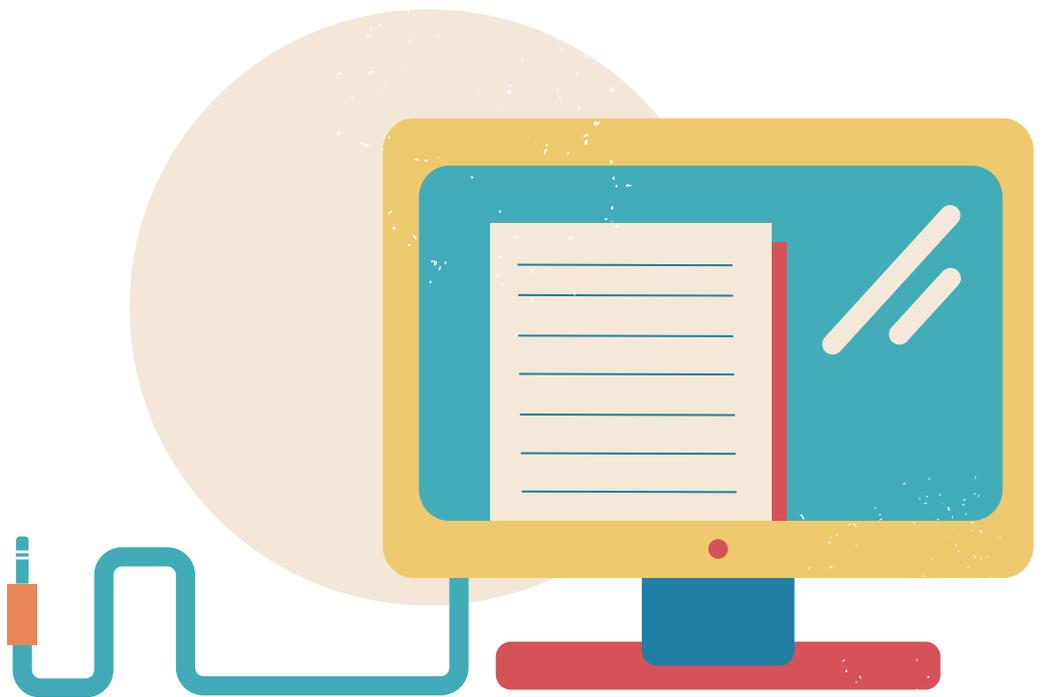
- What is the historical or heritage significance of the topic, and what is already known about it
- Being familiar with the latter will help you identify gaps in the knowledge, which you can attempt to fill with your interviews

**1)** Research and a deep understanding of the topic are crucial before going into an oral history interview. Given that oral history is likely to be used in conjunction with other historical or heritage sources, knowledge of these sources will help you prepare for your interview and ask relevant questions.

Your first port of call should be books and other publications, as they can give you a good overview of the events, analysis and historical significance of the topic. Search for keywords on Google Books and visit the National Library Board's website, which has several useful resources such as search engines for academic journals (JSTOR and ProQuest among others).

NLB's Infopedia and HistorySG also cover local topics, and there is also a searchable index of magazine articles and a database of newspaper articles (NewspaperSG).





Research and a deep understanding of the topic are crucial before going into an oral history interview.



**2)** Next, you can search photographs, government records, maps and other documents on the National Archives of Singapore website. These sources provide official perspectives and work well when complemented with oral history. You can also look at past oral history interviews to gain an understanding of how different people viewed and experienced events, which may be helpful in formulating questions.

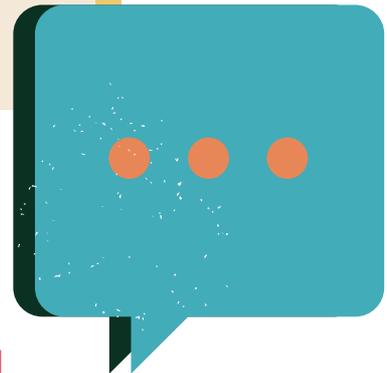
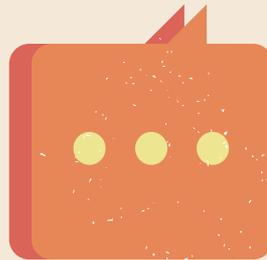
**3)** Learn as much as you can before the interview, so that you can frame and structure your questions effectively. Knowledge of the subject, events and their historical significance will help you to approach the interview from different angles, ask follow-up questions and get the interviewee thinking.

Knowing the angles and narratives from which the subject has already been covered (in past publications and interviews, for example) means that you will be able to avoid redundant questions. It will also help you retread tired narratives. You will be better prepared to surface new information, uncover a different side to the story and present fresh views, all of which will strengthen your research project or presentation.

**4)** Determining the end goal of the interview is an important step. Will you be incorporating oral history with other historical sources in a research project, or presenting the interview in a complete form? Will quotes from the interview appear in a book or magazine, online, in a video or audio recording? Consider this before the interview, as it is likely to shape your questions.

**List of websites one can visit to conduct pre-oral interview, background research:**

- NAS ArchivesOnline
- Roots.sg
- NewspaperSG
- PictureSG
- OneSearch
- Singapore Memory Project
- OneHMap
- OneMap



Learn as much as you can before the interview, so that you can frame and structure your questions effectively.

## STEP 2

# Sourcing for potential interviewees



Having defined the scope of your history or heritage topic, you can begin to shortlist and contact potential interviewees. Structure your shortlist according to your research topic – for example, if you are researching the heritage of a town like Toa Payoh or Tampines, shortlist past and present residents, those who have worked in the town or those who visit often.

### Consideration 1

#### Finding suitable interviewees

Personal contacts such as friends and family can be an excellent source to tap, whether as interviewees or for their ability to refer you to a wider circle of people. Put the word out among personal contacts first, as they are the easiest to reach, and their familiarity with you may ease the interviewing process.

The next step would be to source for interviewees through institutions such as professional societies, educational institutions, social and community clubs, clan and cultural associations. Most institutions are open to being approached for contacts and will help facilitate interviews.

For example, if you are researching specific communities, there are various groups and associations founded on community identities. Community clubs also have an extensive range of contacts, from grassroots volunteers to local merchants, while professional societies and trade unions would be useful for specific occupations.





Aim for diversity in the backgrounds, experiences and occupations of your interviewees – different views and memories will strengthen your research project.

You can also use the power of social media and other communication channels to broadcast open calls for interviewees. Facebook groups based on interests, heritage or places are good places to start.

### Consideration 2

#### Diversity

Aim for diversity in the backgrounds, experiences and occupations of your interviewees – different views and memories will strengthen your research project. Do not be afraid to interview people who are likely to express views contrary to the mainstream, as oral history has great capacity to present multiple points of view in a coherent manner.

### Consideration 3

#### Structure of interview

Work out the structure and likely length of interviews before approaching the interviewee, although these can be adjusted as the interview progresses. You may want to limit your interviews to between 30 minutes and two hours per session, so that each session is not too taxing.



### STEP 3

# Approaching interviewees



Before you approach a potential interviewee, it may be useful to assess whether he or she will make for a worthwhile interview. A preliminary meeting, or telephone conversation, may be helpful to determine the extent of the interviewee's recollections or knowledge. If he or she does not remember much about the topic, you may want to look for another interviewee.

A preliminary meeting can also be useful in establishing trust and rapport with the interviewee, which will be important in eliciting information and life stories. Bring documents such as letters of appointment from official agencies or schools involved in the project, and help the interviewee to prepare by establishing the scope of the interview and the topic you are covering.



A preliminary meeting, or telephone conversation, may be helpful to determine the extent of the interviewee's recollections.

Some interviewees may feel that their memories are not important or significant enough to be recorded as history. Others may be wary of having their stories recorded.

Reassure interviewees by establishing the point of the oral history interview – information gathering to construct a fuller historical picture. Explain that oral history from ordinary members of society, regardless of their occupation, social class or educational level, is essential to how present and future generations understand their society's past. Let interviewees know that their individual stories are important.

It may be useful to show examples of oral history interviews, such as those available on the Oral History Centre/National Archives of Singapore's website, or previous interviews that you have done.

You should also let interviewees know how you intend to use their memories, whether in a publication, as an audio recording or a video, as well as the level of public access. For example, if you intend to upload interview videos to YouTube, you should seek their explicit permission first.

You may consider bringing photographs, old maps or newspaper articles to help interviewees recall more stories. Be careful, however, not to overwhelm the interviewee with too many of these materials or skew his or her recollections towards a particular narrative.



The map of Malaya and Singapore

It is important to find out which languages an interviewee is comfortable with. He or she may speak and understand more than one language, but be more fluent and at ease with one. Find out beforehand and tailor your approach accordingly.

There is a diversity of cultures in Singapore. Be aware of cultural customs and differences, so that you do not inadvertently offend your interviewee, or make him or her uncomfortable.

Dress appropriately for the interview – if you dress too casually, you may not be taken seriously, and if you dress too formally, the interviewee may feel inhibited from telling his or her story.

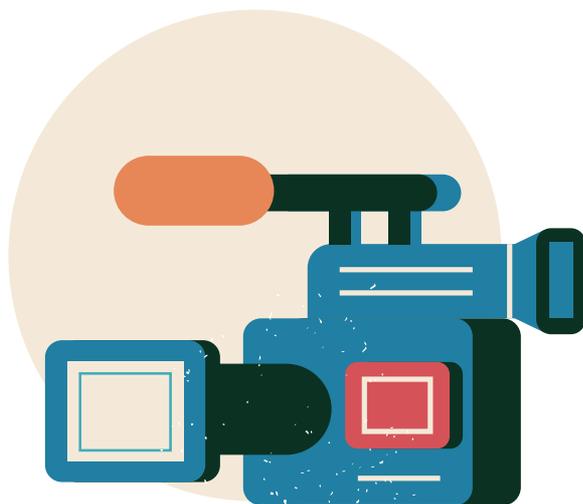
During preliminary meetings, do not ask in-depth questions. If an interviewee begins to answer in detail, the interviewee may skip these accounts during the actual interview, as he or she feels these have already been covered.



## STEP 4

# Choosing a location

Decide on your recording equipment and interview environment. While it may sometimes be the case that you have no choice but to carry out the interview in public environments such as cafes or hawker centres, the background noise in these places will greatly affect how you can use the interview.



Try to pick quieter environments such as offices. If you have arranged an interview through an association or community club, ask if you may use a quiet space within its facilities.



Consider your personal safety when selecting a recording location. Avoid situations where you are alone with the interviewee or are otherwise vulnerable, and try to have a friend accompany you. This person can also act as a co-interviewer and timekeeper.

Where possible, visit the recording location before the interview so you can determine the best setup, such as seating arrangements away from human traffic or other interruptions. You can also record a few mock interviews so that you can test the sound quality before the interview.

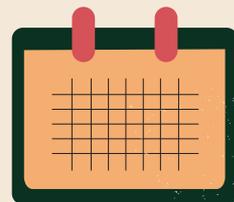
## FACTORS TO CONSIDER:



**Audio or video recording**



**Broadcast medium**



**Availability of interviewee**

## STEP 5

# Scheduling



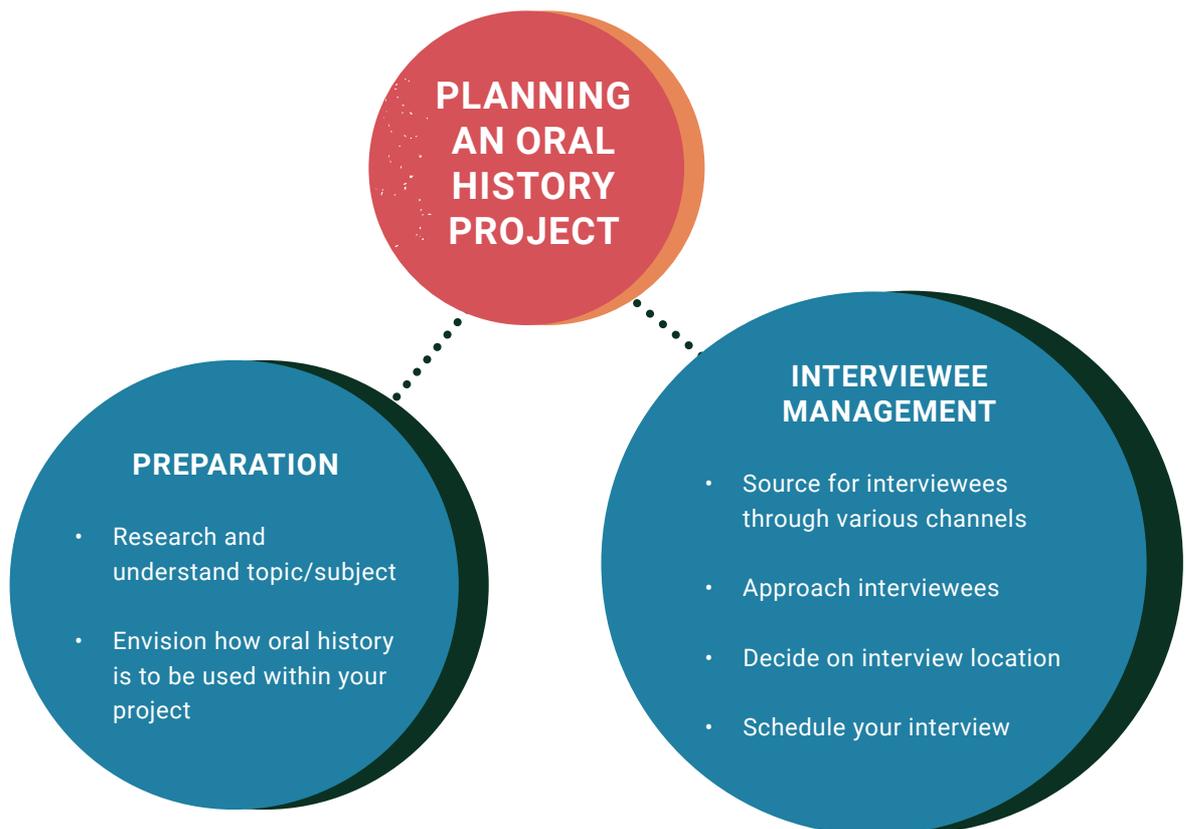
When arranging an interview, explain to the interviewee that his or her full attention will be required for the length of the interview, which may be a couple of hours long. Some interviewees may believe that they can answer your questions while working or carrying out other chores – this should

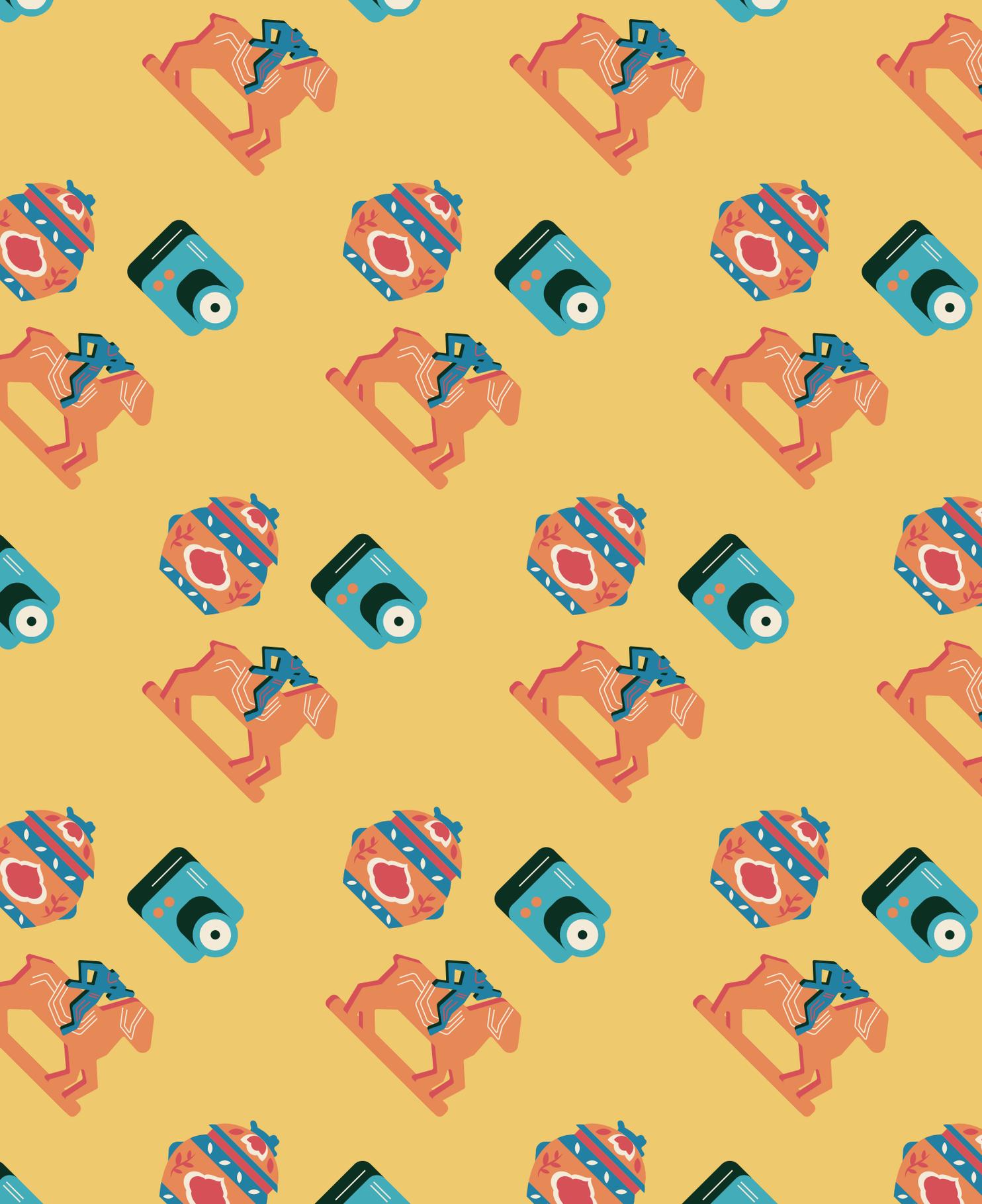
be avoided unless there is no choice (for example, if a hawker can only make time for an interview during his or her work hours).

Schedule your interviews with the comfort of your interviewee and your own work preferences in mind.

An interview conducted when the interviewee is at ease and not preoccupied with other matters is likely to present better information and stories. At times, an interviewee may need to reschedule, and you should leave sufficient buffer space for such delays in your project plans.

Follow-up interviews may be necessary for a full narrative. Schedule these at intervals that provide you with sufficient time to go through earlier interviews and ask questions, clarify information and investigate new avenues of enquiry.





**3.**

# **The Interview**

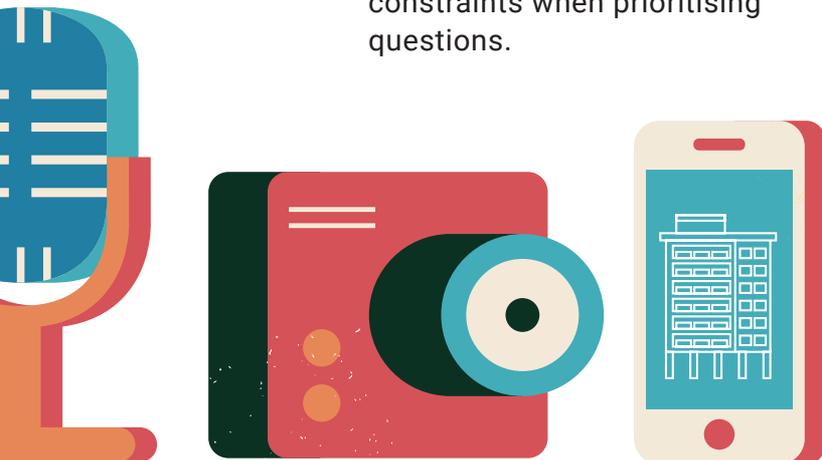
# Interview methodologies and preparation

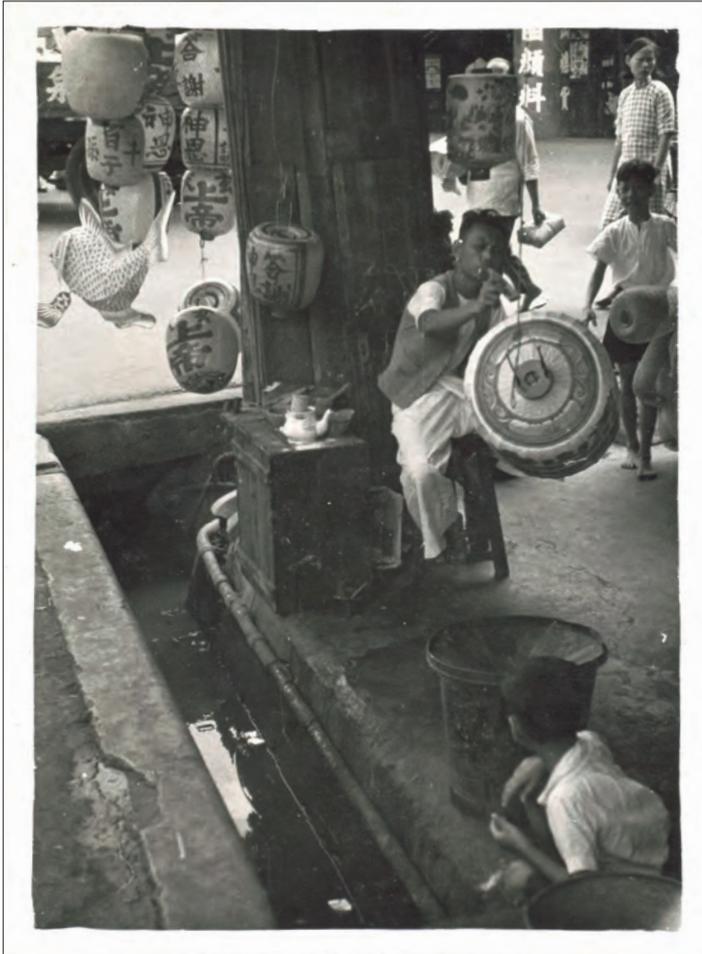
Oral history interviews often combine several techniques, including biographical/life story angles, topical expertise and analysis, and anthropological or sociological approaches. Structure your interview clearly to ensure that you gather the relevant information for each section, and be aware of time constraints when prioritising questions.

The information collected will range from memories and recollections, eyewitness descriptions and feelings, to analysis and opinion.

As an interviewer, showing a genuine interest in the stories and memories being related, as well as respect for the individual, is vital to the oral history process. You will need to be attuned to the moods of interviewees and the emotions that their recollections may stir up, and show empathy and patience.

Your role in the oral history interview is one of a facilitator that encourages recollection, in order to gather relevant information.





A Chinese lantern maker at work

Be prepared to sit and listen, and do not be too quick to jump to the next question. Pause to allow your interviewee time to recollect and expand on his or her points. Do not overshadow him or her by injecting too much of your own knowledge or experiences. Avoid suggestions or completing your interviewee's sentences, as this approach will likely introduce biases into the interview.

Some interviewees may request to view questions before the interview. Oral history is a collaborative methodology of information gathering, and understanding of the topics to be discussed can help recall and produce more detailed answers.

However, there is a danger of interviewees preparing too much and possibly affecting the flow or spontaneity of your interview. Rather than send a detailed list of questions, you may want to give them a list of topics to be covered.

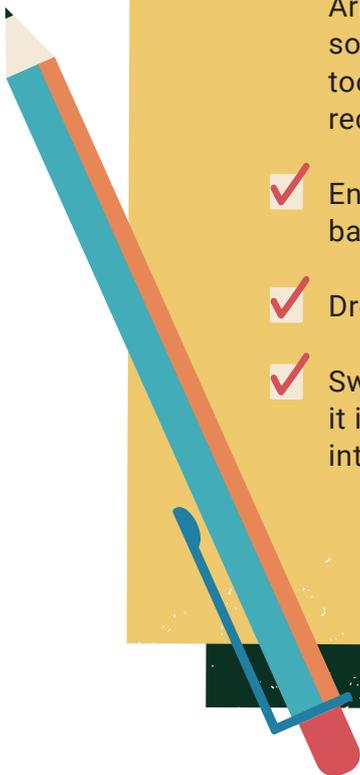
Pause to allow your interviewee time to recollect and expand on his or her points. Do not overshadow him or her by injecting your own knowledge or experiences.





### Pre-interview checklist:

- ✓ Confirm the interview appointment
- ✓ Check that recording equipment is in working order and storage mediums have adequate space. Arrive well in advance to do a soundcheck. If the location is too noisy, consider alternative recording environments
- ✓ Ensure that you have backup batteries for the recorder
- ✓ Dress appropriately
- ✓ Switch off your mobile phone or put it in silent mode, and encourage the interviewee to do the same



# Interview techniques

At the start of the interview, it may be helpful to spend a couple of minutes on informal chat to put the interviewee at ease, without diving straight into the recording.



A good way to start the interview is to ask about the interviewee's family background and childhood experiences.

A form that the interviewee can fill up with his or her biographical details before or during the interview may be useful.

You may want to write or print out your questions and interview structure, so that you do not miss out on any questions.



However, use the printouts as a guide rather than adhering rigidly to them. Often, you will have to shift the order of questions around, rephrase questions and introduce new, follow-up questions. Unexpected avenues of enquiry, prompted by fresh information from the interviewee, often produce some of the best anecdotes and stories.

When considering the narrative of the interview, it is important to determine how the interviewee was positioned in relation to the events or experiences being related. Are his or her recollections a firsthand account, or did the interviewee hear about the event from another person? What is the source of his or her knowledge, and was the interviewee an active participant or an observer? Understanding the positioning of the interviewee will affect your questions and how you use the information gathered.



**Sample questions for gathering background or biographical information:**

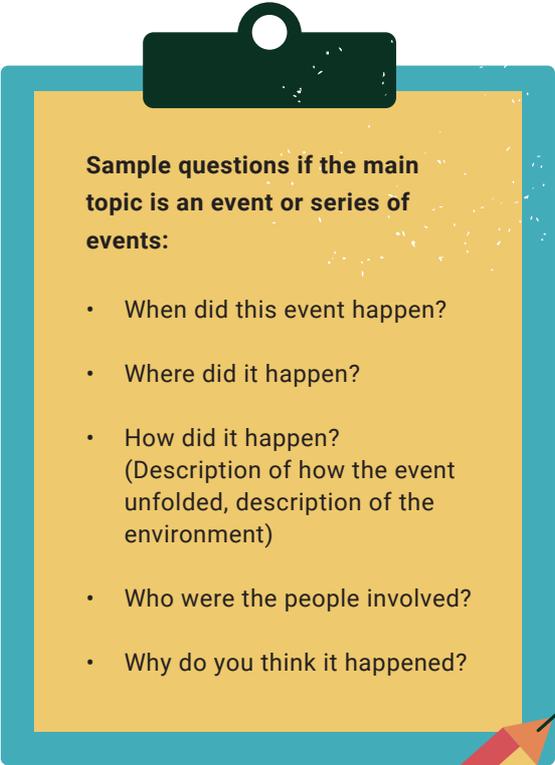
- Please tell me your full name and date of birth.
- Where were you born? (If the interviewee was born overseas, when did he or she arrive in Singapore?)
- Tell me about the members of your family. (Prompt if needed for grandparents, parents, siblings, etc if information is relevant to the subject)
- Do you have extended family outside of Singapore? (If relevant to the topic)



- Tell me about your family when you were growing up. (Encourage details on living environment, parents' occupations or trades, financial situation, family traditions)
- Which schools did you attend and what educational qualifications did you receive?
- Tell me about your first job. (And subsequent jobs, etc)

## THE MAIN TOPIC

When it comes to the main topic of the interview, ensure that you elicit sufficient details and cover all the angles. Remember to ask follow-up questions based on the interviewee's answers.



### Sample questions if the main topic is an event or series of events:

- When did this event happen?
- Where did it happen?
- How did it happen?  
(Description of how the event unfolded, description of the environment)
- Who were the people involved?
- Why do you think it happened?



### Sample questions if the interview is about a community or place:

- Tell me about your memories of this community/place.
- Tell me about the personalities involved.
- What were the significant events for the community/place?
- What are some of the traditions/trades associated with this community/place?
- Describe in detail how this place has changed over the years.
- What is your favourite memory associated with this community/place?

## DIGRESSION

You may find that the interviewee digresses several times during an interview, and begins talking about matters not directly related to your question. Digressions can sometimes produce interesting information, or they can be totally irrelevant. You will have to assess the relevance of this new information on your feet and, if needed, gently guide the interviewee back to the topic.

Maintain eye contact to signal to the interviewee that you are listening. You will have to be nimble and flexible as an interviewer, as you mentally juggle new information, keep in mind unanswered questions and formulate follow-up questions. Making notes will help you keep track of new questions and information that you may need to clarify.



## Example of adapting to new information:

**Interviewer:**

Tell me about the village you grew up in.



**Interviewee:** It was all kampong, farms, plantations. People grew vegetables, some had ducks and chickens. In the kampong in Toa Payoh, there was this Puay Teng Keng Temple. Very famous.



**Interviewer:** Do you know when this temple was established, and why was it named Puay Teng Keng?



**Interviewee:** (Provides details on temple.)



**Interviewer:** Going back to the village, tell me more about the houses and the people. Were there any significant trades or occupations?



Ask interviewees to describe their visual, aural and emotional impressions of people, the environment and places.

### **KEEPING AN EYE ON THE DETAILS**

When it comes to oral history, detail is key. All experiences are individual and sometimes, important new perspectives can arise from the unearthing of the most mundane details. It takes effort to systematically ask about seemingly routine details, but you will consider it worthwhile when you find a fresh story. Ask interviewees to describe their visual, aural and emotional impressions of people, the environment and places, significant objects and social relationships.



Remember that the interviewee's emotions and opinion, as well as personal insights, can sometimes provide exceptional understanding into events and experiences that will almost never be reflected in official records. To gain these insights, you will have to get the interviewee to feel comfortable enough to express himself or herself freely.

## PROBING

At times, gentle probing can prompt an interviewee to consider events or experiences from different angles. If you feel that you are being given vague, general answers or stereotypical narratives, it can be useful to ask the interviewee to describe real-life examples as he or she experienced them.

Probing for details can entail encouraging the interviewee to reflect on experiences and their associated feelings, or repeating to the interviewee a short summary of the issue you are probing deeper into, in order to focus his or her response.

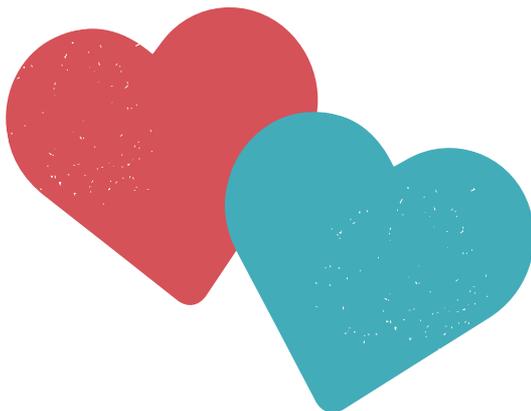
Interviewees may sometimes acquire memories or internalise common narratives from newspaper reports, coffee-shop talk or social media. Encourage them to go beyond the stereotypical and express their personal views of situations.



Always maintain respect for the interviewee and the integrity of the interview, even if you do not agree with what he or she is saying. Do not express your disagreement in the recording.

If you feel that the interviewee has not understood the question, repeat the question politely or phrase it in another way. If the interviewee is avoiding the question, you can probe gently, and rephrasing it or clearing up his or her doubts or worries may be helpful. Never badger the interviewee, and move on to your next question if he or she does not wish to answer a specific question.

It may be helpful to alert the interviewee beforehand that you will be asking these questions and gauge his or her response.



### **APPROACHING SENSITIVE TOPICS**

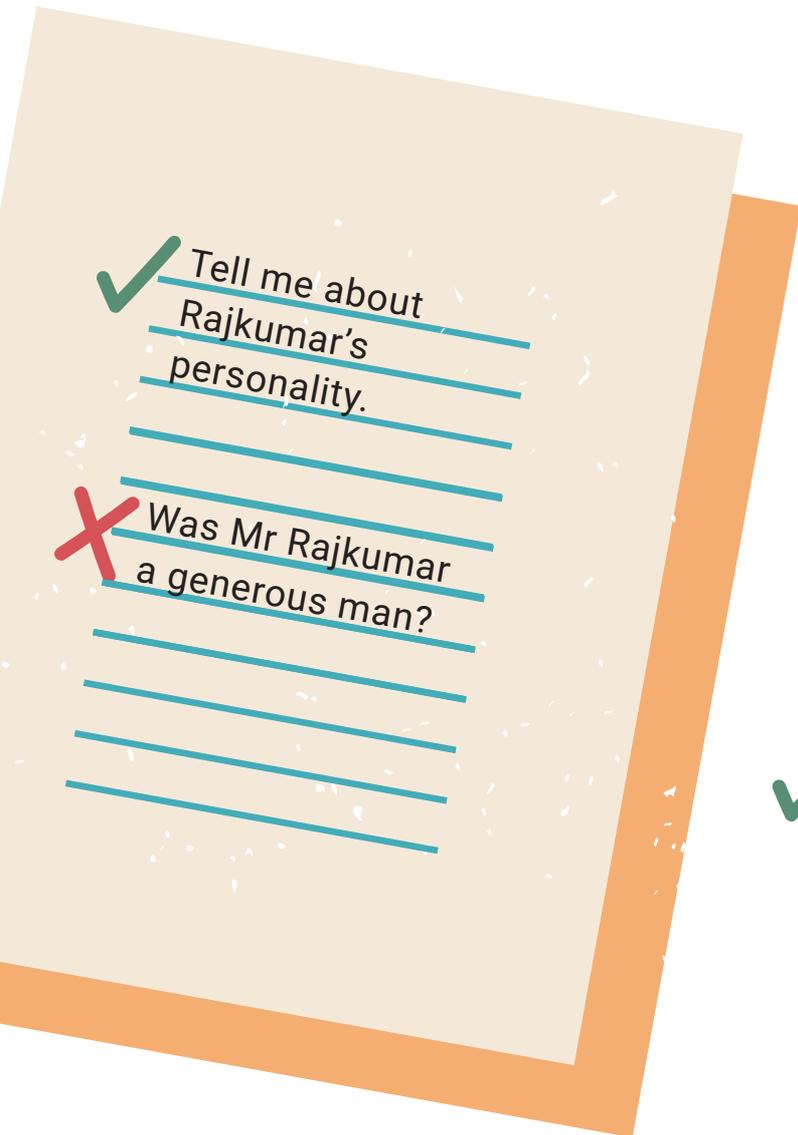
During the course of an interview, it may be the case that you will have to ask questions of a sensitive nature. These may include business setbacks, deaths of loved ones, personal indiscretions or family problems. Approach these topics gently and do not press the interviewee for an answer. It may be helpful to alert the interviewee beforehand that you will be asking these questions and gauge his or her response.

As oral history interviews may span decades of recollections, you should ensure that your questions specify the time period of the events or experiences being talked about. This will help you date and reference specific events easily, as well as make the interview clearer for listeners or viewers.

# Interview dos and don'ts

- ✓ **Be polite and have good manners** when visiting the home of the interviewee (because we are going there to interview)
- ✓ **Check if the person is comfortable** (prior to the interview session, we would have called up the interviewee or his/her family to get their permission for a photographer/videographer/recorder to be around, ask if we can divulge the name of the interviewee as well)





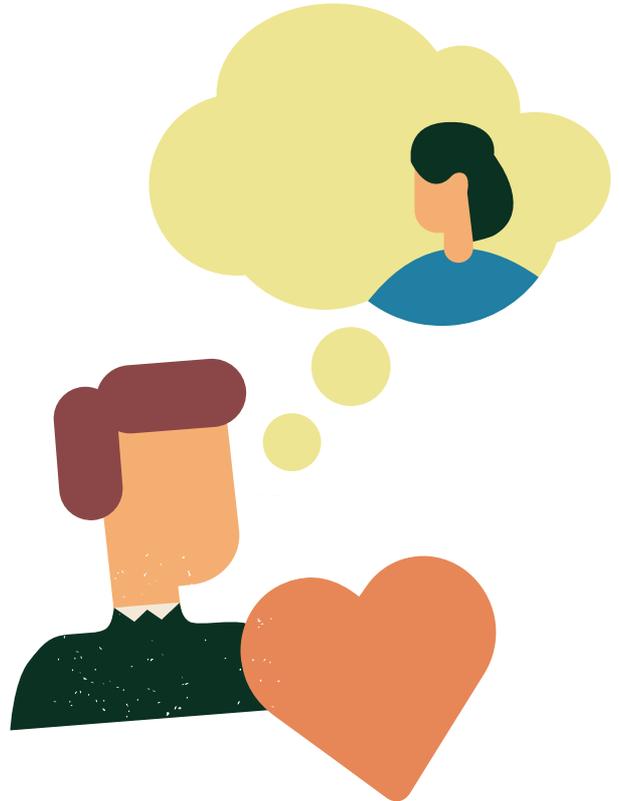
✓ **Use open-ended questions** and avoid questions that are likely to elicit yes/no answers. Yes/no questions should be used only to confirm facts with the interviewee.

For example, ask your interviewee, "Tell me about Mr Rajkumar's personality", rather than "Was Mr Rajkumar a generous man?"



**Learn to put yourself in the interviewee's shoes/position**

e.g. if he/she is talking about his experience playing at the playground with his/her friends and then fell down, student interviewer needs to be able to understand the predicament or situation the interviewee was in and ask follow-up questions like "How do you feel?" or "What happened after that?" or "Did you go to the doctor?" or "How much did you have to pay at the clinic?" etc (a lot of empathy is required in this project by the way)



**Avoid leading questions and value judgements**, even if you feel that these are part of common knowledge.

For example, do not ask, "Were relations between neighbours in the kampong harmonious?" Allow the interviewee to form his or her own opinion by asking more generally, "How were the relations between neighbours in the kampong?"



Even if you are an expert on the subject matter, do not inject your own knowledge as this can introduce bias or colour the interviewee's recollections. After the interviewee has had his or her say, you can clarify details you believe to be inaccurate or unclear, but minimise interruptions.

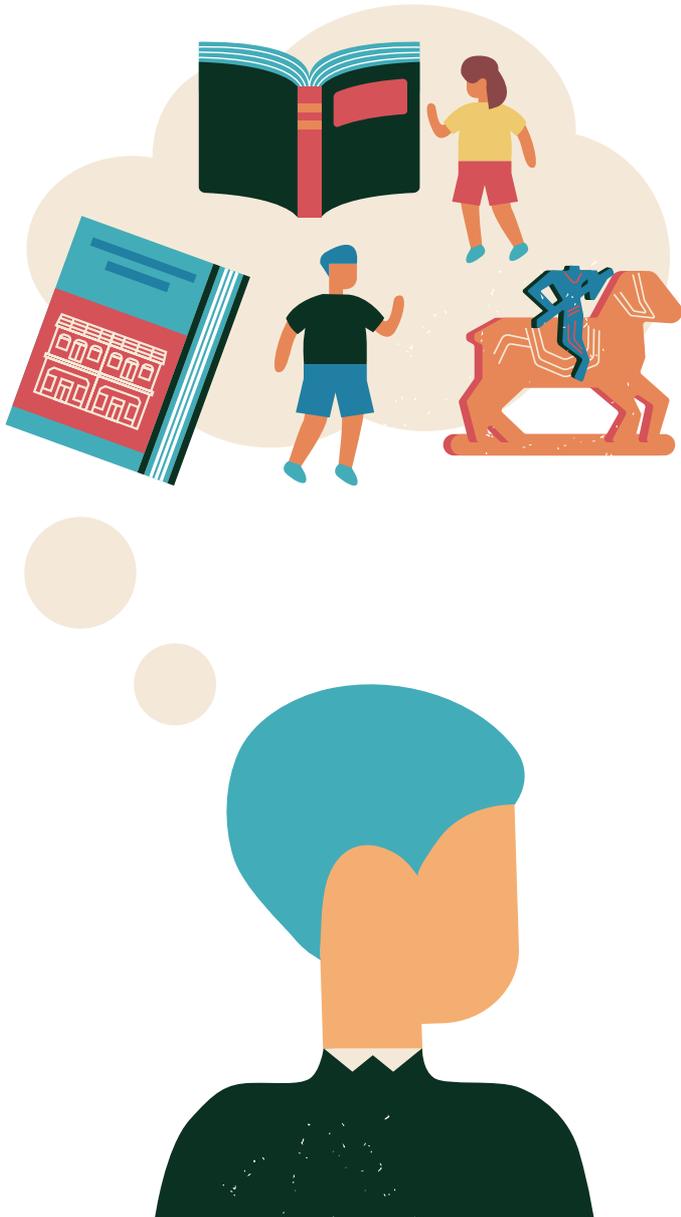
 **Do not worry about silent phases** in the recording – allow the interviewee the time and space to remember details and gather his or her thoughts.



If you disagree with what the interviewee is saying, **do not argue or debate with him or her**. The oral history interview is not an appropriate medium for debate and you may ruin your own interview. Consider your body language and avoid showing expressions of disagreement or displeasure such as frowning.

 **End by thanking the interviewee** for his or her time, and let him or her know when and where they can expect the interview to be published.





Do not worry about silent phases in the recording – allow the interviewee the time and space to remember details and gather his or her thoughts.

# Tips on correct body language/effective communication during interviews



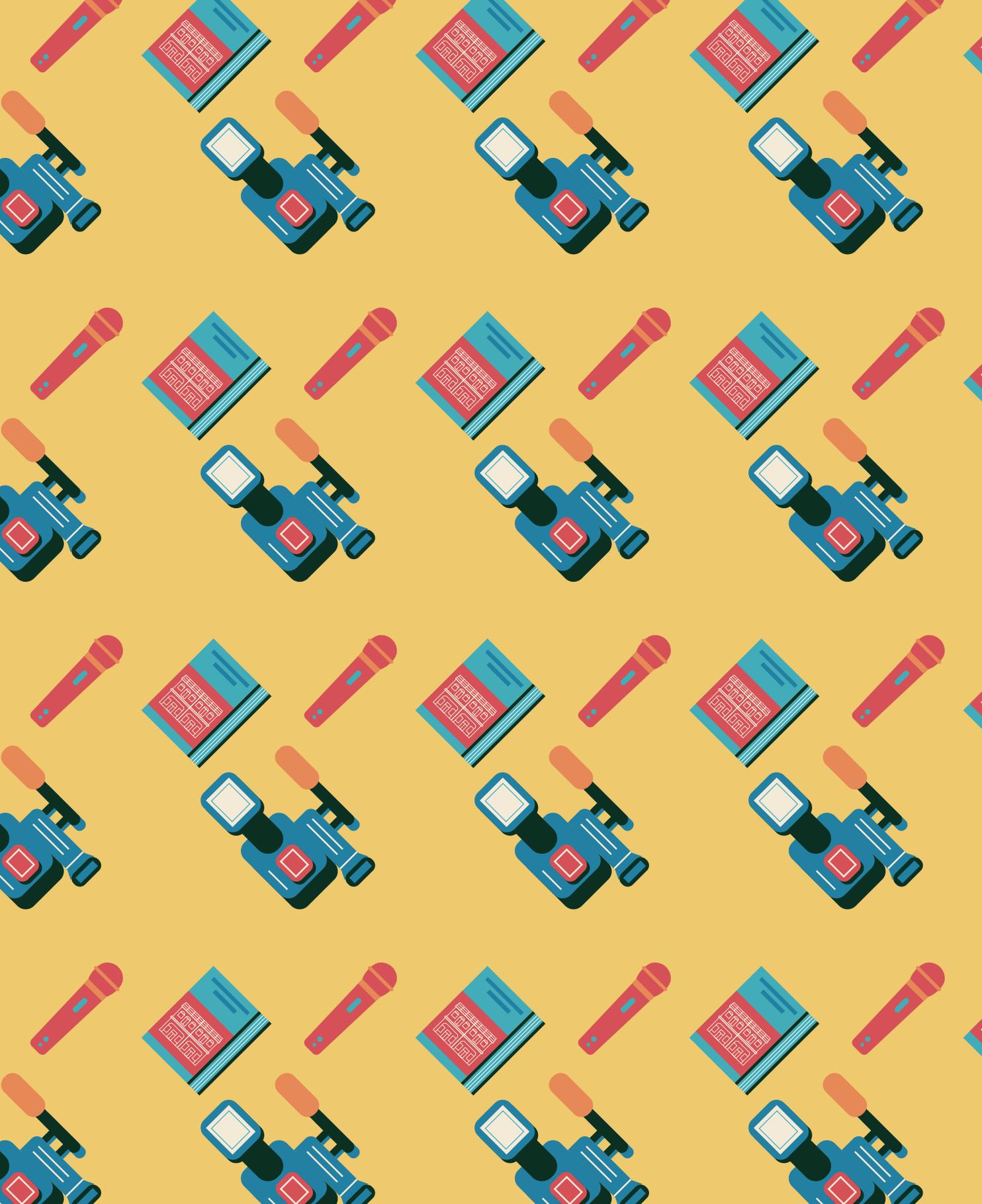
Body language is an important part of oral history interviewing, and an interviewer should remain conscious of his/her own body language as well as that of the interviewee. Sit in a relaxed but straight manner, without slouching, and ensure that your interviewee is comfortable before you begin. Remember that there is a delicate balance to body language behaviours in an interview context: for example, leaning forward slightly can indicate interest in what the interviewee is saying, but too much of it may be interpreted as an interrogatory stance.

Your body language indicates your response to what the interviewee is saying.

Avoid crossing your arms or legs, as this may indicate disinterest. Nods and smiles show that you are following the conversation, and can help encourage the interviewee to expand on what he or she is saying. This can be more effective than verbally prompting an interviewee to continue, and helps eliminate verbal interjections such as “yes”, “uh-huh” which can be a distraction. Maintain eye contact during the interview, but watch the interviewee’s response and gauge if he or she is comfortable. Watching the interviewee’s body language can also give you clues about how he or she feels about your line of questioning, and allows you to adapt accordingly.



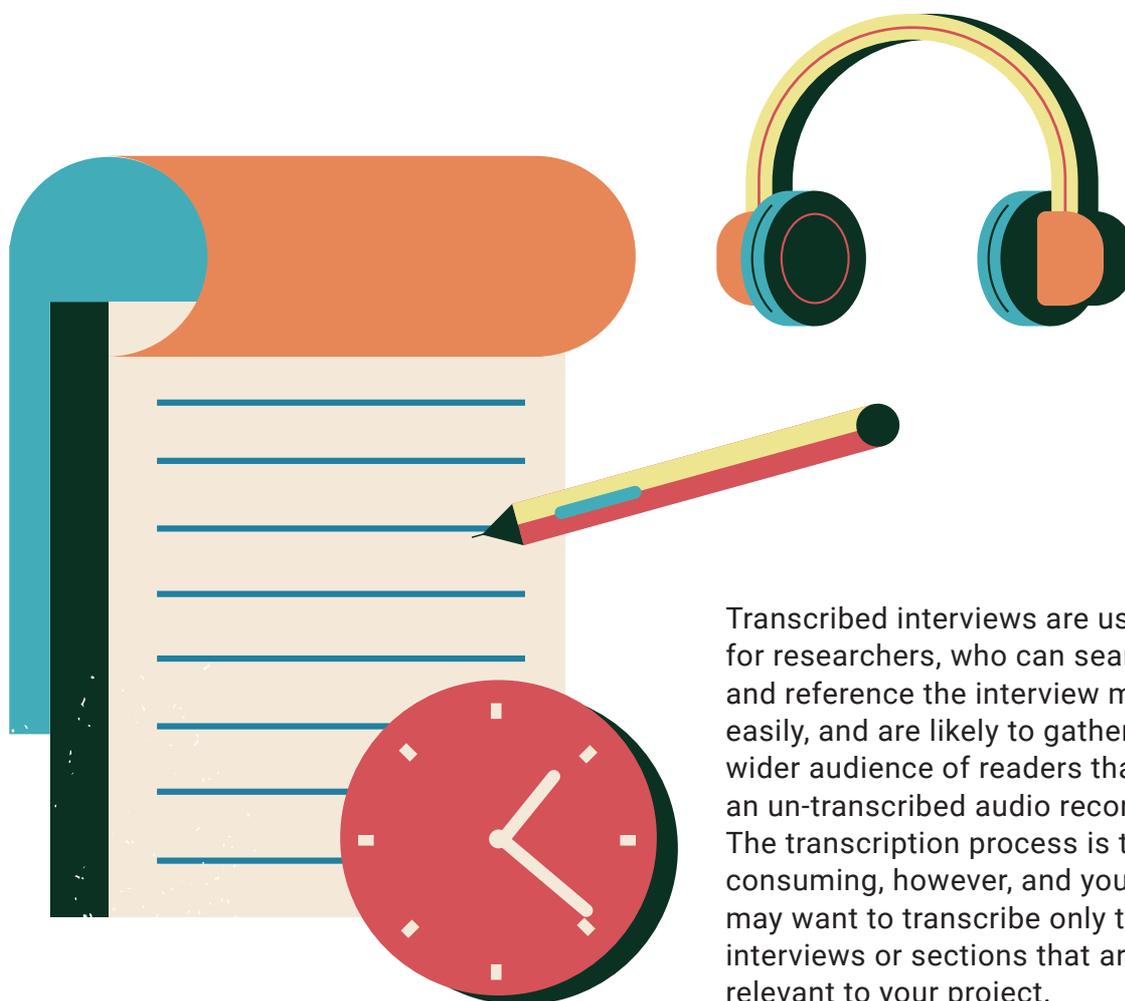
Watching the interviewee's body language can also give you clues about how he or she feels about your line of questioning, and allows you to adapt accordingly.



**4.**

# **Transcribing Interviews**

# Selecting interviews for transcription



Transcribed interviews are useful for researchers, who can search and reference the interview more easily, and are likely to gather a wider audience of readers than an un-transcribed audio recording. The transcription process is time consuming, however, and you may want to transcribe only the interviews or sections that are relevant to your project.



If the sound quality of the interview is less than optimal, or the interviewee's words are difficult to understand or make out, a transcript would help.



Having completed an interview or series of interviews for your project, you are best placed to decide on the relevance of the information and the quality of the stories and recollections. When selecting interviews for transcription, you can also consider:

- ✓ If you have managed to obtain information that is relevant to your project. There is little point in transcribing interviews that you would not have much use for.
- ✓ If the interview has surfaced new information or insights on a subject. You will need to have a broad view of the existing information in books, academic journals, past interviews and newspaper articles to know if you have uncovered new, valuable information or a perspective that shines new light on the subject.



- ✓ If the interview contains relevant, interesting detail and descriptions of people, places, incidents and events.
- ✓ If the sound quality of the interview is less than optimal, or the interviewee's words are difficult to understand or make out, a transcript would help.
- ✓ If the interview contains multiple languages, transcription can provide translations for clearer understanding.
- ✓ If the interviewee used visual aids such as photographs or maps, or other implements to describe concepts and ideas. As these would not be captured in an audio recording, a transcript would help relate their use.

# Guidelines for transcription



As is the case with pre-interview preparation, you should be familiar with the subjects covered in the interview and the interviewee's biographical information before you begin transcribing. Dictionaries and other publications would be useful for checking details, technical jargon or other references.

The key principle to transcribing an oral history interview is preserving the interviewee's voice. That means putting what the interviewee has said to text, verbatim, without correcting

or changing grammar, tenses or choice of words. Some may speak in sentence fragments – transcribe these as they are without joining them up. Transcribing the way the interviewee spoke is important as it will provide readers with an idea of the interviewee's character, social background and general demeanour.

If an interviewee has stated wrong information, insert a correction in square brackets. For example: Singapore became independent in 1959 [should be 1965]. If you are not sure of what the interviewee has said, indicate so in your transcription. You can also note emotions and expressions such as laughter or long pauses, but only if they are relevant to the subject. Your interview transcript has to be readable and easily understood. Do not transcribe irrelevant expressions and interjections such as "ah", "lah" or "oh". It is not necessary to transcribe repetitions or irrelevant expressions such as "I think it was...let me see...no, actually it was...oh, yes, I remember now".

## STYLE GUIDELINES

- Spell out names and dates in full. For example, 28 February 1938. Spell out numerals from zero to nine, while numbers 10 and above are written as Arabic numerals. For example, one, three, seven, 16, 39, 9889.
- Type out acronyms. For example, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations).
- Italicise non-English words and provide definitions. For example, *towkay* (“business leader” in Hokkien).
- Indicate the names of the interviewee, interviewer, transcriber and editor, and the interview dates on the transcript. For long interviews or a series of interviews, section your transcript accordingly for easy referencing.
- Some interviewees may request to approve the transcript before making the interview public. This can be a good way of verifying information, but the interviewee may choose to censor himself or herself. Keep the interviewee apprised of any potential consequences, let him or her know why certain information is valuable for public record, and the individual can make an informed choice.



**5.**

# **Summary**

# Summary



**Chapter 1:** Introduction



**Chapter 4:** Selecting and transcribing interviews



**Chapter 3:** The interview



**Chapter 2:** How to plan an oral history project

## CONDUCTING AN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

- Understand the role of oral history in research projects.
- Understand your research topic by consulting various sources, including books, journals, newspapers and previous oral history interviews.
- Source for interviewees and select them based on the knowledge they have to offer.
- Ensure your interviewees are informed on the interview's scope and purpose, and obtain their consent.
- Prepare for and conduct the interview.

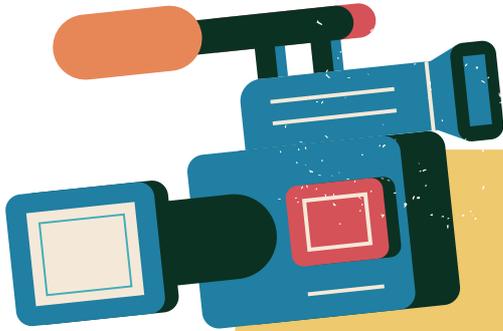


## BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

### Information to provide the interviewee:

- The subjects to be covered in the interview.
- The organisation you are representing, and if the interview is part of a wider project.
- The scope and purpose of the project.
- That the copyright of the interview resides with both the interviewee and the interviewer. You will need a written agreement signed by the interviewee in order to use material from the interview.





## BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

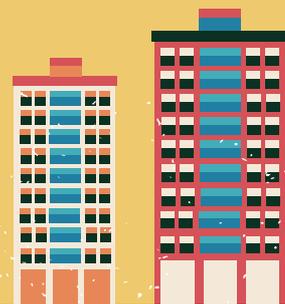
### Pre-interview checklist:

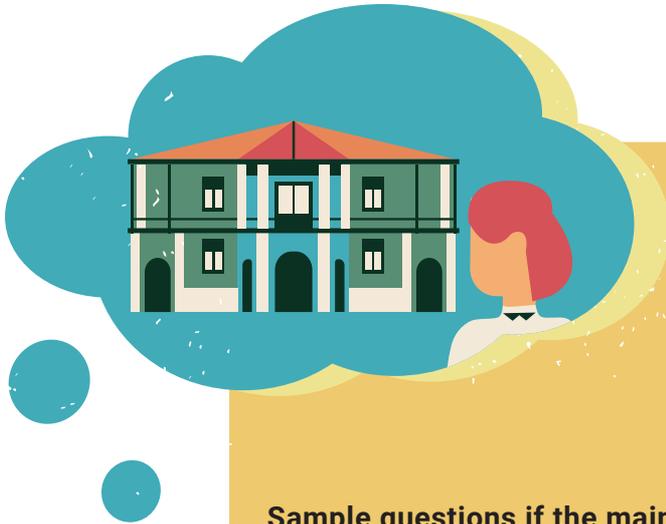
- Confirm the interview appointment.
- Dress appropriately.
- Check that recording equipment is in working order and storage mediums have adequate space. Ensure that you have backup batteries for the recorder.
- Arrive well in advance to do a soundcheck. If the location is too noisy, consider alternative recording environments.
- Switch off your mobile phone or put it in silent mode, and encourage the interviewee to do the same.

## SAMPLE QUESTIONS AND THEMES

### Sample questions for gathering background or biographical information:

- Please tell me your full name and date of birth.
- Where were you born? (If the interviewee was born overseas, when did he or she arrive in Singapore?)
- Tell me about the members of your family. (Prompt if needed for grandparents, parents, siblings, etc if information is relevant to the subject)
- Do you have extended family outside of Singapore? (If relevant to the topic)
- Tell me about your family when you were growing up. (Encourage details on living environment, parents' occupations or trades, financial situation, family traditions)
- Which schools did you attend and what educational qualifications did you receive?
- Tell me about your first job. (And subsequent jobs, etc)





**Sample questions if the main topic is an event or series of events:**

- When did this event happen?
- Where did it happen?
- How did it happen?  
(Description of how the event unfolded, description of the environment)
- Who were the people involved?
- Why do you think it happened?

**Sample questions if the interview is about a community or place:**

- Tell me about your memories of this community/place.
- Tell me about the personalities involved.
- What were the significant events for the community/place?
- What are some of the traditions/trades associated with this community/place?
- Describe in detail how this place has changed over the years.
- What is your favourite memory associated with this community/place?

## SELECTING INTERVIEWS FOR TRANSCRIPTION CHECKLIST



### Consider if:

- You have managed to obtain information that is relevant to your project. There is little point in transcribing interviews that you would not have much use for.
- The interview has surfaced new information or insights on a subject. You will need to have a broad view of the existing information in books, academic journals, past interviews and newspaper articles to know if you have uncovered new, valuable information or a perspective that shines new light on the subject.





- The interview contains relevant, interesting detail and descriptions of people, places, incidents and events.
- The sound quality of the interview is less than optimal, or the interviewee's words are difficult to understand or make out.
- The interview contains multiple languages, as transcription can provide translations for clearer understanding.
- If the interviewee used visual aids such as photographs or maps, or other implements to describe concepts and ideas. As these would not be captured in an audio recording, a transcript would help relate their use.











